

Appropriation Bill, 2017

Friday, October 06, 2017

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2018) BILL, 2017

[Second Day]

Question proposed.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I rise today to contribute to the fiscal 2018 national budget debate, and I do so with much dismay and concern for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Before I get into the substance of the response, allow me to take a moment to thank the members of my team who held consultations with their constituents ahead of the presentation of the budget on Monday, and in so doing, to get the views of their constituents about the concerns and the direction of the current Government. I also want to thank the many professionals and concerned citizens, who took the time to send me their observations, analysis and critique of the 2018 Budget. I welcome the input of the people of our country, many of whom are quite distressed over what they are seeing taking place. My philosophy, Madam Speaker, has always been to listen and then lead, and I value the feedback that has been provided thus far. I also want to thank the members of my hard-working staff and others who have assisted in the preparation of my response. [*Desk thumping*]

The contribution I make today is grounded in my firm belief that service to our country and its people, whether that be in government or in opposition, is not only the most significant mandate of elected representatives of this House, it is also a privilege and a sacred duty. And so as Members of the Honourable House, we have a very special obligation at every single step of the way, no matter how high the Cabinet office we may or may not hold, we must always remember the people who put us here whose votes we went campaigning for and making promises in order to get into this Chamber. We must never forget the fact that they are our employers to whom we must answer and account to at all times. [*Desk thumping*]

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So, as I thank all citizens who shared with me their thoughts, I want to assure them that as a parliamentarian here today, I am here to represent those people in my contribution to this debate.

A World Economic Forum article, just in this very year 2017, September, reminds me of the reasons I entered into public service and that is, to do my part to try to improve the quality of the lives of the people of our country. That article notes that governments are charged with three core duties, three core responsibilities and that is, to be protector, to be provider and to be an investor in people. In my contribution today, I intend to show how this Government has failed in all three core duties to citizens, and how they will continue to fail in these three core duties. I will also demonstrate how the Minister attempted to distort and fudge some of the numbers presented, and in fact, uttered some blatant untruths in his presentation. [*Desk thumping*]

I do not intend to deal with every issue or sector, as I have very competent and capable colleagues who will speak to those matters that I do not address in my contribution. In addition, I intend to highlight our own vision and plan for the way forward. [*Desk thumping*]

As I welcome the hon. Minister of Finance, I trust my reply to his contribution will not be deemed sterile and academic by the Minister. [*Desk thumping*] We now know he frowns upon such interventions and we know he is not averse to throwing shade. [*Laughter*] You see, there is no difference between the Minister and the hon. Prime Minister in that when the Prime Minister will tell Members of Parliament to shut up, his Finance Minister's rude remarks at the Chamber meeting trump and follow suit. After all, this is the tone of governance of this Government. [*Desk thumping*]

The Prime Minister openly declared that it is only at the Parliament that he knowingly associates with crooks. Well, all I would say is that he appears to know his members much better than we do. [*Desk thumping*] And then the hon. Member says, trying to escape responsibility, he says that he is happy that he is not the Minister of Finance, but may I remind you, Madam Speaker, that if the Finance Minister is guilty as charged, the Prime Minister is guilty as sin. And therefore I agree with the Planning Minister, she is correct when she said, do not blame the Minister of Finance because you see it is the Prime Minister who must carry the full responsibility for policy and governance. The passing of the buck must stop.

This blame game must end. You blame the police for crime; you blame parents for delinquency; you blame public officers for corruption; you blame

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residents for flooding; you blame Kamla, well for everything [*Desk thumping*] and when you cannot find Kamla, you blame Mala. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I listened in this Chamber as you did and I watched the Minister of Finance in his close to a three-hour, some would say lackluster presentation. At times, it was as though he did not actually believe what he was saying himself. In a presentation that was long on rhetoric but indeed very short on substance, his presentation was interspersed with some epiphany highlights and paroxysms. Such usually occur when the Member resorted to the blame game and when his tax increases were being announced. Indeed, then the eyes gleamed, the tone, pitch and volume of his voice reached a crescendo as his demeanor morphed to sure excitement. And I was reminded, hon. Madam Speaker, of a movie that I saw, it was a trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, and there was a character in that, Gollum was his name, [*Interruption*] and he would jump and dance in joy at the sight of the ring or the thought of possessing it.

Madam Speaker: Order please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That was the exact reaction I saw when the Member began announcing tax, upon tax, upon tax. [*Desk thumping*] Noting the reactions from all sections of the society to this budget, I get the sense of a growing despair among the citizenry, a population already battered by rampant crime, high food prices, unemployment, under-employment, has awakened to the reality of an uncaring government placing an even heavier burden on their shoulders. Perhaps some would say that the Finance Minister created a bit of history on this occasion. It is the first ever budget presentation in living memory to have alienated every single sector of the national community. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I confess that having been a Member of this august Chamber since 1995, having served one year prior to that in the other place, I have never ever felt so desolate—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I would like to hear the contribution from the Leader of the Opposition, as I guess all of you would like to. I would ask people to abide by Standing Order 53, and again, anybody being challenged can take a little walk and come back when they overcome their challenge. Please proceed, Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I was saying that I confess having been in this Chamber since '95, having been in the other place one year before that, I have never ever felt so desolate on my own behalf, but especially on behalf of citizens of our country as I have been feeling in the

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aftermath of Monday's budget presentation. Indeed, today when I rise to contribute, I do so with the heaviest of hearts and a most worried mindset for the future of our country and the immediate short term welfare for our citizens. Never in the history of this House, have we ever had a budget presentation which essentially amounts to an act of terror against citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, one which would conscientiously and actively destabilize the economic standing of the country and, by extension, lives and economic well-being of the population. And I make this statement because in my respectful view, the budget presented is bankrupt of ideas, it is bankrupt of a plan, it is bankrupt of a vision to take the country forward, [*Desk thumping*] and it is a budget that will bankrupt our country and our people at every level. [*Desk thumping*] I trust and pray that it will not bankrupt the hon. Minister as well.

So, this budget demonstrates a brutal betrayal of the people littered as it is with rehashed broken promises. In some cases, it is biased in favour of the super elite. It resorts to the blame game and the imposition of brutal fiscal measures against the population which would further pauperize people. It would effectively reduce the middle class and working class into abject poverty as massive job cuts and cost of living increases across the board become the new norm. What the country got was a budget presentation essentially in the same old failed measures and the policies announced as new ones were in fact cut and paste from previous budgets and PNM manifestos.

So once again, even as the Minister professed to "Changing the Paradigm", we heard more of the same old, same old; there was nothing new. And even those measures that may seem positive are failing to convince the population of their ultimate effectiveness, simply because this Government has absolutely no track record of delivery and keeping their promises. [*Desk thumping*] And to me, the greatest irony about this presentation is the lofty title presented by the Minister "Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path", to me, that is talk about further adding insult to injury with that name.

10.15 a.m.

The people of this country have been mandated to share the burden of adjustment, but indeed it is this very PNM Government which has failed in every aspect of governance. [*Desk thumping*] For two years, about 761 days, they have not been able to put forward any workable solutions to the problems facing us. Indeed, they have repeatedly broken the promises they made prior to the elections and thereafter, and by being bankrupt with a plan or a vision for the way forward,

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they are guilty of betraying, in my view, of brutalizing and betraying and pauperizing citizens. [*Desk thumping*]

After listening for more than three hours, I was stunned that, once again, the Minister could come to this House with his straight face to continue to blame the Government which I led, and repeat the same worn-out ideas from the previous budget presentations as though they were something new and innovative. What the country witnessed was a poor attempt at covering the current administration's failures, incompetence, and the ability to effectively manage the country's finances to take us where we need to go on a road to growth and development. [*Desk thumping*]

Like many citizens, I waited to hear some positive news that would show us a turnaround of the economy was coming, that there would be improvements in the lives of people. I was deeply disappointed as so many others were. It is painfully clear that the majority of citizens feel this way and are angry. The mass gathering outside this Parliament today demonstrates that people are fed up. [*Desk thumping*] They are tired of the excuses and directives by this administration to do more with less, to tighten your belt and, above all, to shut up while those holding high office enjoy every luxury. [*Desk thumping*]

No one is disputing that our country is facing economic challenges, many of which were exacerbated by the poor policy decisions of the Government. We are very much aware of the impact of sharp declines in global energy prices. However, any responsible Government would assess the situation and develop a clear strategy, business plan, to mitigate the impact and propose options to increase revenue generation. We have heard nothing in this regard and it is likely that we will see further increases in borrowing and a worsening economic climate as a result of the ill-fated measures being put in place by the Government. [*Desk thumping*]

Instead of providing some hope to citizens, we heard more doom and gloom which the Government has been telegraphing to the population since taking office, and the Finance Minister was unable to stem the fears of the public about the country's economic future. The regurgitated 2020 vision, now transformed or morphed into 2030 vision, which the Minister said he laid in the Parliament on Monday, may I remind you was, in fact, laid in this House on the 21st of April, 2017. A Motion was moved to put it before a joint select committee. That Motion was approved, but no committee ever met since that was put there. [*Desk thumping*] So that will remain—the Vision 2030 would remain just that, a pie-in-the-sky dream. [*Desk thumping*]

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The Government has been campaigning for weeks at various public fora, boasting about achievements that are either not theirs or have not actually materialized, and warning about tough-love measures that would be necessary to fix the crisis they have caused. Over the past two years, this country has been subjected to a Government which has failed to look after the needs of people, choosing instead to focus on vanity projects—million-dollar paintings and cars, Soca on the Seas, whilst at the same time cutting funding to critical areas such as in the health care sector, tertiary education sector and with respect to the social safety net for children in this country.

So what have they done in the two years they have been there? They gripe about not having money. They groan about my administration spending money. Well, let us look briefly at some of the things they have spent money on, money we think has been wasted to date. Madam Speaker, \$3.5 million for the Chair of CL Financial on sexual harassment charges [*Desk thumping*]; “roamsing” Shamfa, \$59,000 bill, telephone [*Desk thumping*]; \$92,000 for a romp in Tobago [*Desk thumping*]; Massy Communications, \$225 million [*Desk thumping*]; lobbyist, well known to the Prime Minister, \$18 million [*Desk thumping*]; Petrotrin strike cost \$4 million [*Desk thumping*]; Ernst & Young, \$20 million for audits [*Desk thumping*]; PWC, \$10.5 million for audits [*Desk thumping*]; Brian Lara stadium, about \$100 million [*Desk thumping*]; Soca on the Seas, \$3 million [*Desk thumping*]; paintings, \$3 million; house in Tobago, about \$20 million [*Desk thumping*]; Jazz Festival, \$12 million [*Desk thumping*]; golf course in south, \$.25 million [*Desk thumping*]; and now \$3 million for a golf course in Chaguaramas [*Desk thumping*]; \$2.5 million for a fete match to open the Brian Lara Cricket Academy [*Desk thumping*]; and, of course, for your “bestie”, about \$100 million on fake oil. [*Desk thumping*] So, does this sound like a Government without money? He just cannot fool all the people all the time.

Their complete ineptitude and inability to govern effectively was, once again, brought to the forefront by the 2018 budget presentation. Citizens of our nation were, once again, left wanting, waiting to learn of concrete proposals, ideas and strategies to generate revenue, return to growth and prosperity, expand the economy into new sectors in order to reduce our dependence on oil and gas, foster innovation, provide sustainable employment; instead, we got a presentation bankrupt of such proposals and strategies. [*Desk thumping*]

When they came into office, remember, they promised to restore confidence and rebuild trust, imploring the citizenry, “Let’s do this Together”, then they put forward a blueprint for transformation and growth. Well, it seems that has been

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misplaced somewhere in an archive [*Desk thumping*]; and now the Minister is calling for a change in paradigm. What a moron—sorry—what an oxymoron. [*Laughter*] Oxymoron. This is an admission that all they did thus far failed so they have to change their paradigm, but the budget presented clearly makes no paradigm change. [*Desk thumping*]

We have absolutely no confidence in Government, and they have shown that they cannot be trusted to fulfil any of the promises made. It is distressing to see all the good work undertaken by the Government which I led now crushed by this administration. [*Desk thumping*] Their contradictions abound. They went to the Hyatt on the Wednesday before the budget with the event—the spotlight event before the budget—to announce to the nation that things are bad. Now, this is an oxymoron too. Taxpayers paid Hyatt's fees and the cost of refreshments and so on, where? At the Hyatt, upscale Hyatt, only to learn that we are poor. Only with this Government would you have such an oxymoron taking place. [*Desk thumping*]

The contradictions do not stop there. At the very Hyatt spotlight event—old talk, whatever you want to call it—the head of the Government reveals that the scandals—uh, the Sandals project is on hold, presumably because of a hurricane or the hurricanes. Mere days later, the Minister of Finance reveals in this budget presentation about the project being the centrepiece of the tourism diversification thrust on the flagship island of Tobago. Which one should we believe? What madness is this? [*Desk thumping*] Do they talk to each other? Is Sandals coming or is it going? [*Desk thumping*]

And if their week was not outrageous enough, the Minister gives the most incredulous Anansi story that Ministers took a salary cut by giving donations to charity. [*Laughter*] All UNC MPs in Government or Opposition, we give generously to charities—religious, cultural, social, other causes, other charitable causes—from the birth of our party. We even gave a percentage of our salary to the Children's Life Fund. [*Desk thumping*] When we give to charities, this is the normal work of an MP. It is not a pay cut. It is not a pay cut. If you really want to impress someone, really go and take a pay cut from the Treasury of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

So if you make a purchase at a fund raising cake sale—you buy a piece of cake or curryque or barbeque and so on—you want to call that a pay cut. [*Laughter*] So bankrupt are they of ideas. They are bankrupt on policies; they are bankrupt of plans; they are bankrupt of programmes and now, do you know what?

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The Member for Princes Town can attest, they are now bankrupt of fashion. [*Desk thumping*]

The budget presentation with the associated rhetoric from Government Ministers on the media also gives the fake impression that this budget places a fair burden on all sectors to contribute during economic hard times. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is common knowledge that taxes on corporations, hospitals, banks and the so-called wealthy businesses, will do what?—will be passed on to the smaller man. At the end of the day, the patient who cannot get treatment at the hospital will pay more at the private institution.

The poor bank customer or account holders will absorb the bank charges and the working class will pay for taxes or increases on tyres, diesel, inspection fees and so on. All this, all this, all these taxes, to do what? So that this Government led by Prime Minister Rowley can find \$3 million to upgrade a golf course. This is obscenity personified. [*Desk thumping*] As I have stated, the Government has deepened the country's crisis as a result of very poor choices and policy decisions.

I turn now to look at the state of the economy, and I am constrained to look at that in terms of the attempts made by the Minister to blame the government I led for the present state of the economy. The Minister reminded me of a book I once read entitled: *How to lie with Statistics*. The Minister, with Gollum-like glee conveniently distorted and fudged numbers and, at times, told outright untruths so as to lay blame at the door of the Government I led. The Minister conveniently switched the goalposts, switching the years he quoted from to suit his purpose. At one time it is '14, at another time it is '15. Let us just remember when we left office it was at the end of fiscal 2015, and that is what you should be talking about, not going back before that.

We must remember that the increase in expenditure in this country started under the PNM, and the increase in their expenditure represented the largest increase in expenditure in our history, moving from a budget of \$15 billion in 2002 to \$45 billion in 2009. [*Desk thumping*] That is when we came in. This represented a \$30 billion or 300 per cent increase over that five-year period. In our five-year period, our expenditure increased from \$45 billion to \$62 billion. This was an increase of \$17 billion or 36 per cent. [*Desk thumping*] You are looking at 300 per cent increase under that same Government when the Minister went down memory lane into 2009 and 2008 as compared to under the Partnership's five years, 36 per cent.

The suggestion by the Minister is that the increase during the PNM tenure, 2002 to 2009, occurred in the context of a similar increase in revenues is correct, but it strains credibility to suggest as the Minister did that after 2009 that same Government would have restrained expenditure in the face of about \$100 per barrel for oil. In fact, there would have had to be a zero per cent change in expenditure over the last eight years for the budget to come close to a balance position today. In fact, at the moment, they are unable to reduce expenditure from the \$50 billion level of last year when they are saying they need to cut their cloth to suit their coat.

My Government reduced expenditure to \$57 billion in 2015 from the previous year's \$62 billion; that was when the price of oil collapsed, and notwithstanding it was an election year, 2015, [*Desk thumping*] we reduced expenditure. The further suggestion the Minister makes is that the expenditure over 2010 to 2015 was wasted, mismanaged or stolen.

10.30 a.m.

The fact is that during our five-year period the country experienced the largest increase in output and employment in the history of our nation. [*Desk thumping*] You see, we were very fortunate, we had the best Finance Minister in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Larry Howai. [*Desk thumping*]

Over the last two years, and over \$100 billion has been spent, significant foreign reserves have been used, the HSF has been raided, and yet there is a feeling that nothing has been done, that the economy is stagnant and, in fact, declining, with only crime showing any growth,

I turn now to the erroneous statements made by the Minister with respect to NGC dividends. The Minister gave the impression that the Partnership Government took \$16 billion in dividends over the five-year period, 2010—15. In fact, that is totally incorrect. [*Desk thumping*] The truth is that in five years, 2010—15, my Government took \$12.7 billion in dividends, but that Government, this present Government, in just a short space of four months, Madam Speaker, has taken \$3.6 billion—[*Desk thumping*]—four months, from September 2015, to December 2015, \$3.6 billion in four months. But the Minister comes on every occasion about who maxed out and did not max out and who was running on fumes. The Minister gives the—[*Interruption*] Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I am hearing some unparliamentary language, okay. I want to remind Members the decorum of this House, and ask Members the same sort of respect that they wish accorded to them be also shown,

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so that any such words are not going to be tolerated. I ask Members to please restrain themselves. Member, Leader of the Opposition, please continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much. You see, Madam Speaker, these numbers are not fabricated from anywhere, they come from the very budget documents laid in this House this year, [*Desk thumping*] laid last year, and laid previously. In the *Review of the Economy* you will find the numbers. You will find them in the *Estimates of Expenditure*. You will find them in all those fancy pretty books over the period of time as we debate budgets in this House. And so, that was another—but I heard someone say, liar cannot truth, but it was an untruth to say that we took \$16 billion when, in fact, they took the 3.6 in four months. The Minister gives the impression that the entire \$16 billion was taken by the Partnership Government, and that is where—[*Interruption*] I am sorry.

Madam Speaker: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, please control the crosstalk. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: "Take ah walk."

Hon. Member: "Dey don't get walk."

Madam Speaker: Members, let me control the deliberations, please. Leader of the Opposition, please continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, thank you so much, Madam. So another suggestion the hon. Minister made, another statement or fact that the Minister made is that the Partnership Government took 100 per cent of profits of the NGC through the dividend. The Minister also said that the dividend policy of the NGC was to pay 50 per cent in dividends but we breached that policy and took 100 per cent. That is totally inaccurate as well, Madam. [*Desk thumping*]

First of all, the *State Enterprises Performance Monitoring Manual* allows Government to take up to 100 per cent in dividends after making allowance for required operating and capital expenditure. The NGC's cash flow was sufficient to allow for it to meet its cash requirements after dividends are taken into account. In every event, I want to repeat, the Partnership never took 100 per cent of the profits of NGC. [*Desk thumping*] You see, these points have to be made because the Minister has repeated them on many occasions in this House, and it is very important to refute the boldface inaccuracies in some of those statements. [*Desk thumping*]

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I turn now to the issue of public debt, Madam. The Minister has also attributed the debt build-up to the Partnership Government when, in fact, when we came into office in 2010, the PNM had left billions in unsettled contractors payments. They had left a 23 billion hole in the Treasury with respect to CLF for us to settle. It was the need to inject funds into CLF that strained the Government's finances. This is substantiated. Evidence could be found in a study done by the Central Bank published in the *Economic Bulletin*, Volume XV, No. 2 at page 100, where it states:

“...the main impetus for the increase in the public sector debt to GDP ratio came from the Government's bailout to CLICO rather than increased borrowing for deficit financing.”

[*Desk thumping*] That is the truth. That is the truth. That is where it came from. And which Government put us into that hole with Clico, it was not the Partnership Government but the PNM Government. [*Desk thumping*]

In addition to the \$23 billion problem that the PNM left in '09—10, they also left about \$13 billion Petrotrin debt that continues to be a major problem for the country, and we shall see when this debt comes up for repayment next year, in 2018—19, Government will have to guarantee it because they cannot pay it. What goes around comes around eh, because those things happened during their term, the World GTL, the gas-to-liquids, the GOP, several of those projects—gas-to-liquids, GTL, and the sulphur optimization project. As a government, we recognized that we had to fund the Clico bailout but at the same time, keep debt low and, as a result, a number of projects were funded by internally generated funds, which is what placed a burden on the Government's cash flows. We did not run out for foreign exchange, and the Minister complained, why did we not go out on a roadshow and get US dollars; why did we take internal; why did we not take—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Diego Martin North/East, please let this be the last time that I stand. Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, again. Yes—why did we not use internal debt; why did we use external debt instead of internal debt? That is what we did. We did it first not to further burden what we owed in US dollars in the external debt, and we placed the burden on Government cash flows, but we had the management with which to bring in the moneys, and that was where we were. What the Minister has tried to avoid explaining is why the debt has now increased to close to \$100 billion [*Desk thumping*] and they have nothing to show for it,

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[*Desk thumping*] except paintings, and so on, you probably have that, or maybe a Mustang, I do not know.

Madam Speaker, I turn to revenue and expenditure, and I move to something that is very important here in terms of understanding the state of the economy, the numbers, when we crunched the numbers to see the untruths that have been told to the people of this country. On 27th September, the Prime Minister addressed the nation at the “Spotlight” event. He began with, and I quote, “The Basic Facts”. He said then, and I quote:

“After enjoying energy sector revenues taxes and royalties

2010 - \$15.7 B

2014 - \$19.4 B

2016 - \$1.6 B

2017 - \$2.1 B

In other words”—and I am continuing with the quotation—“the Government was faced with a fall of more than 89% in its main revenue source between 2014 and 2017.”

Again, why use ’14? Why use ’14 when we demitted office in ’15? I think it is because the revenue for 2015, which I explained already, because you dropped it when the oil prices went down was less than the 2014, as the fall in energy prices had already effected the economy. But that did not actually suit the picture so desperately they wanted to prove. Again, the author of the book, *How to Lie with Statistics*, can learn a thing or two from these statements.

It does not stop there. So, first the statements given, 2010, energy revenues, \$15.7 billion; 2014, \$19.4 billion; 2016, \$1.6 billion; 2017, \$2.1 billion. To accompany these pronouncements, the hon. Prime Minister also provided a graph, which I cannot hold up but it is in the document, provided a graph of the information provided to the country. I got it from a copy of the graph taken off the website of the Office of the Prime Minister, and the figures displayed in this graphic that the Prime Minister was showing the population does not reflect at all the words he was telling the population. [*Desk thumping*]

In fact, the graph shows the central government energy revenues at around \$6 billion in 2016. Remember, the Prime Minister said \$1.6 billion in 2016, and not the \$1.6 billion the Prime Minister said. This was the first time that something was wrong when what was said and what was showed did not match.

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Around the same time the Central Bank published its long overdue *Economic Bulletin*. For some reason, the newly minted Governor did not publish a second quarter bulletin, he went straight into September bulletin, but that is an argument for another day. And in this bulletin, September 27th—I believe—2017, the figures were also different from the Prime Minister's figures. So, the Prime Minister said one thing, showed another, and both of those were different from the figures from the Central Bank, in that 27th September bulletin. But the mystery is compounded even further by the publications laid in this honourable House on Monday, four days after the Prime Minister's ghost figures. According to the *Review of the Economy 2017*, page 96, Appendix 20, which deals with "Central Government Fiscal Operations", "Current Revenue: of which Energy Sector Revenue" is one, here fiscal 2016, what was the Energy Sector Revenue, and not the \$1.6 billion—not the \$1.6 billion, the 2016 Energy Sector Revenue was about \$8.3 billion—[*Desk thumping*]⁸—8.278 billion, almost 8.3 billion.

In other words, Trinidad and Tobago received 419 per cent more revenue in 2016 than what the Prime Minister told this country just over a week ago. Shocking, Madam Speaker. The Prime Minister said his Government received \$2.1 billion in energy sector revenues, taxes and royalties, but, Madam, what is the truth? I refer you back to the *Review of the Economy*, same page and table, same book laid here. There, the estimates is that the 2017 revenue estimates, energy revenue estimates received was not the \$2.1 billion the Prime Minister told the country, in the *Review of the Economy* laid in here, in 2017 it is \$9 billion. [*Desk thumping*] Why are we—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Order. Order.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, that is 330 per cent more money, well over three times more in revenue from the energy sector than what the Prime Minister told this country,

Now, why did the Prime Minister present these figures, which did not appear in any other source, and which there are hundreds of per cent drastically lower than the true figures? Why did the Prime Minister understate our energy revenues? My question is, was he misled? Did someone mislead him or did he deliberately mislead the nation? That is my question. [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, if you can—as far as the second part, if you can say that in a different way. You said deliberately misleading, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: There is a question. I will be guided, Madam.

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I want to remind you that these wrong figures were presented under the heading, “The facts”. And in their anxiety to undertake brutal policy prescriptions, is it then that they had to create a perception in the country that the country was worse off than it actually was,

I asked public servants to take note because the Prime Minister immediately used those ghost figures to wave his hatchet about the jobs of public sector employees being threatened. [*Desk thumping*] This begs the question what are the real revenue figures in a scenario where the Prime Minister and his Finance Minister and the Central Bank all have different numbers. Perhaps more important, if anything can be more important, is the fact that every Government considers its revenue in order to determine expenditure. Revenue determines policy prescriptions, project funding, salary negotiations, allocations to Ministries, money to the Judiciary, the police service, and so on. Your revenue stream is what will determine your policy directives. So if we now have three and four different sets of revenue figures, which one do we use to create policy? Are we then going to be creating wrong policies, wrong priorities and wrong decisions for the benefit of the country?

10.45 a.m.

But you know revenue was not the only wrong figure presented. In the same presentation, the Prime Minister boasted, and I quote:

“From a level of record planned spending of \$63 billion in 2015/2016, the incoming new Government immediately, cautiously, moved to \$53 billion in 2016/2017, a reduction in expenditure of more than 15%.”

Madam Speaker, again from the books laid here, in 2015—2016, the PNM spent \$52.9 billion according to the *Review of the Economy*, a reduction in expenditure of 4.5 per cent, not the 15 per cent that the hon. Prime Minister told the nation. Again, the figures are wrong on the expenditure side.

The Minister seems to be out of his league. He lacks the institutional knowledge and experience as a result of being really without a plan or a clue. The Minister continues to prescribe policy initiatives all designed for environments that are so different from ours. In his first budget speech, the Minister announced that he would set in motion the achievement of a sustainable fiscal balance. I quote:

“I will commence this process in fiscal year 2016 with a moderate budget deficit equivalent of 1.7 per cent of GDP and continue the fiscal consolidation

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process to achieve a broadly balanced budget by fiscal year”—“yuh know when?”—“2018.”

At a time when energy revenues is falling, when tax revenue was collapsing, this Minister proclaimed a balanced budget in two years. The two years have come and gone. The two years have come and gone. And expecting to wish it into existence, the Minister also predicted total revenues \$60.3 billion in fiscal 2016. In these circumstances, the Minister projected expenditure of \$63 billion, Now, this is the same Minister today who is talking about citizens who expect budgets of \$55 billion and \$60 billion, when in his last two budgets he really did not pay heed to his own words, and talking now about a false economy.

As any secondary “Econ” student could have predicted, the Minister was absolutely wrong. Revenues for fiscal 2016 fell by one-third, hinged on the fall of the world energy prices. In the face of this drastic fall, Government continued to spend in current expenditure of \$53 billion in the 12-month period. From a negligible account, a look at the Current Account balance of \$50.6 billion in my last day in government, Minister Imbert took this country into a Current Account collapse of \$7.97 billion. [*Desk thumping*] My last year. This is when the Minister told this House on numerous occasions that we were running the country on fumes; we had maxed out the overdraft. At that time the Current Account balance was what?—a mere \$50.6 million at the end of the last fiscal year we were in office. But this Minister—this Minister—has taken our country into a Current Account collapse of 7.9, almost \$8 billion, Madam Speaker.

Last year was no different. Estimated revenues were \$47 billion. Revenue actually collected was 20 per cent lower than the estimate, despite significantly better revenue streams from the rebounding energy sector. It is interesting, in the last fiscal year we just completed we got more revenue from the energy sector than anticipated. And this is the Minister who had the gall, as I say, to say that the Partnership Government was running on fumes. We ran with \$50.6 million on the Current Account balance—million eh—this Minister has taken that account to \$7.97 billion.

As we approach 2018, it is obvious that the Minister will not be able to achieve his objective of a balanced budget any time soon; not going to happen. This time, estimated revenues at \$45.7 billion, planned spending of \$50 billion, the resultant deficit of \$4.76 billion will have to be funded by even more public debt. Once more, Madam Speaker, the Minister will fail to achieve his target, [*Desk thumping*]

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The Minister would have us believe that he is engaging in some sort of paradigm shift, when the reality is that he is following the same road map he used in 2016 and 2017, which failed to achieve any of the objective targets that the Minister had set himself. So, we are engaging in the same mistakes we started off with. The results are predictable. Trinidad and Tobago will continue down the slippery slope of bankruptcy. [*Desk thumping*] Under this Minister, we have drastically falling expenditure and also drastically falling revenue.

Madam Speaker, this is not a parlour you are running, this is a country, and the policy perspectives are very different. While lowering Government expenditure is good in some cases, in a recession that is not necessarily so. To boost the economy Government needs to provide incentives for people to spend to stimulate the multiplier effect of expenditure, and in that way help to grow the economy. This is not rocket science. What this Minister has been doing from his first day in office has been the reverse. It is elementary “Econ” that if you raise taxes, you increase the cost of doing business. You invite the risk of reduced expenditure by economic participants, and so a reduction in tax intake is possible.

The Minister—some people call the Minister the “Tax Man”, everything is tax, tax, tax—and yet, so many new taxes but the revenue from taxes is falling. [*Laughter and desk thumping*] So, obviously that cannot be the new paradigm. That is the same old—borrow, tax and spend; the same old paradigm. That is not a new paradigm at all. The Minister may be anxious to point to the Sandals and so on, but it is uncertain how much revenues we will ever be able to see and secure from that, because of all the giveaways that may have happened in other countries with Sandals.

Budget 2018 thus far has to be the most severe manifestation of misalignment of policy, as virtually every revenue raising measure, as I said before, will fall on the backs and pockets of one group directly or will pass on, and that is the middle and working class. You cannot tax a people into prosperity—you cannot. [*Desk thumping*] As all sectors, not just the energy sector, but the non-energy sector has declined markedly since they came into office with overall growth declining by 6 per cent in 2016 and provisionally 2.3 in 2017.

As the Government continues to max out every account the Government has access to borrow from, the Minister continues to demonstrate a lack of knowledge and competence in basic economics. The Minister will be one to point to the several mega projects, highway construction or development, new infrastructure projects which do not of their own generate any money, at least not for the

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Government and people, and which in fact include significant maintenance costs. This at a time when the Government has withheld expenditure in maintaining the existing infrastructure, resulting in some places in increasingly worse floods in areas which previously never had floods.

More taxes and still less current revenue generation. This shortfall was on account of declines in revenues derived from taxes on income and profits of other companies that are non-oil companies and individuals. So do not blame the fall in energy prices. In fact, the energy prices went up this year. What you are seeing is that where you budgeted for more taxes, the fall in revenue is from the taxes, not from the energy sector.

We know energy revenue is primarily determined by factors outside of our control, internationally, but what is under the control of this Government is the stimulation of the non-energy sector which has been in continuous decline. [*Desk thumping*] So the Minister continues to look for areas to cast blame as to why the expected revenues have not come to pass. They are blaming tax evasion, but why under this new regime has this occurred? How come it is falling under this regime and did not occur before? Is it that there is more tax evasion now than there was in 2015 and 2014? Why, more importantly, has consumer demand declined? And it takes us back to the issue of declined confidence of consumers in the economy.

They have failed to protect the interest and overall welfare of consumers. Confidence in the economy is at an all-time low. There was a significant shortfall of \$1.4 billion in expected revenue from VAT. The plan to generate revenue through their new VAT scheme has failed miserably. So how is it then you are collecting less from VAT? You have put VAT across the board. You have put VAT on almost 7,000 items that we had removed the VAT from, you have put it back on, and yet you are still coming down to less. In addition to having betrayed the citizens by imposing taxes on previously zero-rated items, the Minister has fallen short badly of his end goal.

This year the Minister estimates that we can expect to collect an additional \$800 million in VAT. This can only be seen as the Minister has already conceded to depending upcoming price increases of basic goods and services, thus leading to expected higher estimates of revenue to be derived from VAT. But you would remember the first budget the Minister read when he estimated VAT revenues to be way above, and we all told the Minister in this House, no, it was \$12 million, that it would not be, and when we came back with the *Review of the Economy* it did not materialize. So once again we have this pie in the sky dream of getting

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additional money of \$800 billion in VAT. I wish you good luck, hon. Minister. Goods and services are going to go up. Citizens are going to be burdened furthermore by these additional increments. I turn now to the issue of public debt.

The Minister's comments to our brave and hard-working business community has been called disrespectful by some persons. In his utterances, the Minister repeats again and again the misguided slogans of, perhaps, spin doctors, trying to make someone believe that my former administration was reckless, spent all the money, left the Treasury empty; repeat, repeat, the Minister comes with that. You would recall the repeated accusations against the Partnership Government of maxing out the Central Bank overdraft by September 2015. The Minister unsuccessfully tries to continue this narrative, but I do not think he is fooling anyone anymore.

The incompetence of the Government of which he is a Member can no longer be hidden behind arrogance and misdirection. Within weeks of taking office they claimed that the country was running on fumes, because the overdraft of the Central Bank was at 98 per cent. The Minister said they barely had enough funds to service the country for a few days. Madam Speaker, the Minister went on to say:

“Fortunately, this fiscal crisis was averted by prudent fiscal management, targeted budgetary support and timely intervention on the part of the new PNM Government.”

That is the *Hansard* of the October 05, 2015, straight out of the red and ready election.

In the first quarter of fiscal 2016/2017, when the Minister claimed—that is the same period, the few months after election—the nation had no money, was running on fumes, the bulletin revealed the Minister drew down some \$1.5 billion in that very same first quarter. So that was between September and December, drew down, drew down, \$1.5 billion. Where did that come from? If there was no money and we were running on fumes, where did that money come from? [*Desk thumping*] It is simple, someone is not telling the truth, and I prefer to believe the books and the *Review of the Economy* that are presented in this Parliament at every budget time.

The debt crisis he claimed that the People's Partnership left him in was a figment of someone's imagination, perhaps created by PNM spin doctors. Madam Speaker, \$1.5 billion is enough money to give every single pensioner over \$16,000; [*Desk thumping*] \$1.5 billion is enough to fully fund the GATE

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programme for every student for three years. All of this from money the Minister claimed did not exist. That indeed is fake news of a fake debt. The kind of Chicken Little politics is what it is. Trying to convince the nation that the sky is falling because of the Partnership, so that they do not see the incompetence of the PNM Administration.

They chastised my Government for borrowing. The Partnership borrowed money and delivered hundreds of projects which have improved the lives of citizens. Real results; you can drive anywhere in this country and you can touch and you can feel and you will see the projects delivered under the Partnership. [*Desk thumping*] Today ask any one of the citizens standing outside the Parliament now how are they feeling. They will tell you they feel and see nothing but hardship from this Government, whilst the Government continues to distract the country from the raiding of the Treasury with nothing to show for it. [*Desk thumping*]

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Within two months of being elected, they came to Parliament to debate and use their majority to raise the borrowing ceilings by \$50 billion so that they could borrow more money. When we demitted office there was \$13.3 billion in headroom under all those statutes which allowed for borrowing, \$13.3 billion in headroom under the External Loans Act, the Development Loans Act, Guarantee of Loans Act, but they came to Parliament soon after they got into Government to raise the borrowing limits by \$50 billion to borrow more money.

In addition to that was the more than \$1.5 billion which we already knew they were going to borrow via the overdraft at the Central Bank. And this does not access loans under the IDB and IBRD Acts, Madam Speaker. So even more is the fact that as the result of the Partnership Government's actions, there were several outstanding payments due in 2016 which the PNM administration would have benefited from simply because they were in Government. I speak of revenue that they would have obtained money, they would have obtained when they came into Government in the 2016 fiscal which included \$1.5 billion from Phoenix Park IPO; \$3.8 billion from a capital payment by TGU; a half of a billion dividend from NGC, taxation in the sum of \$41 billion. [*Desk thumping*] That is the revenue that was generated, but entered onto the books in fiscal 2016 where it really began, fiscal 2016 began when?—September 2015, up to the month before, just before September 2016.

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So we almost, we doubled, Madam Speaker, the savings in HSF. In 2010, when we got there it was US \$3 billion; when we left there, it was \$5.6 billion. [Desk thumping] We left net foreign reserves of \$12.6 billion, we left an economy that was growing; not even the Minister could deny that. [Desk thumping] This is a far cry from when we came into Government in 2010.

When we came in we met an economy in shambles. We inherited, as I told you, the \$23 billion Clico debt; a \$5 billion debt to public servants; another \$1 billion to contractors, thanks to the then PNM of which many senior Members here [Desk thumping] were Members of that Cabinet. My Government was confronted by over \$30 billion in debt immediately as we formed the Government, and I am not here counting the public sector debt. Infrastructure was in shambles, flooding, whenever rain “set up”, as they used to say or one person once claimed, once rain set up, a person said, once they claimed it was a stationary cloud. A Minister said that, “yuh” know—a stationary cloud led to flooding on the highway. Can you imagine?

My Government recognized that it had to fund Clico, I told you about before, and keep the debt low. Projects that today are being used by our citizens. So, we met an economy then in a tailspin from mismanagement, waste and corruption. [Desk thumping] We met the GTL scandal, billions siphoned off. A PNM Government, of which the Minister of Finance was a part, saddled Petrotrin with a \$13 billion debt, I mentioned before. Who can forget the billions lost in poor housing construction?—the Minister of Finance was part of that as well; he was in that Cabinet as was the hon. Prime Minister. The mention of Las Alturas should make every Member on the other side hang their heads in shame. [Desk thumping]

We met the MV *Su*, millions spent for a vessel that never worked; [Desk thumping] we met the Brian Lara stadium with steel fabrication which failed structural inspections; [Desk thumping] we met a bill for a “racket rail” in which billions had already been paid for, nothing to show for it. [Desk thumping] And, Madam Speaker, every public servant would remember when we got into office in 2010, we were also faced with over 100 wage negotiations which had been abandoned by the PNM. [Desk thumping] When we took office we were forced to fix the fumes of corruption and mismanagement. But you know what?—we faced these things head on. We took the tax base from \$37 billion that the PNM had and we raised it to \$41 billion by 2011. [Desk thumping] When we left Government, annual capital receipt was \$4.9 billion. Unlike the incompetence of this PNM Government, my team did not sit down and cry or try to blame everyone; we went to work and got the job done from day one. [Desk thumping]

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The people of this great nation elected us to govern and that is what we did. I am pleased to say, Madam Speaker, that I had the honour and the privilege to have led the most productive Government this country has ever seen. [*Desk thumping*] Through strong planning and delivery by a hands-on Cabinet, we stabilized the economy, we put the country back on a growth path.

Today, under this PNM administration Trinidad and Tobago is in a nosedive [*Desk thumping*] The Government has betrayed the population's confidence and has not even delivered a plan, far less anything citizens could see or touch. From a slogan of "Let's do this" to one of—where we have reached today from "Let's do this", the slogan seems now to have become "Let's do nothing". [*Desk thumping*]

One thing is certain, after two years in Government they have pushed the debt, the public sector debt, up by 23 per cent. In their two years \$17.2 billion has been added; in two years public sector debt \$17.2 billion, that is more in two years. In these circumstances, it is obvious they will have a dependence on borrowing to finance government expenditure, and that will continue with consequent increases in the public debt.

Madam Speaker, the Minister's confession that is he forced to borrow billions in order to pay salaries and other bills as opposed to creating any type of revenue generation. Any bank in T&T would call this different kind of borrowing to fill gaps, to borrow to fill other gaps, borrowing to fill gaps to borrow to fill other gaps.

Hon. Member: Kiting.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Kiting, that is the word I was looking for, kiting. That, my friends, is not how to run a country. At this rate they will incur the largest inter-generational transfer of debt in the history of our country. [*Desk thumping*] At this rate, not our children, you know, it will go down into generations; down to our grandchildren will have to clean up the mess that is being made at this time. At present under this Government, every man, woman and child has to face a debt of 69 almost \$70,000, and that does not include the mismanagement to come.

Given the level of borrowing and public debt at present, it is clear that the Minister is hoping oil prices will not only rebound, but he must pray at night that it should reach, at least, \$200 a barrel. Every right-thinking citizen knows that the Government seems to not only be a stranger to the truth, or a stranger to the truth, but they also seem to be strangers to basic maths. Time and time again the math just does not add up, and so—I would not go into who might be mathematically

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challenged or who might be an engineer or a lawyer and so on, but it is clear that in this budget statement the projected deficit for fiscal 2015/16 of 2 point will be \$2.8 billion, the actual deficit was \$7.9 billion. So the Minister estimated for 2015 to 2016 a deficit of \$2.8 billion. How on earth did that reach almost \$8 billion, \$8 billion?—total miscalculation.

In his second budget statement the Minister projected a deficit of \$6 billion. You know what that turned out to be?—\$12.6 billion and counting, 12.6. How can you be so wrong? How can you be so wrong in forecasting and planning for this country when all your estimates, all your targets, have not been met? And then you want to talk about changing the paradigm and you come back with the same measures, the same borrow, tax and spend. That is the same paradigm in which we are going into fiscal 2018; there has been no change whatsoever. Now, the Minister predicts a budget deficit of \$4.7 billion. Well, given his track record with the math over the last two, I mean, there is no way, I do not see it adding up at all.

The IMF projections, based on inside information from the Government, are very disturbing. In its 2016 Article IV Report, the IMF warned that debt would continue to rise. The IMF has projections for public sector debt as a per cent of GDP for the four years '18 to '21 and these are—public sector debt from IMF, eh, the projections, because I am saying I do not trust the projections of the Minister of Finance given in the last two budgets, they were never met, those were never realized.

The IMF is saying, for 2018, public sector debt as a percentage of GDP 68.2 per cent; the next year 2019, 77.9 per cent; the next year 87.9 per cent; and then 97.9 per cent respectively, 2018 to 2021. While central government debt, well that is the debt to GDP, the actual debt is projected as 48.5—we are looking at 2018 to 2021, eh—58.2, 68.1 and 78.1 respectively over the medium term. This is indeed frightening, Madam Speaker, and I trust that someone on the other side would shed some light on whether these IMF projections are inaccurate or whether they are wrong. All of this paints a picture of gloom and doom under this incompetent Government. [*Desk thumping*]

And again, what are the prescriptions? What are the policies and programmes to take us out of that pathway down in a nosedive, down, further down in every regard? What are the prescriptions? Well, I will talk, Madam Speaker, as I go along because I want to look at the energy sector.

It is true that we have a competitive advantage in energy and we should not “dis” that; while we want to say we want to get out of the energy sector, we want

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to diversify, we want to remove the dependence on the energy sector, let us recognize it is a very important sector for getting us revenue. It is unfortunate that in addition to the distorted reality painted by the Minister on the country's economy and its finances, misconstructions abound with respect to the energy sector. Again, things that are totally inaccurate—in some cases, distorted.

When we entered office in 2010, we were alarmed to learn that due to the policy stagnation of the previous PNM administration, investors were not interested in investing, exploring or producing anything in Trinidad and Tobago in the energy sector. In fact, in mid-2010, there was only one rig working offshore. Did you know that?—in mid-2010 when we came into office. As a result of the fall in investment from 2008 to '10, natural gas productions started to decline in late 2010, and so the nation was facing a future revenue crisis, not because of energy prices, but simply because we were heading into a situation where production would continue to decline. To add to that, major upstream players entered a period of prolonged maintenance, and that is well documented, so this also impacted on production.

So what did we do in the face of this upcoming crisis with respect to revenues from energy? What did we do?—we attacked the problem head on with a series of policy measures as follows: we mobilized an aggressive exploration strategy by way of offering incentives to the seismic companies, the upstreamers, the bp, Shell, BHP and so on, so that we could find new reserves of hydrocarbon, new reserves. The turnaround in natural gas supply and the rebound in the energy sector that the Minister of Finance spoke about just on Monday is as a result of the projects we initiated 2013—2015, [*Desk thumping*] not so much as by your leave when those projects were mentioned. These projects include the bp Juniper, the EOG Sercan, bp Truck and BHP Angostura Phase 3. Those are the projects going now. But, you see, when you want to reap down the road you have to plant today, you have to plant today. [*Desk thumping*]

And so, the bp Angelin development is as a result of the service we did in 2011 to 2013 by bp. This same survey led to the success of the Macadamia exploration well. These projects are what are responsible for the moderate growth the Minister of Finance spoke about in 2017 and to come in 2018. At the time of passing these incentives of the Finance Bill this is what the then MP for Diego Martin North/East, not the Minister—MP—had to say and I quote:

It is about time these fiscal incentives were put in place. [*Desk thumping*]

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I cannot believe it. *Hansard*. It is in the *Hansard*.

It is about time these fiscal incentives were put in place.

And the Minister comes here, some would say, like a hypocrite. I would not say that about him. Comes here and says that these incentives have resulted in—people cannot get corporation tax, also called taxes from the energy sector, We cannot get it because this Government, my Government, you all, you gave it away. Somebody down on that end shouted out “Kamla, you gave it away”. Nothing is further from the truth, Nothing! And that is what I am saying: throughout this there have been many, many statements made that are totally untrue. Nothing is further from the truth.

So, first of all, when we were passing the incentives here, the then MP said, it is about time these fiscal incentives were put in place. In many cases these incentives were simply accelerated allowances. The allowances were permitted to be carried over a shorter period of time, In his budget speech last year, the Minister confirmed that our accelerated incentives led to results. So first of all, then he said, yes, very good, why you took so long. Then last year when he was speaking about this same incentives this is what the Minister said:

“In recent years, there have been significant changes to the Trinidad and Tobago oil and gas taxation regime, designed to stimulate production in mature fields and to encourage new field development. By and large, these changes have had a positive effect.” [*Crosstalk*] [*Desk thumping*]

But on Monday, Minister changed his tune, He criticised the accelerated capital allowances of 2014, The Minister said the allowances were responsible for the energy sector not paying corporation taxes for the next seven years—and this was one of the times when the eyes gleamed, and the voice went up, and the pitch went up, and the whole bench went up; all the theatrics of Gollum. All the theatrics when the Minister said, not paying corporation taxes for the next seven years. Now, how can that be when the capital allowances will expire, according to law, in three months’ time?—December 31, 2017. Does it mean that that Government has passed a piece of law that we are not aware about that they have extended that tax incentive time? How can a tax incentive expire in three months? In fact, tax payments for seven years. The claim is incredible. It demonstrates a gross misunderstanding of the workings of a huge part of the economy that he is entrusted to oversee. Everyone in the energy sector knows this.

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In January 2018, the system reverts to what obtains before April 2014. This means companies will still be able to claim the 100 per cent of their capital expenditure for exploration and development drilling, only they will do so over a longer period time. So all that was happening was that accelerated you had a shorter period of time. [*Desk thumping*] These incentives have had little or no impact on energy sector revenue, because the companies that operate in the upstream in the exploration and production licence regime, they have made smaller profits or losses in the years '15, '16 and '17. So, nothing to do with the incentives. That means there was little or no taxable income against which the allowances could have been applied. [*Crosstalk*] The incentives are not applicable to companies—I am sorry, I am getting disturbed here.

Madam Speaker: I would like to advise Members to please observe the decorum of the House. I am being continuously disturbed by Members on the right of the well. Please continue, Member.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. So, here we are about these incentives. The incentives are not applicable to companies in the midstream and downstream petrochemical sector, and these are like Atlantic LNG, Point Lisas companies and so on. We still earn revenue from these mid- and downstream providers.

Increased production of natural gas should lead to increased production of high-value ammonia, methanol and urea in the downstream sector, leading to more income from taxes. And in fact, if you look at the *Review of the Economy* you would see that methanol prices have gone really very, very high. It is a shame that we had to let go of the MHTL plant based on agreements that been entered into. So, here we are, this may be at risk as the energy chamber chairman Eugene Tiah stated yesterday, without clarity—I am still getting this muttering and it is getting a little difficult, Madam Speaker, to think. So, may I please have your protection?

Madam Speaker: I would just like to caution Members, this would be the last time; after this, Members are going to be asked to leave the Chamber. Please continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you so much. I think what is worrying someone on the other side is when I talked about increased production on natural gas would lead to increased production of high-value ammonia, methanol and urea, and natural gas would be coming, as I said, based on the projects we had undertaken with the Jupiter project coming on stream, Sercan, and all those other projects now coming on stream.

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But this may be at risk I am saying, Madam Speaker. The energy chamber chairman said this yesterday: Without clarity on policy and the right contractual terms shareholders in downstream facilities will be unwilling to commit the necessary capital to maintain our highly successful mid- and downstream sector. The Central Bank bulletin tells us that for the first 10 months of fiscal 2017 Government collected—as I said before—TT \$6 billion in revenue from the energy sector.

It is simply not correct to say that the country was earning not one cent—and I am quoting those words of the Minister—for production about three billion cubic feet of natural gas per day. And indeed, people who did not know better, you know, “ooh, ahh, wow”, three billion, whatever, cubic feet. Yeah, three billion! And being told that the country was earning not one cent. Totally incorrect, Madam Speaker! Totally incorrect. [*Desk thumping*]

These statements are inflammatory, and could be quite damaging to the reputation of companies that we do business with. Lower prices, lower production, carried-forward losses have never led to lower collection of petroleum profits tax. That is the corporation tax the Minister said, also known as petroleum profits tax. Perhaps if the Minister wants to increase revenue, the Minister could prevent companies from claiming carried-forward losses which are permitted by section 16 of the Income Tax Act. I think this would be unwise, however, but if the Minister in his constant quest for new source of a tax revenue—known by some for his unwise decisions—he may want to follow that route.

Madam Speaker, in fiscal 2018 our natural gas supply will benefit from an 18 per cent increase in natural gas production, the seeds of which were sown, when? In 2010 and 2014, under the Partnership Government. [*Desk thumping*] I want to tell you, Madam Speaker, when we govern we do not govern for tomorrow, we govern for the future. [*Desk thumping*]

Not one new project has ever been conceptualized by this new PNM administration. In the entire two years they have been in office they are living off the fruits of the labour of—[*Desk thumping*] Hand in hand, lack of plan and execution has been a loss of confidence in our business. And this was not helped by the industry-wide confusion caused by the Minister’s statement with respect to the royalties and this petroleum tax.

The loss of the Angelin platform fabrication to Mexico remains a source deep disappointment to us. We lost 300 jobs that could have bought us in US \$200 million in FDI, in foreign direct investment because, you know why? Do you

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know why? They blamed the workers. It is not the workers, Madam Speaker. It is because the NGC failed to finalize a new contract with BP before the end of 2016. [*Desk thumping*] They blamed the workers. They say is the workers and the strikes and so on. The NGC failed, I am told, to finalize a new contract with BP before the end of 2016.

It was the mishandling of the relationship with MHTL that led to the closure of two of their plants in February of this year, and the loss of hundreds of jobs. And, of course, ArcelorMittal packed up and left in March 2016, taking with them about 600 jobs. To date, the relationship between Government and multinationals has been damaged. A further sign of poor stakeholder relations is demonstrated by the press release that BP put out a few days ago, saying that they need, and I quote: Much more clarity on the details in the budget.

That means they do not understand what the Minister said [*Desk thumping*] as it related to his statement on royalties and taxes. The largest player in the TT energy sector, the third largest in the world, is confused with what was delivered here on Monday. [*Desk thumping*] That is an ominous sign for our economy. As we cement our reliability and expertise in a now very competitive region. Remember, yes Trinidad was Trinidad was Trinidad and Tobago. We were the number one in the Caribbean. Look, we are in a very competitive region right here, because now we have seen Guyana and Grenada's recent oil finds. And if you do not have this relationship with the multinationals, then they will pick up their rig and go.

Hon. Member: Suriname.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Suriname as well. And then of course we have the threat of massive shale oil coming out of the United States, that our little bits of oil and gas, if we do not work properly, can be thrown out. We need to make sure as we cement our reliability and expertise in this region, we need to make sure we are still seen as a primary choice for multinationals to investment. [*Desk thumping*]

For this to happen, we need to have better relations and understanding with stakeholders. We worked hard, you know. We worked hard to maintain a relationship with stakeholders based on mutual respect; we understood that a balance had to be struck between the country's interest and the developer's interest, with consideration to the wider global environment.

I turn now to the issue raised by the hon. Minister about royalties from the energy sector. What of these changes about royalties? The Minister said he would

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apply a fixed royalty of 12.5 per cent across the board. Will the royalty arrangements be applied to production sharing contracts? Companies operating with the PSCs, production sharing contracts, they do not pay royalty based on the actual contract they have, the contractual arrangement. Companies that operate exploration and production, like BP, with their licence, and Petrotrin, they pay royalty, and in some cases that is at the rate of about 10 per cent, and for others it is about 12.5 per cent. These agreements would have to be amended if the Government were to add a new royalty provision.

Has the Government already gotten the consent of the pertinent energy companies? You have a contract with them. Have you gotten their consent now to change their contract? They share production with the Government and that is how the Government receives its share, the production sharing contracts. BP has been paying its royalty in kind since 2006 based on an agreement to supply royalty gas; that is what had been agreed to by the late former Prime Minister Manning. This royalty gas supplied by bp on behalf of the Minister of Energy to NGC at no cost, royalty gas. Not money, eh. Not cash. What has happened to that arrangement? Is the Government now going to take cash instead of the royalty gas, natural gas? We need some answers to that.

The Minister says, has given no details on how he plans to implement this new royalty regime, and how much money he expects to get from it, and, of course, stakeholders are confused. Even worse, as I said, the chairman of the energy chamber indicated that the Government had outlined the desire for a new tax regime in the last three annual budgets, and despite consultations there is still a lack of final resolution and clarity about exactly what is intended. And through we have been here, every budget the Minister has brought, we are going to harmonize, we are going to reform the fiscal regime in the energy sector. Broken promise one, broken promise two, and again now promised in this budget. Third budget.

And you know, listen, this is your third budget, you know. If you stay and last out, you only have two more to come. Only two more to come, this is your third budget! And as I said, this is a bankrupt budget to the country. When we left office in 2015, we left a Natural Gas Master Plan. That document has been laid in Parliament recently. Totally, almost, I think nothing has been altered; as the Minister of Finance likes to say, not a comma or a semicolon has been changed.

11.30 a.m.

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries in laying it was so impressed that he hailed it as pioneering. This historic document speaks to the way forward

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for the energy sector and it says works continue to be competitive in upstream and in so doing we would continue to attract investment, not scare it away. That gas master plan which we commissioned, this Government has sat on for over two years reviewing, repeatedly, in it, the document, the plan, repeatedly implores the Government to immediately mobilize an aggressive exploration campaign to find new reserves of gas, to maintain the highly successful fiscal regime which we implemented and I had explained earlier that is what we had done when we went into office; aggressive exploration campaign. The master gas plan is saying to do that. You sat in it for two years, so no exploration campaign has yet started, and these things take years to be monetized and to come on stream.

It is also our understanding that come 2019 NGC will be paying significantly more for natural gas from bpTT and EOG Resources, and this will put further pressure on profit margins at NGC and Point Lisas. Now, the Prime Minister has gone on record as admitting that he negotiated a gas price, on behalf of the NGC, with EOG Resources in a meeting in Houston in March 2017. At that meeting, there were no officers of the NGC present. There were no officers of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries present. The Prime Minister was accompanied by the Minister for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. Now, this is a very strange thing.

The Prime Minister is not a contracting party in this matter. It is a matter between NGC and EOG; they are the contracting parties. It was therefore, in my respectful view, highly improper for the Prime Minister to assume the role of the NGC—[*Desk thumping*] to lead negotiations on their behalf. This incident has led to the fixing of natural gas prices by the political directorate, namely, the Prime Minister and has undermined the board of the NGC and its management. [*Desk thumping*] A course of action flies in the face of transparency. It is our understanding that because of this intervention, NGC will now have to pay significantly more for natural gas in 2019 and this will negatively impact the competitiveness of the entire natural gas sector. [*Desk thumping*]

On the issue of hybrids, I again say that in 2014 the Partnership administration removed the MVT and VAT on hybrids under 1999 cc. In the next budget the Minister of Finance, our then Minister of Finance went a step further, removed all taxes on hybrids and this created a surge in demand for hybrids. This was the right direction to take the nation. It was progressive and it was green. It was in keeping with the global trend which sees the proliferation of hybrids in the developed world. Sadly, the Minister sought to penalize this growing segment of the car industry just when it was taking off. To cut off vehicles over 1599 cc, in my respectful view, is a step in the wrong direction. [*Desk thumping*]

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In fact, there are only a few hybrid vehicles which fall into the classification 1599 and under. So, we reverse the policy so that only very few vehicles would be accessible. The exemption represented a discount of more than 50 per cent. This means that family friendly vehicles, larger engines may not be within the reach of families who may want to go to hybrid route because the cost has gone up and so on, drastically. So, once again, is the average income earner desirous of becoming more environmentally friendly and benefit from the Government's willingness to support this? That door has been shut. [*Desk thumping*]

I will move on, Madam, from energy matters, but I will return on the issue of the sale of assets under the heading of procurement with respect to the sale of TGU shares which was announced in the budget last year and I think we have some areas of concern there.

Procurement, public accountability and transparency. And this is an area, Madam Speaker, which will—it will be worthwhile to remind ourselves of a ruling given by our Court of Appeal in *The Minister of Planning and Sustainable Development vs The Joint Consultative Council*. I have footnoted the reference here. Where the Court of Appeal stated:

“It may be worth reminding ourselves that whereas freedom, transparency and accountability are the hallmarks of a participatory democracy, secrecy lies at the heart of the dictatorships...”—from our Court of Appeal.

What we have experienced over the past few years clearly signals to every right-thinking Trinidadian and Tobagonian, is that this regime is clearly on the pathway to the dictatorship and they have a lot of secrets which are being uncovered one by one. It is not a coincidence that every single piece of legislation enacted in this country which seeks to promote transparency and accountability has been by non-PNM Governments. [*Desk thumping*]

It was a UNC Government, for example, that was responsible for the passage of the Integrity in Public Life Act, [*Desk thumping*] the Proceeds of Crime Act, the Judicial Review Act, the Freedom of Information Act, the Equal Opportunity Act. It was the Partnership Government which had the vision and will to amend the Standing Orders of this Parliament to allow for establishment of JSCs to hold Government accountable for their actions. [*Desk thumping*] I am proud to say that our changes to these Standing Orders, the changes have allowed the “ferrygate” enquiry to progress, thereby allowing the nation to see what is really is happening under this Government. This is changing the way we hold our elective officials accountable for decision-making.

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We want to also remember it was the People's Partnership Government responsible for the enactment of the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act. [*Desk thumping*] The passage of this piece of legislation is representing the delivery of the manifesto promise we had made and that we would lay it in the Parliament within 30 days of coming into office in 2010 and so said so done. We laid the entire package here and the objects of that Act, of the Bill, was to promote principles of transparency, accountability, integrity and value for money; efficiency, fairness, equity and public confidence and local industry development, sustainable procurement, sustainable development in public procurement process, as well as the disposal of public property.

So whether you are acquiring goods or services and property or whether you are disposing or selling them you will have this transparency. You know, I make no apologies today in saying that there seem to be some officials in Government who have deliberately delayed the implementation of the procurement legislation. [*Desk thumping*] Over the past two years—and we will have to ask whether such delay was to facilitate some in ensuring that they fill their pockets of their friends and their financiers. Even while we were in Government and worked on the Bill we had difficulty working with the then Opposition to get the Bill passed. They opposed us at every point. [*Desk thumping*] We got it passed. Now, this Government, that Opposition now in Government is stalling. The record speaks for itself. So we passed the piece of legislation, Madam Speaker, but it is not put in place.

Over and over Government has promised they would implement the legislation, they just are not getting it done. They promised under the 2015 manifesto; they promised in budget 2016, promised in budget 2017 and now again in budget 2018, the same promise is being made in all three of their budgets. We expect what the Minister told us last year, in his last budget statement, he did not just say we will do it in this, he said, we will do it by March 2017. Well, March has come and gone and now we are being told it will be done in 2018. This is the record of the PNM, a Government of broken promises and betrayal. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I had to write to the President to warn the Office of the President that the Minister's and the Ministry of Finance's involvement in the process for the appointment of the procurement regulator was unlawful and illegal and would result in the entire—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Order. Order. Order!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—process being corrupted. You will recall budget debate—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: Madam Speaker, imputing improper motives. Nobody has corrupted the process of procurement.

Madam Speaker: Leader of the Opposition, please, continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] It was noticeable in the budget statement that no mention was made of the involvement of the Ministry of Finance and/or the Minister in the appointment process. I recall in this very Parliament when the Minister indicated that they would hire, through the Ministry, persons who will make up a shortlist of persons for the procurement regulator and send it. I am saying that I wrote to His Excellency, the Office of the President to say that if that process be followed it will be unlawful and will corrupt the independence of the office. [*Desk thumping*] What are the consequences of the non-implementation of procurement legislation?

We have seen Government spending about \$110 billion over the last two years and so for two years the promises of good governance, transparency, and accountability and so on, we need procurement legislation to protect our country. The Government tries to distract the population with allegations of corruption about everybody sitting here. People have grown weary of that. They do not want to hear about “blame Kamla”. They just want the Government to do something, anything to ease suffering and they want transparency and accountability. [*Desk thumping*]

Let me demonstrate some of the things that have happened with the lack of procurement legislation to prevent corruption. We have seen a relative of a Minister securing a \$400 million contract for construction of the first segment of a highway. The county was told that the transaction was transparent because the Minister recused himself when the matter was being discussed. A financier of the PNM was able to seek a contract for the rental of a barge and cargo carrier at a cost of about US \$22,000 per day to service the sea bridge. I wonder if anyone recused themselves from the deliberations for the award of this contract.

Special procurement processes were used because they said the situation was urgent. Contracts are being awarded for the extension of the Solomon Hochoy Highway to Point Fortin; contracts in excess of millions of dollars awarded for the completion of the works on the Brian Lara stadium; contracts awarded for the

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lease of *Cabo Star*, *Ocean Flower 2*, under the supervision and control of the Minister of Works and Transport and the Port Authority and we have been seeing the JSC, what has been coming out of that. This was also done through special procurement processes because they said the situation was urgent. These contracts are more than TT \$1 million per month, Madam Speaker. The list does not include contracts for hundreds of millions of dollars awarded by special purpose companies and so on. And so all of this being done, in two years with the delay, with respect to implementation of the procurement legislation, there is no clear transparency or accountability in those processes. [*Desk thumping*]

I come now finally to TGU, Trinidad Generation Unlimited. The Minister of Finance announced in 2016/2017 budget statement, Government's intention to sell a percentage of its sharehold in Trinidad—TGU. So remember I said procurement is about acquiring goods and services and property, but it is also about disposing. So here it is, Government has announced its intention to sell TGU, sell shares. I quote:

“the sale of 20 percent of...(TGU)”—shares—“to institutional investors, such as the...(NIB) and...Trinidad and Tobago Unit Trust Corporation.

This measure is expected to generate \$600 million.”

That was then, 2016/2017 budget statement.

Upon the mid-term review, May 10th, right here, 2017, the plans of the Government suddenly and drastically changed and the Minister announced:

“The divestment of the...TGU by Union Estate—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Lee: Standing Order 53, please.

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you.

“The divestment of the...TGU by Union Estate Electricity Generation Company...is also advancing. After a review of our earlier decision to dispose of 20.0 per cent of the shareholding of TGU to certain local institutional investors, we have now determined that it is more appropriate to pursue”—to protract—“the introduction of an Independent Power Producer or other suitably qualified private sector investor into the ownership and operations of TGU.”

So first we were selling our electricity generating plant, TGU. We were selling to institutional investors, local, NIB, Unit Trust, and then that changed and we are now talking about selling to some private sector investor.

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“We propose that the new shareholder would hold up to 40 per cent of the shareholding in the Company, with another 10 per cent offered to the public...”

So now the new shareholder, the private man, 40 per cent, with another 10 offered to the public, John Public and/or institutional investors.

“The proceeds of this divestment exercise are estimated to range from \$3 billion to \$5 billion...”

Because look at what is going on. When the Minister talked about it first, it was 20 per cent. The intake was expected to be \$600 million, now it has jumped. They are going and sell 40 per cent with another 10 per cent. How much are you going to sell now? Fifty per cent. And I warned Government about what happened with MHTL. When MHTL was a minority and when Government was the majority with the institutional investors, you will remember Mr. Duprey and Clico had sold their shares in MHTL and when they sold it, the Ferrostaal and Proman triggered clauses in the contract and when we went to arbitration in the United Kingdom they went—

Mr. Imbert: They lost.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We did not lose. [*Interruption*] All right. Madam, please. The Minister will have his time to speak.

Madam Speaker: I just want to know if there is an interruption being made in accordance with the Standing Orders? Is there? Please, proceed.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What happened to MHTL, Madam Speaker, going up to the arbitration in the United Kingdom, what they had triggered, they said that the shareholding was oppressive, that they were the minority and it was oppressive and the court held that. And that is how Trinidad and Tobago had to sell the shares to MHTL. That is how it happened. I am warning Government, one of the same companies involved in that deal, Ferrostaal, is the one now that you want to sell this thing to. You want to sell TGU.

“We propose that the new shareholder would hold”—as I said—40 per cent”—and so on.

The proceeds...\$3 billion to \$5 billion, depending on final valuation...and the quantum of shareholding divested, with these proceeds compensating for potential shortfalls to any other one of Government’s sale of assets programme. Further details will be made public in due course.

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Of course, 2016/2017 fiscal “finish”. We heard no further details even though in September 2016 the Government decided to divest 20 per cent of TGU to local institutional investors. Within a few months it went to 40 per cent to an unnamed entity. What changed? What was the process to sell to this unnamed entity? This decision by Government clearly demonstrates the policy of this Government to tax and sell off the assets of the country to raise revenue. [*Desk thumping*]

I would like to ask the hon. Minister, is it correct, that by Cabinet Minute No. 922 of May 25, 2017, the Cabinet agreed and I quote:

The Ministry of Finance and the Union Estate Electricity Generation Company Limited, with appropriate consultants, managed the sale of Trinidad Generation Unlimited Plan to Ferrostaal GMBH for 40 per cent of TGU with another 10 per cent offer to public and private institutional investors. Minute No. 1529 of September 2016 refers.

All relevant consultancies be engaged by Union Estate Electricity Generation Company Limited—whoever they are—and they will act on behalf of the Ministry of Finance with costs to be on a reimbursable basis.

So you would have to pay them costs as well. I want to ask, through you, Madam Speaker, whether on the 13th of January, 2017, the Prime Minister received a private courtesy call from Ferrostaal, in or about—

Hon. Members: Ohhhh!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and I am asking the question. The 13th of January, 2017, did the person known as Ken Julien accompany Ferrostaal on that courtesy call? [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Members: Shame!

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, this is a transaction value between \$3 billion to \$5 billion. This is an asset valued at \$3 billion to \$5 billion. It belongs to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Let me explain the extent to which this administration would go to hide their secrets. Remember I quoted from the Court of Appeal judgment talking about democracy and openness, but corruption is about secrets and dictatorship is about secrets.

Madam Speaker, the Cabinet Minute is dated 25th May, 2017, okay? Two weeks later, on the 9th June, 2017, MP Lee had the following exchanges with the hon. Prime Minister during PMQs on this issue, and I quote:

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“Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the hon. Prime Minister: Would the Prime Minister say whether Government has reached an agreement to divest 40 per cent of Trinidad Generation Unlimited (TGU) to a private sector investor?

Check the dates. Cabinet Minute, 25th May, 2017 and this is a question being asked by MP Lee two weeks later, 9th June, right here in this Parliament. I am quoting from the *Hansard*, the response:

“The Minister of Finance in this capacity as corporation sole, is currently exploring the divestment of 40 per cent of TGU and there is no agreement at this time.

The process is the widest process”—I am still quoting—“Having indicated in the national budget a public expression that we are interested in receiving from interested parties and we are prepared to divest, we are considering offers, we are inviting persons who may be interested”—so maybe Ferrostaal was invited for a meeting—maybe:

“we are inviting persons who may be interested, international companies that are working in Trinidad and Tobago in the area. We are looking at the broadest spectrum, and the Cabinet will determine, based on the offers, what is the best option for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.”

End of quote from the hon. Prime Minister. So, again, I am asking, could the Government indicate whether there was no agreement on the matter of the sale on June 9th, 2017 when there was a Cabinet decision May 25, 2017 to sell 40 per cent to Ferrostaal? [*Desk thumping*] These are things that would be avoided if the procurement legislation was in place. We really need perhaps a JSC because that is one way in which we try to get to the truth.

So when the Prime Minister answered the hon. Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre—it is very difficult not to go in the wrong place with this. But was he correct when he said that there was nothing? Is the Cabinet Note a fake note? What is the true answer, Madam Speaker? What is there to hide? Why is this transaction shrouded in secrecy? The Cabinet apparently had taken the decision to dispose of one of the country’s most valuable assets. And, Madam Speaker, may I say, with the greatest of respect, I do not believe that the electricity grid, the supply of electricity for the nation, should be placed in the hands of a private investor. [*Desk thumping*] There are some things that you must retain control of for the safety and the national security of your country.

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Madam Speaker, what was the process for this to happen, for this sale by sole select tender, and the selection made? That is why I warn that by the time the procurement legislation is implemented there would be very little left of the assets of the country. I want to ask: what was the procurement process that was engaged in selecting Ferrostaal? What were the names of the other firms that were considered? What, if any, due diligence was performed on the Ferrostaal—*[Interruption]*

Madam Speaker: Might I ask, Member of the Diego Martin North/East, if you kindly take a little walk and you—*[Desk thumping]* I would also like to remind Members on the left side of the well, that the clapping of the desks can also be considered a disturbance. *[Members leave Chamber]* *[Crosstalk]* Member for Couva South, Member for Laventille West, I am on my legs. Leader of the Opposition. *[Desk thumping]*

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yes, Madam Speaker, back to Ferrostaal. Who were the consultants engaged by Union Estate Generation Company Limited? Why is the sale being negotiated by UEE/GCL with appropriate consultants? And that is a holding company for the Union Estate and not by TGU itself. Why are we using the holding company and not TGU? What payments for relevant consultancies are there? Are there not State officials, technocrats, general managers and boards to negotiate the sale? Is there in place at this time a fully constituted TGU board? Was it legal for the Government to sole select a purchaser without any tender process for the sale of one of our country's most valuable assets? *[Desk thumping]* Again, the questions as to you are selling it to a foreign company.

This decision would obviously affect the delicate NGC/T&TEC and TGU agreements which will, in turn, adversely affect the price of electricity to citizens of this country, And you know, just today an article appeared in the newspaper, Madam Speaker, I think it was the *Trinidad Guardian*, which dealt with increases in rates for WASA and for T&TEC. As far as I am aware, the RIC is the body charged to deal with rate hikes, and here it is that the chairman of the IRC, I think her name is Ms. Hyacinth Guy—

Hon. Members: RIC.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Regulated Industries Commission. This is the commission I am referring to. Ms. Guy said in a telephone interview yesterday:

“We anticipate that by the first quarter of 2018 we will be completed with the both reviews”—of WASA, T&TEC—“so far a framework for reviewing the rate

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for T&TEC has already been done, while one was being developed for WASA. The review process will”—include—“three phases.”

And it continues:

“Guy said the RIC has been working apace with the review process for the last few months. Once reviews are completed, the new rates will be handed over to WASA and T&TEC, following which the population would be informed—

Had the rates been done incrementally, we would not have been so far behind.”

So here it is the chairman is already signalling an increase based on the Minister's statement, of course, that they will assess the matter—is here saying that the rates are going to be increased, Ms. Guy said the public can seek recourse should both utilities fail to deliver proper service, then they would go to—after the new tariffs go into effect—

“Should the utilities fail to deliver proper services after the new tariffs go into effect, Guy said, the public can seek recourse.”

So it is coming. The new rates are definitely, definitely, coming. [*Desk thumping*] So we are going to be selling off our TGU shares, 40 per cent and 10 per cent, and I am asking—we wonder how this will impact the review of the rates. Well, we do not have to wonder anymore because they are going ahead. The silence of the Minister regarding this transaction, no report to the Parliament that you have reached an agreement—a decision—to sell off the TGU.

The question is: are we going to wake up one morning and find that Lake Asphalt no longer belongs to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? It has been sold to a friend or an acquaintance? Is this what is planned for Petrotrin and Trinmar assets, that Government sell out the assets belonging to the people right before our eyes and we do not know? This is why the procurement legislation should be implemented forthwith. [*Desk thumping*]

And in this budget, the hon. Minister of Finance has proposed three ministerial committees to do some serious things, you know: to give out housing and land; to give out grants and to give out loans. One is to be chaired by the Prime Minister that will have the power to give out State lands as part of the Government's housing programme. Another has responsibility for approval of agricultural grants in the sum of, I think, a total of about \$20 million—to give out grants, a ministerial committee.

12.00 noon

Today, a third has responsibility under this budget to approve loans to small businesses in the sum of a total \$50 million. Madam Speaker, where are the tender laws of this country? Where are those laws? We had the Central Tenders Board Act. That Government moved out, changed that a lot when they amended it to create special purpose companies and then put tendering committees within those special purpose companies. And then, what are we hearing here? Ministerial committees to give away land, to give away grants, to give away loans?

You know, hon. Prime Minister, today, on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, I call upon the hon. Prime Minister to put a halt to these initiatives. [*Desk thumping*] Do we really want a ministerial committee to give out money, to give out land? Do we really want that in this country? I do not care who is the Government, we cannot allow this to happen. This is the process that people do not want. The Government has to stop these initiatives and it would be clear if they do not, that they want to avoid transparency. What about political patronage, man? Political patronage—these grants, loans and so on can be used for that when you put it in the hands of the politicians. I am sorry to say that implementing these initiatives instead of relying on procurement legislation makes it look like the Government is trying to sneak in political slush funds in these—[*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, the resources that are available to us, as a country, are blessed and we are very blessed to enjoy them, but they are finite. We simply cannot waste and squander our limited resources to satisfy anybody's political desires and to fuel corruption. The Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act was enacted to strengthen our democracy, to ensure that the procurement of goods and services by the State, and disposal of property is, was, will be, transparent and equitable. And so, the entire purpose of it was to help to deal with corruption, to promote efficiency and integrity in the procurement process. Is it then when you have a politician determining whether you will get the agriculture grant, what do you have to prove to that politician? What would you have to do? I heard a statement coming out when the hon. Prime Minister was asked about a particular individual. When asked if that person contributed to the campaign, the Prime Minister is reported to have said, "I would expect if you are my friend that you would contribute to the campaign", and that is a dangerous trending when it comes to putting matters like these in the hands of politicians. I call upon Government to operationalize this public procurement Act as soon as possible.

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Madam Speaker, there is another area which is cause for concern. The Government blames all and sundry for failures. Every act of corruption is blamed on everyone else other than the Cabinet, or the Prime Minister. No one takes responsibility. No one is held responsible. They accused hard-working and dedicated public officers of corruption, fraud and mismanagement. You know when senior public officers refuse to toe the line, as in the “ferrygate” scandal, they attempt to throw them under the bus. [*Desk thumping*] Throw them under the bus. A very disturbing development is in the news that the Ministry of Attorney General—I repeat, not the police, not the Office of the DPP, a Ministry with not one, not two, but with three Cabinet ranked Ministers is now seizing computers and mobile phones.

I am not aware that a Ministry can move in into anybody’s property to seize computers and phones. This statement was made by the hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West in a post-Cab briefing and it is carried in the newspapers today. [*Desk thumping*] Under what law is this being done?

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member. I am getting a sense of restlessness in the Chamber. I am just asking Members to be mindful, if it is that Members feel restless they, again, can take a little walk and come back. Please continue, Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you so much. I think perhaps they allowed me to get a one second off my feet. So I would proceed from there. So here we are, no responsibility. Under what law does the Ministry of the Attorney General have the power to seize phones, or laptops, or computers? And then when they are seized, who is examining them, Madam Speaker?

A Ministry cannot seize equipment from another Ministry. That is the job of the police acting in accordance with the law. This is a dangerous development, [*Desk thumping*] dangerous development. It is more in line with the Third World banana republics of the last generation. [*Desk thumping*] Now we are getting reports of senior officials of Government pressuring public officers to take actions or sign statements as part of a political witch-hunt. I appeal to all hard-working public officers not to be intimidated, not to be harassed or bullied by a failing regime. [*Desk thumping*] I call upon senior officers to resist political pressure to break the law. I call upon you to stay faithful to your oaths. We are committed to the rule of law. We will not allow this Government to intimidate public officers or law enforcement officials. [*Desk thumping*]

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We commend all police officers for trying their best to deal with crime under the weight of an incompetent Government lacking a plan and the political will [*Desk thumping*] and I want to remind our country that when we were in office we were able to bring crime down, serious crimes, to the lowest ever in 33 years. [*Desk thumping*] And when we did that, when the murder rate was on decline, in one year we went 47 days without a single murder—all of that. You know what? We worked with the very same police service that is in place today. [*Desk thumping*] Do not blame the police. Do not blame the police. If crime is out of control, do not blame the police. Blame yourselves since you cannot give the direction, resources and the plans to those in the police force eager to do their best. And that takes me on to the next topic, Madam Speaker, national security, as we go forward.

I started off with the article by Slaughter from the World Economic Forum, September 2017, about the three core responsibilities of a Government. That is what Governments are there for. I talked about being protector, I talked about being provider and I talked about being investor in people. I want to go to that fundamental paramount duty of any responsible Government which is to be the protector of the people who elected them to govern. If a Government cannot protect its citizens and cannot guarantee safety and security, a Government has lost its legitimacy to govern. [*Desk thumping*] The importance of the Government's duty to protect our citizens is the first right enshrined in our country's Constitution. The right to life, liberty, property and security of the person is enshrined constitutionally guaranteed right, guaranteed by Government to every citizen of our country. That right is breached and violated with each crime, whether murder, robbery and so on, that is suffered on a daily basis in this country. The people are under siege at the hand of criminal elements. Murder and mayhem grips our county today and it seems as though people have become numb to the killing and bloodshed, and it seems that the Government has become oblivious to the suffering and carnage.

The most important issue and concern in our country today is the need to protect your families and your property from criminal elements. Nothing is more important to people now. Never before have we been so unsafe. We are living in very perilous times. I have read the statistics many times here. I will not go into those in any great detail today, but the level of fear being experienced on a daily basis is unprecedented. People are no longer prisoners in their homes. Remember the days when we used to say that you are prisoners in your homes? People are now becoming victims and statistics in their own homes. Our homes have become

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new hunting grounds and killing fields for criminals. Never before have our women, our children, our elderly been under attacked as they are now. No one is spared from the wrath of criminals, and the Government in all of this has proven to be hopeless, and helpless, and bankrupt to offer any solution to give comfort.

Never before have I felt the pain for our elderly and children so much. It is a pain felt by the entire population. The lost to our country by loss of lives, the scourge of crime and criminality, as a country we have endured coming down increasingly from September 2015, is unquantifiable and unbearable. And so, we were listening and waiting. Budget three, okay, you have been there two years, you probably settled down, what are your plans, what are your initiatives to protect our citizens, to protect our children, to protect our property, to protect our businesses? And we waited with bated breath, all in vain. How was the Government going to address the level of crime and criminality? What were the plans to support countless victims of crime who have lost loved ones?

In this budget statement, the Minister clearly demonstrated the importance that his Government places on national security and safety, and the need to protect our citizens. It was two hours into the presentation that the Minister sought to reveal Government's plans for national security and that lasted all of about six minutes in over a three-hour budget presentation.

Mr. Charles: Three hours and 20 minutes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Three hours and 20 minutes. That national security presentation was, in my respectful view, insulting, insensitive and uncaring to the most important issue bedevilling our country today. The statement of the Minister again, bankrupt of ideas and substance, lacking in plans. And so, after two years and three budgets now, the population now accepts a mistake that was made in September 2015. [*Desk thumping*] The country now understands that this Government not only lacks competence and creditability, but they are uncaring and insensitive, and at times arrogant with respect to the suffering of the people of this country. So, hard-working, honest citizens continue to be bait, continue to be terrorized, with respect to safety and security, by criminals.

You know, the Minister read his budget on Monday and just maybe, what was it, two days after, I think the 3rd of September, 2017—Madam Speaker, on Tuesday 3rd, which is the day after the budget was read, the United States Department of State through the Overseas Security Advisory Council—that would have been Tuesday of this week—Security Council assessed Port of Spain as being and I quote:

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“...a critical threat location for crime directed at or affecting official U.S. Government interests.”

This report, which is a signal to the world of the present crime situation facing our country is a serious indictment on the Government’s fight against crime. Let me quote, Madam Speaker, a few comments made in the report as follows:

“The Government of Trinidad and Tobago...faces numerous challenges in its effort to reduce crime, including an overburdened legal system, bureaucratic resistance to change, unemployment in marginal areas, disenfranchised youth, the negative influence of gangs, drugs, weapons, and an economic recession.

...(TTPS)...crime statistics show a 1.4% increase in overall serious”—crimes—“as compared to 2015. Violent crime remains a major concern...

Despite the seizure of...firearms in 2016, almost 81% of the murders were committed by firearm...

According to TTPS statistics, there were 462 murders in 2016, 420 murders in 2015, 403 in 2014...”

And you see the upward trajectory.

“The detection rate...15.2% for 2016, an increase from 13.6 percent in 2015.”

So the crime stats confirmed, Madam Speaker, that crime is definitely on the rise with this 1.4 per cent increase in serious activity as compared to 2015. Despite the seizure of firearms, almost 81 per cent of the murders committed by the firearms and so on. What is noteworthy about the report however, Madam Speaker, is that specific mentioned is made of the success of crime-fighting initiatives that were implemented under the partnership administration,

In this US report note is made of the additional vehicles that were provided to the protective services during the period of the partnership government; note is made of the establishment in 2014 of the Community Comfort Patrol Programme. However, the report notes this programme was discontinued in 2017 under this administration; it makes note of the programme we had implemented with the Rapid Response Unit. The report notes that the RRU—Rapid Response Unit—has been operating with a success in both islands, and these were the things that we were doing in the fight against crime whilst we were in Government. This report acknowledged the progress made under the partnership in the fight against crime and criminality. That today now, that success is no more under this administration. Where are we today, what do the numbers tell us?

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Now, the Minister did not refer to one single success of his Government in the fight against crime in the last two years. He could not give us a single statistic because that would have revealed the betrayal perpetrated on citizens. And Madam Speaker, allow me, using the COMSTAT data as follows. In the last two years of this Government, we have lost more than 1,000 of our men, women, children, sons and daughters to criminal elements. Let me repeat that. In two years, more than 1,000 murders in this country. And Madam Speaker, the horror of young children staying with a babysitter being slaughtered and throat slit. The horror of the murders that are coming—elderly women, elderly people. That is where we are at.

I am quoting from the Commissioner of Police COMSTAT data dated in the 19th of September, 2017. For period January 01, 2017 to September 16, there were 343 murders. This is an increase of 30 more murders for the same period and this does not include persons who are reported as missing, sometimes subsequently turn up dead. Wounding and shootings, 497 reports of wounding and shootings, first nine months of this year. This represents an increase of 107, more than the last year. With respect to kidnappings, increase of 36 per cent and kidnappings for ransom, there was an increase of 150 per cent. Percentage wise, numbers otherwise. Robberies. There have been 1,968 reports of robberies for 2017 and 577 reports of larceny of vehicles. That is up to September 2017. This means that each day, there are seven robberies reported—and these are the ones that are not reported. There may be others that are not reported. There are seven robberies reported each day in our country and two vehicles are reported stolen each day in our country. Possession of firearms and ammunition, 733 reports of possession of firearms and ammunition; 313 drug-related offences.

With respect to murders, for the first nine months of this year there have been a 700 per cent increase in murders on the sister isle in Tobago. In Tobago, 700 per cent increase for the first nine; 25 per cent increase in wounding and shootings. This is in Tobago. There has been a 20 per cent increase in kidnappings; a 26 per cent increase in robberies; a 38 per cent increase in narcotic-related offences. This is how the Government has delivered on its promise to keep the people of Tobago safe and secure. [*Desk thumping*] That is what those who may come for Sandals, if it ever happens, will be exposed to in the sister isle. This constitutes the report card of this Government in the fight against crime and its efforts to protect and secure the citizens of our country.

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This is what the people of this country have gotten in return for the \$7 billion spent on national security during the last fiscal year, Let us not forget previous fiscal year, under this Government, \$10 billion. So we have spent in the two years, \$17 billion on national security and not a single person in this country is safer today. Every single family living in fear. Loss of thousand lives and more and the Minister comes to tell us, they come to tell you, “Tell the country we could make it if we try”. Perhaps the Minister would have been better off, you know, if he had quoted from the other Stalin song with one—what is it? “Bun dem.” The other Stalin song. One second, just looking for my note here. The other Stalin song, anyway, “bun dem”. “Buh yuh come by de gate, Peter is begging Peter to allow him, he cyah wait to deal with those who are corrupt and all the other things.” It was very strange. Yeah, okay. “Ahh”, here it is. Let me quote some words from the famous Mighty Stalin. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:

Judgement morning, I by de gate and I waiting

Because I begging de master, give me a work with Peter

It have sinners coming, with dem...

[*Crosstalk*] Madam Speaker, please.

Because I begging de master, give me a work with Peter

It have some sinners coming, with dem I go be dealing

Because de things that they do me, I want to fix dem personally

During my lifetime...they were unkind,

So much corruption that they make, now it is time they must feel my weight.

Peter, Peter don't hold me back!

This is my time for burning

Peter, keep the fire blazing

This is Jah time for burning

Keep the fire blazing

Bun them, bun them, bun them.

[*Desk thumping*] That would have been more appropriate. I wish I could sing, Madam, but I could never sing like the great Dr. Calliste. And so all this is

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happening: loss of loved ones, rape, rob, kidnap, brutalize, throat slit. I mean, a young boy trying to intervene to help someone gets his life snuffed out. This is a colossal and abject failure of this Government to deal with crime. This is what it is. [*Desk thumping*]

And so, having heard the Minister of Finance, I want to make it very clear, I fear that this coming year will be even worse than last year and the figures seem to be supporting that upward trend. I lead a Government that saw serious crime fall, as I said, to the lowest in 33 years, because we had a vision, we had a plan to make our country safe and secure. We provided the protective services with resources that they needed to fight crime. We were on our way to weeding out from the services those corrupt officers who were hindering the fight against crime. And Madam Speaker, with the help of God, we will do again when we get back into office. [*Desk thumping*]

Their record of betrayal, deception and broken promises. We must never forget, Madam Speaker, that this Government promised the people of this country the solution to the crime problem. Madam Speaker, they said that they had the answer before the election and every budget, two years, these two years, what we heard repeated, repeated, repeated, the 10-point crime plan: appoint a Commissioner of Police, still waiting; manpower audit, still waiting; municipal police, to activate laws to establish municipal police in all local Government bodies and so on, they said, “oooh”, we will get 100 municipal police in every local Government—broken promise. Police Complaints Authority to amend legislation, broken promise, repeated time and time again.

Parliamentary oversight to establish a JSC to deal with crime. Yes, it is true, the parliamentary committee has been established but when we met with the hon. Prime Minister, we raised the issue of having the Chairman as a Government Member, the Prime Minister said that he would look into that, nothing has changed.

On the issue of witness tampering, in the 10-point crime plan, witness tampering offence, amend the present laws to create a specific offence of witness tampering. This was in your 10-point crime plan—[*Crosstalk*] this was in the 10-point crime plan of the then Opposition, Madam, before election, not done; two years, not even a Bill introduced; another broken promise. Unlawful eviction offence, the promise was to amend the laws, to create a specific offence of unlawful eviction, after two years, again, broken promise. Urban renewal plan, the proposal has gone the same way as the creation of the offence of unlawful eviction and so on. This was one of the recommendations of the Dr. Selwyn

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Ryan's report to help with dispossessed youth and so on, promised in the Opposition 10-point crime plan, nothing. Ten-point crime plan, accept the Caribbean Court of Justice as final court of appeal, nothing done, not even a consultation; another broken promise. So all of this is the 10-point plan.

And then, the hon. Minister comes to this House, in 2015/2016 budget, and makes promises, all of which are broken. One, establish a joint border protection agency. That has been repeated budget after budget, has not happened; broken promise. They promised the TTPS will be modernized, establishment of a police management agency, again, after two years, another broken promise. Local Government, local constabularies, as I said before, introduced in each, so that was in the 10-point plan, it was in the 2015/2016, nothing has happened; broken promise. They promised we will establish a police service inspectorate to deal with abuse of state power; after two years, another broken promise. They promised the prison management will be strengthened; after two years, broken promise. The promises of reform have not been kept and the response of the President, prison officers, to the 2017 package confirms this. So here we are, a sad story of broken promises of inefficiency and incompetence in the fight against crime. Not a single one of the promises in the 2016/2017 budget in the fight against crime, not one has been delivered.

The Minister's promises under the 2016/2017 budget were really—that is the second budget—a repeat of the first budget. Three promises were made then: establishment, again, municipal police, third time promise made, broken; decentralization of the police service, no step has been taken; rollout of programmes to foster the building of public trust, it is quite ironic that in seeking to build public trust in the police service, the Ministry of National Security shuts down the Community Comfort Patrol Programme. You come back in this budget, Madam Speaker. And here now, just this one basic promise, something called a National Crime Prevention Programme. The question is: how, who, what, when, where and why? And I trust as the budget debate is fleshed out, those words will tell a story of what was the latest plan of Government to fight crime. Now this, it seems to me, is a mirror image of a programme that is already in existence known as the Citizen Security Programme established under the Partnership, contributed to the reduction of crime and violence in over 100 high-risk communities throughout the country. So I await with bated breath what this will be, this new national prevention of crime.

We move on, Madam Speaker, we have seen the promises repeated in the fight against crime. Today, I want to point out that we were able to bring the

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crime down and because we did several things you know. We did several things in that five-year period, brought the crime down lower. The Rapid Response Unit, the highway patrol, the linking of the E999 to the NOC, Community Comfort Patrol, National Security Operations Group, counterterrorist intelligence unit. All of these were in place and much of it is being dismantled by the present Government and crime continues to rise.

So I know those on the other side have raised the issue of success of the SAUTT and of the OPVs and I am sure they will continue to say that this was the best thing since slice bread, but I want to point out the following: when this S-A-U-T-T, SAUTT was in full swing, the homicide rate, the murder rate in our country was the highest in the nation's history. [*Desk thumping*] Serious crime was at its highest in our nation's history and kidnapping was at its highest in our nation's history. Yes, we dismantled it and yes, we shut it down and we were able to bring down serious crimes, as I said before. So protection and safety is very important. I have met with the Prime Minister on at least two occasions, shared views of the Opposition with respect to the fight against crime. We have made suggestions to grab the low-hanging fruit such as operationalize DNA legislation, electronic monitoring legislation, resource the Forensic Science Centre, amend the anti-gang, scientific training of police officers and so on. But today I just want to put some others into what have already been shared in the public domain in the fight against crime and these are as follows:

- Forthwith, take steps to establish a special unit to detect and prosecute corrupt officers in the protective services.
- Take steps immediately to repeal and replace the Justice Protection Act to provide a comprehensive, workable and well-resourced witness protection programme.
- Resource the Judiciary, Magistracy and the Office of the DPP.
- Fully resource the Forensic Science Centre and take steps to establish a national forensic science institute in collaboration with the UWI.
- Establish a national centre for victims of crime to provide services to cope with trauma and grief, protection, education, counselling and to assist in any other way, the victims of crime.

Again, I call upon the Government to reconsider its dismantling of the policies and programmes which were in place when we were in office to do with the Community Comfort Patrol.

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I remember things that we did. We expanded the fleet of the TTDF, Defence Force, the TTPS and others by more than 500 vehicles. We refurbished more than 11,000. We built and opened eight police stations. [*Desk thumping*] We increased the number of CCTV cameras by more than 500 throughout the country. We established the National Security Training Academy, and many other measures which allowed us to bring crime down.

I move on as time moves on, Madam Speaker. I come to building human capital and quality of life and I will not deal with all the heads contained in there under “Building Human Capacity” in the budget statement. I just want to raise two of them, two of those.

On this critical level of economic growth, the Government, it seems to me, is more at sea than the *Ocean Flower 2*. On entering office, they quickly and maliciously chose to fire the entire engine room of the HDC and they brought in a new man. Madam Speaker, this has been a disaster. After criticizing us on every penny spent, on every action taken, every ceremony held, today, two years later, the housing sector has collapsed. [*Desk thumping*] They have not built one single house in two years and by their incompetence they have terminated work at several HDC estates. They announced with fanfare a new private sector partnership arrangement to stimulate home construction. Two years later not a single home built.

The Minister spent some time repeating himself on the issue of housing and he had the most remarkable premise that there is a great demand for rental accommodation and tells us that the Government intends to focus on the area of rental. Madam Speaker, as elected MPs, all of us here will tell you, eight out of 10 persons they want to buy a house, they want to own a home. We had believed very strongly in a home-owning democracy. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, rent money is called dead money because when you rent for years, at the end of the day you own nothing. And so I have to ask if this is the vision of the PNM to keep citizens in bondage of renting, to have, in a way, create a new slavery by dependence on the State to change a light bulb in your rental unit. Under previous PNM Governments, they gave out many rental units. When we entered office we found that thousands of these renters could not and did not pay \$100 rent per month. This is what the Minister wants to take us back to. Measures announced by the Finance Minister will see housing developments turned into slums and quite possibly lead to more crimes. Madam, please.

Madam Speaker: Please, continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam. This is the old model. We talked about a new paradigm, changing the paradigm, but we are going backwards into the old model of housing. The return to the old model of asking non-builders to build could also result in the disbandment of HDC, throwing about 1,400 public officers on the breadline. As a result, the dedicated employees of the Ministry may join the other thousands outside there on the streets, jobless.

This Government has effectively announced the reversal, as I said, of the home owning democracy and development of communities which the Partnership had established and returning to rentals and infringement of current Town and Country Planning regulations. The Government is also abandoning their own public/private partnership's home-building policy and is handing over the housing portfolio to individuals in the private sector. In other words, this Government is moving from the three P method to just P. From the three P method, public/private partnership, to just P, that is the contractor will have the millions of dollars to invest in home construction when dealing with a Government they cannot trust. This, I have pointed out earlier, Madam, the conflict of interest and the political interference that can arise from the proposal to do housing in our country as disclosed in this budget.

The Government is in the court today, in the courts, facing claims from contractors for a failure to pay from way back then, way back then. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, which has not built a single unit, is expected to become redundant and defunct under this system. The new measures are an obvious vote of no—Madam Speaker, please, can you help me?

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, 53.

Madam Speaker: Might I invite the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No, it was not him.

Madam Speaker:—to take a walk and return.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam. So, here it is, the Government wants to ask the same contractors to build houses, the ones who have them in court today, facing claims. They want to ask that they build houses on the promise that the Government will pay at some point.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development has not built a single unit, as I said before, and the new measures and obvious vote of no confidence in the

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non-performing Minister who was not built, as I say one. This will be done completely outside the procurement laws and regulations to focus on private developers to be registered by a new committee chaired by the Prime Minister reeks of political interference and corruption. Will this be a case of friends and family and family and friends building houses?

Prior to the 2010, they attempted to implement this exact model. They took political activists, gave them five houses to build, and these activists built one and a half. May I remind the national community that my administration had to spend \$120 million to repair the houses and bad infrastructure left by the previous PNM regime. [*Desk thumping*] Who can forget the pictures of houses moving in Wellington Gardens, the hills collapsing and retrenched? Their legacy was Las Alturas. We are going back to those days under this Government. It should be noted that the Partnership executed 7,130 housing starts, delivered 8,521 housing units in the five years we were there. In two years not one house has been built. For 2010 to 2015, records confirm 8,521 units were delivered across 35 project sites. This figure includes the completion of stalled projects we inherited from the previous PNM Government.

During 2010 to 2015, 102 homes were allocated to the differently-abled as we did a different kind of distribution. Eight hundred homes went to members of the protective services, 380 longstanding applicants were allocated under the programme as has been a long time coming where they had been waiting for over 15 years.

The housing police now being articulated by this Minister is a major retrograde step from that under the Partnership administration, which delivered thousands of decent, affordable and structurally sound homes and developed communities with access to green spaces and leisure areas. We built and were able to distribute homes in Oasis Greens in Chaguanas, Fair Field in Princes Town, Cypress Hills in Union Hall.

I personally assisted in turning the sod at housing sites and had the signal honour to return in my term at those same sites to give out keys for completed units. [*Desk thumping*] They have not built a single new house in two years. We gave out 100 homes per week. The regime is returning to this old formula of badly built units without community support and a breach of regulations.

So we had another programme to help people, with respect to finding a home and that programme was known as the Land for Landless programme. This Government has completely turned its back on the cries of citizens for the

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provision of land. So whilst saying the Government cannot provide all the housing with the number of applications, they have turned their back on that other programme, the Land for the Landless, which would have allowed persons to build their own home at their own pace. They always seem—this Government always seem to believe that everyone wants a house, but there are many citizens, particularly the working poor and lower middle-class, who would prefer a lot of land upon which to construct a modest but all the less, a home for themselves. Again, we talk about a home-owning democracy, a land-owning democracy, Madam Speaker for which we stood for and the UNC stands for.

Many young families yearn to purchase a lot of land. My institution designed a sort of rigorous, technical and policy framework this Land for Landless programme. This initiative would have distributed thousands of lots to deserving low income applicants for land. Over 50,000 persons had applied in the six months for land. The LSA was to be the driver of this programme. I am now told that this programme has been abandoned. So what do we expect? You rent, you cannot become part of, again an owner of a home and an owner of land. That is not the programme contemplated by the Government. And so we are talking about here under the heading “Building” what is it, “Human Capital and Quality of Life”. “Building Human Capital and Quality of Life”.

And I turn now to the Arima hospital because under this heading they talked about hospitals and I want to share with you, Madam, again, the distortion of the numbers presented here, with respect to the Arima Hospital and to ask: which is the accurate number? We know for decades the people of Arima have been taken for granted and betrayed by various governments. Religiously the PNM would promise to construct the Arima hospital, promises again broken. I recall longstanding protests by a businessman Baliram Maraj and others mounting a one-man protest for this hospital. That was not taken one. As far back as 1981, the PNM was promising a hospital in Arima, 1981, and every time before and every time after—I have the footnotes source here—once elected, despite recognizing the need for this hospital, they never built. Madam Speaker, I am proud to say today that it was the Partnership Government that designed, tendered for evaluation and awarded and commenced construction of the Arima hospital.

Madam Speaker, when the Minister of Finance talks we really have to listen, because often what he says and what the truth is, are not related at all. [*Desk thumping*] There is a disconnect, a penchant for distorting the truth. When the Minister recites figures double-check them.

Mr. Imbert: Madam Speaker, 48(6), I do not have any such penchant. That is deliberate imputation of improper motives.

Madam Speaker: Leader, I just ask you to withdraw that and rephrase it, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Okay, I withdraw “penchant”. It is a nice word, but I withdraw it. I am saying—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: What—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am withdrawing the word. Okay, I withdraw whatever it was, but I will repeat this; what the Minister says and what the truth is, are not related. [*Desk thumping*] When the Minister recites figures, I am saying we must double-check them, reality check. Under this heading of the Arima hospital, we see some numbers that are totally not correct, as with so many other numbers given.

Last Monday, the Minister gloated in this House, and I quote:

“In keeping with the Government’s continued thrust to improve the availability of quality healthcare in Trinidad and Tobago, construction of the Arima hospital is ongoing.”

The Minister says, and let us take note of the numbers now, Madam Speaker. I am saying we must check them.

“The original projected cost of the hospital was \$1.85 billion but this PNM Government, in an effort to save you tax dollars and achieve value for money, was able to reduce the cost to \$1.6 billion.”

So, the original cost, \$1.8 billion the Minister says, but they were able to reduce it to \$1.6 billion,

“saving \$250 million without changing the design of the hospital. The new 150-bed hospital is expected to be completed and be operational in 2019.”

This is on the *Hansard* of this House, Madam Speaker, the 2nd of this month, 2017.

Madam Speaker, I refer you to the 2015 budget documents now, specifically the State Enterprises Investment Programme, page 52, 2015. It is reported:

Construction of the Arima Hospital, this project involves the augmentation of the existing Arima Health Centre to facilitate an inpatient capacity of 150 beds. The new hospital will have a maximum of four storeys. The estimated cost is \$1.680 billion, of which \$600 million is projected for fiscal 2015.

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So, Madam Speaker, the original projected cost this Minister told us was \$1.85 billion, totally incorrect, because in the estimates the original cost is listed as being \$1.680 billion. [*Desk thumping*]

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So where did the Minister get this \$1.85 billion? In the state Enterprises Investment Programme now for 2016, so that was 2015 they gave 1.85, in the 2016 State Enterprises Investment Programme, one of those books there for 2016, I quote:

“Construction of the Arima Hospital - ...five (5) storey...”—continues—The estimated cost of the project has been revised from \$1,680.3 million to \$1,858.3 million. The projected expenditure from April to September 2015 is \$132.6 million...”

So here we are, looking at the 2016 fiscal year, would be September 2015 to just before August 2016, 1.8. So, in our time it was listed at 1.68, under their budget documents listed as 1.858 and that is what the Minister mentioned on Monday.

But this deception and confusion—this is deceptive, Madam, and there is confusion. Mr. Noel Garcia, Chairman of UDeCott, in an interview with the *Trinidad Guardian* published in February 2016 told this country that the cost of the Arima Hospital was \$1.4 billion. Now this is the person directly responsible for the construction—telling the country that the cost had effectively fallen to \$1.4 billion, but the Minister of Finance comes to this House to say that the new cost is \$1.6 billion, and that there is a saving of 250. So the price went up in the last year, not down, Madam Speaker, from these documents.

In June 2016, while touring the Arima Hospital, proud Arima MP, Minister Garcia, he announced that because of the economic downturn and the surveys, the hospital had been scaled down to 110 beds [*Laughter*] and that is the cost, and that is where the cost was reduced to \$1.2 billion. And these are quoted, I have the references from the *CNC3* TV and from the *Trinidad Guardian*. The Arima MP was never corrected and therefore we trust that his information is the best information. After all, the Arima MP is said to be a very close tie to the Chairman of UDeCott. Mr. Garcia is in charge of the project. So how did the project, which dropped to \$1.2 billion in June last year, go back up by \$400 million now? Which Minister is speaking the truth, well not the truth, is giving the correct numbers, Madam? And this is important, because if the hospital has been downsized, then it means Mr. Imbert—information given by Mr. Imbert to the Parliament would be inaccurate.

If not, it means the Minister of Education would have said something else to the population, and the Government, by failing to correct the information circulated to the public. So here we are, all with different numbers, different quotations, and different size. *[Interruption]* “Yeah”, thank you. If the Arima MP is right, the number of beds have been reduced, it means construction cost per bed went from the original cost of \$11.2 when he announced it, sorry \$11.2 million to \$12.3 million, to \$14.5 million, at present the hike in construction costs under the PNM of \$2.3 million per hospital bed in Arima. Madam Speaker, we ask for what are the true numbers with respect to this matter, and should we not get them, we will be filing relevant freedom of information applications.

Madam Speaker, I turn now to Labour and Security: and I will want to—the World Economic Forum, as I told you, I mentioned about the three core functions of a Government. Protector, and I have dealt with the issue of national security, but the function of a Government is also that of provider and I look now at the issues dealing with labour and social security. But before I go there, I really want to spend a little moment on the fiscal measures at 146, because again there is something here that just does not make any sense, Madam. 146—Fiscal and Other Measures: Madam Speaker, if you look at the Ernst & Young Report on Budget 2016 and Budget 2015, you will see that the Government failed to implement 16 of 31 measures, that is in 2016; and in 2017, they failed to implement several of the measures as shown in Ernst & Young.

The Minister announced several new taxes as fiscal measures in this budget, and let us look at the stats for this. With respect to the maxi-taxi fiscal measure, I think we have some concerns with respect to that because you see, there has been a judgment of the High Court in Trinidad and Tobago, and I am very familiar with that judgment, because we were in government—can you just please find the maxi-taxi piece for me—the High Court action brought by the Maxi-Taxi Association against the government. Minister Jack Warner was the Minister of Works and Transport at the time and Minister Warner put forward a directive to the Transport Commissioner that he will remove all the bands, they will not have to register for a band to get a maxi-taxi, so anybody could buy a maxi-taxi and basically, that is exactly what has happened here where—*[Interruption]* thank you—removal of the restrictions. This is exactly where the Minister told us moving restrictions from banded maxi-taxis, but what is interesting is when you go to the budget document, budget statement, it is nowhere to be found in the budget statement, Madam Speaker. There is nothing about maxi-taxi, removing restrictions, in the budget statement.

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After the budget was read, and we downloaded the soft copy from the Ministry of Finance, the website, we saw one paragraph inserted, under “Transport”, the last paragraph under the heading Transport which talked about a maxi-taxi restriction. And, Madam Speaker, I then decided to get a copy of the *Hansard* because this was strange. I know I heard the Minister say it, but it was not in the budget document given to us and what was said in the soft copy from the website, be it a short paragraph, but I remember the Minister being very agitated or excited when he was talking about the maxi-taxi restrictions. So I went to the *Hansard* and that was also different. This is what we saw on the online version:

We are pleased to announce that—“We are moving all restrictions on banded maxi-taxis in order to open up the public transportation system.”

That is the soft copy from the website, did not exist at all in the printed budget documents, which gives me the impression that this was an afterthought. That when the budget documents were being printed [*Desk thumping*] it was not there. It came after he made the statement here and inserted it, to me something is not right about that. That you give us a document here, you go up on the Parliament website and you insert something, you insert something that was never in the document here. And then you go—so the documents, that got me really concerned, Madam, as to what else. And we have spent a lot of man-hours taking the three documents to compare them and there are other areas, the MPs will raise them, where the things are different, it is a bit of sleight of hand, with due respect, on the amount of time now to see which is the correct one.

We go to the *Hansard*, let us see what the *Hansard* said, it is an extended part: “...this Government to remove...current restrictions on...allocation of maxi-taxi licences, remove it altogether. ... No longer will there be restrictions...”

Madam, please, this is becoming overbearing.

Madam Speaker: Member for Diego Martin North/East, I am sure you would like to pay some interest in what is being said and I would like you to assist me in hearing.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Ma’am.

Restrictions, removing restrictions—“remove it altogether. No longer will there be restrictions on ownership of banded maxi-taxis. Persons would be able to buy and band their maxi-taxis and drive wherever they please without any restriction. This will open up the public transportation system.”

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So it appears that the Minister, before walking into this Chamber or the night before, coming to make the budget presentation, the morning before reading here or the night, someone probably spoke with him and say, “hey, it is a great idea, take up all these bands” and so on because if the Minister had checked it, his Ministry officials would have told him that you cannot do that in law. This is exactly what happened to the same Ministry with a previous Minister and therefore no due diligence, no checking, no research, “vaps”, “vaille-que-vaille”, you come and you just take it off, I do not know who put the idea in your head. [Desk thumping]

So we are unsure about what restrictions are being removed as the Minister, on one hand, says all restrictions will be removed and then on the other hand the Minister spoke of the removal of the restrictions on ownership of banded maxi-taxis. I am sure he will tell us what he means in due course when he responds. So, they are two completely different statements, they carry completely different meanings. I do not know which version we should rely upon. After the statement was printed, the Minister thought of removing the restrictions on banded maxis and then clandestinely included what I said on the online version. The Minister thought one thing, wrote another thing and said something else altogether.

Further, had this been a policy that was contemplated by Government, we would have seen an adjustment to the Draft Estimates of Revenue under the Sub-Head: Applications of Maxi-Taxi Licence, Madam Speaker. That should have been included in the Estimates, there is no such Estimate for this Item. They formulate Government policy on the hoof it seems, Madam Speaker. This brings me to another important point. In 2011, as I started to relate before I located the text, an attempt was made to remove the restrictions on the registration of maxi-taxis. It was shut down by the High Court in 2011 and that is in the case of *Eon Hewitt and others vs The Minister of Works and Transport and The Transport Commissioner of Trinidad and Tobago*. The claimants were the Association of Maxi-Taxis of Trinidad and Tobago, Routes 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, maxi-taxi associations. They brought the action against the Minister of Works and so on. The Court found that such a decision was unlawful as the Transport Commissioner failed to consult with the Advisory Committee and other stakeholders such as the claimants as required by the provision on the Maxi-Taxi Act before making its decision. It is another requirement that the consultation be conducted at a time when proposals are at a sufficiently formative stage. In this case, the decision is already made, there has been absolutely no consultation with

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respect to this matter. They have called on the Minister to meet and speak with them and they had several meetings with the then Minister, but it did not say the lawfulness of the actions in just removing the restrictions on the banded maxi-taxi.

Now, it sounds like a good idea to move off these and say everybody go and buy. But what is going to happen to the cost of these, it is the small man who is going to get run off the road, the small man. The plan that the super elite with the money can buy 10 maxis, but the small man with one maxi will not be able to effect the economies of scale than a person with 10, and therefore when you come up to offer services, the man with the five or the 10 he can offer you a lower rate thereby the other maxi-taxis are going to be in difficulty, and that is why we challenged it in the court, because they were going to be suffering a severe disadvantage.

Madam, in the last half hour I have, I will like to spend a moment on the way forward, as I see it, 20 minutes sorry, [*Interruption*] 23, thank you. On the way forward, it is clear in this budget that we have not seen any real indication of a shift in paradigm with respect to taking our country forward, taking the country forward, and, therefore, I would like to spend a little time, as I said, sharing, the road that we must travel to come out of the outdated paradigm of raising taxes, of borrowing and spending that is simply not working. That has been going on for long enough it is not working the revenue streams are down and especially now where energy revenue is also down.

1.00 p.m.

So we have to change the economic landscape of Trinidad and Tobago. That change, in my respectful view, must address not only contemporary revenue generating measures, but it must address the area of job creation and opportunities for our young people. The way forward requires determination but, more important, action. I remain fully committed to working to transform our country, the policies, the plans and the projects which we had in government that were people-centred and that were working—the home-owning democracy, as I said, the shareholding democracy, those are some of the matters.

We delivered on the ideals of change in all spheres of development, health care, education, national security, social development and so on. The point is, we delivered a better quality of life for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] And so, I respectfully disagree, Madam Speaker, when the Minister says that he is doing a good job because the people are not rioting yet, the people

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are not feeling it. I respectfully disagree. They are feeling it in their pockets, in their families. They are feeling it in their homes. [*Desk thumping*] It is as if two sets of hitmen are attacking our population: the bandits and the tax man.

I have spoken of the ills confronting our country. We have pointed out how the Government is creating a death trap. While we prepare the future for our young people, have we forgotten the elderly as we go along? It is clear for our survival, at this time, of high prices, increased taxes, low incentives and no new ideas offered by the Government, we must find a way to generate money for the country, create jobs, sustainable, and business so that everyone will have a fairly decent life.

So what are the alternatives that we can pursue? The archaic days of tax, spend, borrow are over. What can we pursue? There are three options, Madam Speaker. One option is to create new jobs within the existing economy. That however is not going to happen, because there has been no improvement in the economy since the Government took power, and it is as though they are working in a vacuum. There is no cohesion in the few areas identified for further revenue.

Another option is to diversify the present economy, and that has started to some extent, but not at the rate or the pace that we want to go. Diversification in this present economy will require it to be more efficient, highly productive and profitable. New revenue sources must be created in terms of product innovations, new platforms for growth or developing new products for which the markets exist. I will leave to my colleagues, others, to develop some more on the diversification efforts, but today I want to propose a third option. So one is to create jobs in this existing economy—create jobs and grow revenue; the second option I said was with the diversification thrust, but I do believe there is a third option, and it does not mean it is an either/or. They could go along simultaneously, as we seek to bring in more revenue, create more jobs and, therefore, create a better quality of life.

That third option is to completely revolutionize our economy as other countries in the developed world, as well as in the developing world are presently doing. And what is this revolution of which I speak? Last year, in my budget contribution, I spoke a little of it. I made reference to what has been called the fourth industrial revolution, the digital age, as announced and proclaimed by the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2016. And so, this is the option, this is the revolution, I am suggesting that we must now roll out to bring growth and jobs to our country.

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As an instance of what can be achieved, let us see what is happening elsewhere. While we were sleeping here, the world is moving ahead with other measures. We are now in the era of telebanking, intranet, bitcoins, technology transfers and investments, and we too here in Trinidad and Tobago must become part of the industrial revolution in finance, in medicine, in trade, research and development.

Let me give you an example of the impact of technology at the financial environment that the Minister of Finance may, perhaps, look at—this has happened elsewhere—the cashless society. In Australia, November 2016, Citibank gets rid of all cash at all of its banks and Australia phases out the \$100 bill. Belgium, you cannot buy anything above 3,000 euros in cash. India phased out 500 and 1,000 rupee notes in 2016. Singapore, many returns have no cash policy. Korea plans to phase out cash by 2019. Sweden, only 20 per cent of retail is done by cash. So what is happening? The digital age ushers in this era of high value, high efficiency, high productivity with tremendous opportunities—these are entrepreneurship and, of course, jobs and so on. Many countries have already made the forward.

Now, Madam Speaker, this cashless society works in two ways: yes, more efficiency and more transparency, but do you know what? It will work very strongly to help to wipe out corruption in our country [*Desk thumping*] because you will be able to trace every dollar through this digital technology, every dollar that is spent or sent.

Many countries, I am saying, have made the forward. Some are in the process, some are leapfrogging into the digital age creating great benefit. Sixty countries were ranked in four categories of digital evolution index 2017, some of which shared the same type of population and size like ours. Here are a few examples. Stall Out countries: US, Canada, Sweden, Denmark; Stand Out countries: Singapore, New Zealand, Estonia, UAE; Break Out countries: Russia, China, Bangladesh, Kenya; Watch Out countries: Egypt, Pakistan, Peru, Vietnam. Now, Estonia is a place similar to our population size and they have less natural resources. They are ranked at No. 30 on that index. Barbados ranked at 72; Jamaica at 75. They have all ranked above Trinidad and Tobago; in this index we are 94 out of the 138 countries. In 2016, we were ranked at 89 in this index so it therefore means there is a slide. So there has been no push in this area and the way forward is very clear.

In informatics, Madam Speaker, in robotics, a lot more here. I will give it to others to raise. Microwork platforms and informatics in this digital age can bring

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us work, can bring us jobs and can bring us growth. InnoCentive which will allow local and international businesses to put up their problems to look for answers. The IT, in order to be a producer of wealth, Madam Speaker, requires an industrialized approach and that is the option I think Trinidad and Tobago should pursue now as we move from the old paradigm into a new paradigm of the industrial revolution. [*Desk thumping*]

That is why when we were in government we took the unprecedented step of giving every child in school, [*Desk thumping*] secondary school, a laptop to prepare them for this revolutionary new world, the digital age that is indeed sweeping around the country. And with the digital revolution, Madam, you can have digital economy with other sectors of the economy, whichever sector—agriculture, sport—in every sector of the economy this digital revolution can take place to create new jobs, to create revenue streams and, therefore, growth and prosperity.

Madam Speaker, I want to thank you very much for the time that I have spoken here and as I say—[*Crosstalk*] What? I thought you would be very happy. Madam Speaker, as I close, I would share a story of betrayal. I would share a story with you of betrayal. You know, there was a couple, about seven years ago, getting along very, very, well, looking after their children. They had enough money to buy food and books for their children and laptops for their children and they had their home. They were taking care of TV, fridge and so on. About five years ago, along came some smart people and they basically mamagued the spouse in that couple to leave home and she left and she went. Two years later now she is crying because first the fella lost his job. He had no income, he had no money. He lost his job. So what did he do? He decided well, look, let me mortgage the house, mortgage the car. But then came the time where he could not use those borrowings anymore, he had to actually pay. He went around begging friends: “Well, look, lend me money.” It reached a point where nobody wanted to lend him because it was “backsed out”, “borrow out”. Then he started to dip into the piggybank of the children. When the spouse complained he said: “Shut up, do not say anything!” That was today, in this time. That is where we are today. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I am saying, the days of that Government are numbered. [*Desk thumping*] I want to assure the national community it is only a matter of days, weeks or months but not years before they would have gone, the UNC will return to government. [*Desk thumping*] They are already in the middle of the week. They have reached Wednesday in the political cycle, and as we all know by

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the time Wednesday comes around, if you blink it is Friday upon you. So the people must have faith that the days of the PNM, Prime Minister Rowley's Government, are getting lesser with each breath you take. When we look and listen to the chorus of protestors outside these hallowed halls from all walks of life, we are convinced they are clinging to the ledge by their fingernails. They are as stable as jello, Madam Speaker.

And so, there is so much more I can say. The MPs on our side will go into much more details in other sectors. Let me just say that this budget has traumatized many. This budget is a bankrupt, brutal and biased budget which really betrays the trust of the people. It embodies the PNM's defining hallmark, that of blatant incompetence, corruption and mismanagement of the country and the economy. I can only say for the hon. Minister of Finance to heed the cries of every single sector in Trinidad and Tobago from the top to the bottom, from the bottom to the top—from businessman to fisherman, from the single mother to the high-end CEO.

And, can I say, it seems most inappropriate and done in bad faith that whilst we were engaging the casino industry in a joint select committee—did a whole year of work—it seems to me to be most inappropriate and in bad faith to come and drop these high taxes on these people. [*Desk thumping*] You may not realize the number of persons employed in that sector. Something similar like this happened in the past when I was Leader of the Opposition then. We had to actually get someone from the industry to sit in the Senate. I was able to appoint such a person in the Senate to bring the views of those workers. There are thousands of them directly affected and indirectly affected, and the fear of job loss is exceedingly great. They have asked, on their behalf, that we plead with the Government to meet in good faith with them to continue the discussions with respect to the gambling Bill, the joint select committee, that this Parliament was engaged in before implementing any of these draconian taxes that are here involved.

And so, Minister, we need to revise some of these measures. I have seen some are definitely illegal, others are distortions of the truth but, at the end of the day, everyone will not feel the adjustment. It will not be equal. You know, there is broad brush because everyone must bear the burden of adjustment, but it does not work like that because the man who has \$10 to his name and he has to pay \$5 in taxes—whether it be gas—the other taxes there—diesel, property taxes, whatever they may—and the man who has \$100 who has to pay the \$5, what happens? He is not going to feel it like the man with the \$5. So do not fool yourselves.

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There is no way that everyone will bear the burden of adjustment in an equitable manner. It is not going to be like that because the haves, those who have, will be less impacted than the have-nots. Those in the working class and the middle classes are going to be wiped out and will bring us into a situation that could lead to chaos and social unrest in our country, because if you do not have the majority of your people in working positions to sustain themselves and their families, then you are going to resolve into chaos and social unrest, Madam Speaker.

So it is like, you know, there was an experiment when you talk about equity and what is equitable where you say, okay, people get As, people get Bs, people get Cs, but you decide—you see, all of this competition to get an A, a B and a C, that is not normal, that is not a good thing, so you know what? Let us give everybody A; let us give everybody an A. And when you give everybody an A, fine. So everybody is happy. First year, those hard-working students who would get an A because they have worked hard and then now everybody is getting the A, so what happens? They stop performing, they stop studying, because what is the point of it? What is the point of it?

1.15 p.m.

What is the point of it? It becomes a disincentive because, well, everybody is getting the A, the one who does not study, the one who does not work, the one who is not productive, everybody is getting this A. So it is a false issue of equity and equality, Madam Speaker, a false issue. [*Desk thumping*] A Government has a duty, the third core responsibility, to provide for those—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. One of the core responsibilities of a Government is that of provider, and this is especially so when it comes to the most vulnerable. That is why the whole issue of the social safety net is there. You know, Madam Speaker, you have just spoken with the same three people; I just have a few minutes left. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: I would really want to invite the Members for San Fernando West and Diego Martin North/East to take an early lunch. Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Equity, that the adjustment will be borne equitably by everyone, and I said one of the functions of a Government, I mentioned protector, provider, investor in

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people. In terms of provider, it is the duty of a Government to provide for those most vulnerable and those most in need,

You know, Madam Speaker, today we read about children who are being dumped, I mean, the most heart-rending stories, people being dumped, and I want to suggest a programme that is done in Africa, and in other countries, it is called, Door of Hope. This is where instead of people dumping babies anywhere—in institutions, children's homes, and so on—you have a receptacle place in which someone can bring a baby and put the baby in that, and it sounds an alarm in the entire—yes, Madam seems to be aware of it—it sounds an alarm, it makes a noise so the people in the institution know and they will go out and collect it—collect the baby, not the “it”, the he or she.

Now, this is not to say we are condoning promiscuity and, you know, unwanted child pregnancies, and so on, the point is as in reality we have to save the child—save a life. So I want to recommend that the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, [*Desk thumping*] the Door of Hope programme, and please can we ask you to please bring back the baby grant so that we can feed the babies or the children. [*Desk thumping*] I thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I think it is agreed that now is a convenient time for us to take the lunch break. We shall resume at 2.30.

1.18 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

2.30 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

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

The Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is nice for the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West to be called to my feet rather than to be exercising my feet. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, at the start of this afternoon's proceedings, I have the great privilege and honour and pleasure to be asked to respond to the empty seat of the Member for Siparia, who, after making a contribution for just over three hours and 10 minutes, seems to have decided not to participate any further in today's proceedings, which is quite unfortunate, because, Madam Speaker, I like to say what has to be said in front of someone. And what we have had unfortunately, Madam Speaker, and I am forced to correct many things on the record, and for the

purposes of the *Hansard*, but also for those members of the public, and, in particular, the civic-minded public, to do a lot of correcting. So if you would permit me, Madam Speaker, to start off, first of all, by addressing the issues in the energy sector.

We heard some commentary on the state of the energy sector and some suggestions as to what existed at the departure, in September 2015, of the Member for Siparia and her Government in the energy sector. I would just like the opportunity, Madam Speaker, to put things into context, because a lot has been said, and, in fact, a lot of commentary is taking place by those who hold the title of former Minister, and they seem to be finding themselves attempting to defend a lot of policies and positions which really, quite frankly, are figments of their imagination. Because what was taking place between 2010 and 2015, in addition to a complete crash of the commodity prices from 2014, was a very stagnant oil and gas industry in Trinidad and Tobago, and what the country should have been told at the time was there were serious curtailment issues taking place on the Point Lisas Estate. And I remember when we were in Opposition, we asked the question of the then Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs, Mr. Ramnarine, and we asked, well what is going on, because a lot of persons who are very valuable to Trinidad and Tobago's economy in the downstream industry were telling us that they were suffering from curtailment, which means a shortage of supply of gas in Point Lisas.

When we asked about it we were told maintenance, and what is interesting is that exact point, because we have seen Mr. Ramnarine try to back away from his argument on maintenance. He continuously told us throughout the period, it is maintenance, it is extensive maintenance taking place; do not worry, it is pure maintenance. Recently, when we have exposed it, he has tried publicly to say, no, no, no, no, no; on other occasions I mentioned that we were a mature field and a mature province, et cetera. This afternoon, starting this morning, the hon. Leader of the Opposition came frontally on the record, placed it at the feet of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and this is what you would expect from the leadership to put forward their strongest arguments, and she only talked about maintenance leading to curtailment during that period.

So, Madam Speaker, what the population of Trinidad and Tobago can take that to mean, without a doubt, is that it was a continuation of the story that we were being given that our gas sector was suffering curtailment issues between—it really started around 2011 and 2015 due to maintenance. They maintained that as their story and their reason, however, we now know differently. They also spoke

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about the Poten report, the gas master plan. The gas master plan was delivered just before they left office. They had the opportunity to bring it forward to the population before they left office, they did not do so. In fact, when we came in office and we had heard about a gas master plan, it took us a little while to locate the gas master plan and then to start studying it.

Unfortunately, the Member for Siparia told the population today it took this Government two years to bring the gas master plan to the Parliament—complete fiction. It cannot happen in mathematics. It is just complete misrepresentation once again of the facts, because if we came in September 2015, it took us a while to locate this infamous gas master plan which was not laid by those who had commissioned it, and then it was laid in the Parliament this year in or around June, if I remember correctly. I do not know how from September 2015 to June 2017 equals to two years, but let me alleviate any concerns that the population may have with respect to how we dealt with the gas master plan. Immediately, the subcommittee of Cabinet, the Energy subcommittee, the Prime Minister who chairs it; the hon. Prime Minister set up an even smaller committee to study this gas master plan, and to bring in experts and to do consultation throughout the industry to really understand it. Policy decisions had to be taken by the Government, but at the time what is important, Madam Speaker, is that the country understands that that energy sector was in complete crisis.

Within a few days of us coming into office in September 2015, we had the only project that the former administration signed knocking on our door, the CGCL project, telling us they needed an urgent opinion from the hon. Attorney General. We did not rush to sign the opinion, rather we studied it to make sure it was what was best for Trinidad and Tobago. What we immediately discovered, whilst having downstreamers come to us simultaneously and tell us that they were suffering serious curtailment issues, which of course is at the doorstep of NGC, is we found that that CGCL deal would have exposed Trinidad and Tobago to billions of US dollars in claims. And to explain it to the population of Trinidad and Tobago, why we say so and why it is so is unbeknownst to us, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, the former administration decided to have a whole policy change to deal with the distribution of gas to downstream, and what they decided to do is all of those plants at Point Lisas that have been with us for the past couple decades that have been loyal, that have been paying for their gas, taking their gas, employing people and keeping us at the forefront of the energy landscape in the world and being a stable place, they decided to change the policy, and dealing with a curtailment say, well you will get gas last.

So they changed the whole policy, said whoever is the newest plant in Trinidad and Tobago will get full gas, and then trickle down to those who were here for all these years. They never told the population about this. The worst part of that, Madam Speaker, is that immediately exposed the State and NGC to a constitutional argument for damages of unfair treatment, inequality of treatment with the law. So we had to immediately set about as a Government trying to renegotiate this.

What we also found on the files—I would like to remind the population of Trinidad and Tobago—is on the day of elections in 2015, the 7th of September, 2015, the same public servants in Siparia is telling—stand up now, thankfully, they stood up on the 7th of September on that occasion, maybe not down at Chaguaramas when they were giving out lands that night, and doing OAS the Friday before, but what they did on the day of elections, the then Attorney General, Mr. Garvin Nicholas, was putting pressure on the public servants at the Office of the Attorney General to sign that Attorney General's opinion which would have exposed Trinidad and Tobago to billions of US dollars in claims. And they put it not only in writing, they put it in writing in red on the files.

So, immediately, as a reasonable Government and as a responsible Government, we set about to renegotiate the terms of the contract with the shareholders of the CGCL plant. A very small team was put together. It was a very difficult negotiation, always being driven by doing what is best for Trinidad and Tobago. When it got to that difficult stage, the Prime Minister said that we cannot expose our whole energy sector, our gas sector, and our NGC company to these billions of dollars of claims. If we have to go to arbitration with the CGCL shareholders alone, we would do so. Fortunately, Madam Speaker, and it included personally getting on a flight, flying from Port of Spain to Japan, a two-day turnaround to negotiate with the Government of Japan. We managed to renegotiate the terms of the CGCL contract in favourable terms for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

We persuaded the shareholders to stand *pari passu* and to deal with us because we were sure, because we had other parallel tracks being run at the same time to get more gas. So we have reversed all of those potential liabilities, all of those detrimental areas for Trinidad and Tobago with the CGCL deal and it is proceeding. In 2013, contracts began to expire with the downstream industry, including, quite ironically, the same Proman and MHTL that the Member for Siparia talks about. The Member for Siparia has talked today saying how plants have been shut down; the plants are not shut down. Workers were sent home, yes.

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Some workers may have been sent home when we were at the lowest point of the curtailment after coming into office, because, again, the same Ministry of Energy, the former Minister of Energy who likes to go out there now and profess how great he is, what he has done, maybe to try and get a job, failed to negotiate any downstream contract on behalf of NGC.

So I am coming to Houston, and I am coming to the trip that secured and stabilized Trinidad and Tobago. Contracts began to expire in 2013, the same MHTL, and what did NGC do, and the former Ministry of Energy, and the former Member for Siparia? They ignored them and kept rolling the contracts on a month-to-month basis, and what did that do, that also exposed Trinidad and Tobago to a litany of lawsuits and claims which, again, we have faced as we came in and we dealt with. And, perhaps, that might be an opportune moment, Madam Speaker; I would like to refer to the Eighth Report of the Public Accounts Joint Select Committee, which is under the Second Session of the Eleventh Parliament, and it is chaired by a Mr. Wade Mark, who I believe is Sen. Wade Mark. He is the Chairman of this Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee. This has been laid in Parliament. One of the things I would like to tell the population of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, is this is a Joint Select Committee report that interrogated NGC and asked them questions under the chairmanship of those on the other side.

You heard the Member for Siparia frontally tell the population, and I am drawing the population's attention to this as the most flagrant example of untruth. She told the population today that the Minister of Finance was misleading them when he said that they used \$16 billion of cash from NGC. And she made a big "hookoorah" [*Phonetic*] saying how in four months this Government used three and a half billion dollars from NGC. That three and a half billion dollars was actually the proceeds of the PPGPL IPO that they put in place before they left. [*Desk thumping*] I would like to personally thank the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, for voting them out of office on the 7th of September, 2015. [*Desk thumping*] I will tell you why. If they had left them in office they would have spent that three and a half billion dollars in the space of 24 hours because they are quite capable of doing it, [*Desk thumping*] and I could tell you who they would have given it to as well.

So let me read the report now, and it is on page 18, under the heading, Dividend Payout Plan, and I thank Sen. Mark for this:

"With the recent downgrades of NGC by credit rating agencies, Moody's and Caricris, the Committee sought clarification on one of the major issues raised

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by the agencies; that of the company's high dividend payments.

It was noted that during the period 2012—2015,”—Madam Speaker, three years, 2012 to 2015—“the dividends paid for each consecutive year were \$1.2 billion, \$4.2 billion, \$3.8 billion and \$6.8 billion, respectively.”

That \$6.8 billion would have been in 2015; that totals \$16 billion. So once again, Madam Speaker, unfortunately, just this morning we have had the Member for Siparia mislead not only this respectable House, but attempt to mislead the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago once again. They go on to say:

“Moreover, for the fiscal year 2013, eleven (11) dividends were paid.”

So that is almost a dividend per month. It is as though they woke up one morning and discovered the same piggy bank she spoke about, and said, “let us go, let us go, let us take it this month, let us take another this month”—\$16 billion in that space of time.

“In 2014 and 2015, eight (8) and eleven (11) dividends were paid respectively. Consequently, these significant number of payments bit into the company's retained earnings and caused a substantial decline in its asset base and thus, negatively impacted its balance sheet.

With respect to the dividend payments for the years 2013 and 2014, it was advised that the dividend policy allowed up to 50 percent but”—

I will repeat that:

“for the years 2013 and 2014, it was advised that the dividend policy allowed up to 50 percent but was changed in 2015”—not by us—changed pre-September—“2015 to allow the company to pay up to 100 percent of its profit after tax in dividends. The company advised that in dealing with dividend expectations, it sought to communicate with the Ministry of Finance in advance in terms of what the dividend outlook was for the fiscal year, as well as, provided on a quarterly basis what NGC could pay in terms of dividends.”

Madam Speaker, on the basis of this report that has been laid in Parliament under the chairmanship of Sen. Wade Mark, that is why I said, thank God they did not get that \$3.5 billion before they left office, because they spent \$16 billion paying out 11 and 11 and 8, so that is 22—30 dividends. What company do you know pays 30 dividends in the space of four years, and not even a full four years, and that is what they were responsible for in the energy sector. And,

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unfortunately, once again, we found no other than the Leader of the Opposition coming before the people of Trinidad and Tobago and in the most blatant of fashions attempting to mislead them on something that her own Senator has put before this House and signed it.

I also want to talk about what I was talking about with the contracts, and this former Minister who likes to go—last night I heard him on television talking about, “the Government should implement the death penalty, and it is on the books, and that is how you should deal with crime”, this former Minister of Energy, pontificating with my friend from Caroni Central at some chamber. And I wondered to myself, but you were in Government for five years, two Attorneys General later and you did not even attempt once to enforce that law. And I will come to witness tampering, she talked about witness tampering, I will talk about that in a short while. What this report goes on to say, Madam Speaker, at page 37, and this is now dealing with the contracts that expired. In the case of contracts, many of these discussions are at an advanced stage, this is now under this administration, and the company is actively engaged in multilateral decisions, both on the upstream side with EOG, Shell, BP, BHP, and on the downstream side.

Allow me to pause here, Madam Speaker, because this might be the ideal opportune moment to talk about that trip to Houston. When we came in we met expired downstream contracts, but what was more frightening is there was a complete drop-off point for Trinidad and Tobago of upstream contracts, future gas, and the price of gas by upstreamers to supply the downstream industry. Immediately, again, a team was set up out of the Cabinet and the subcommittee of Energy from the Cabinet comprising of NGC, comprising of the technocrats at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, comprising of those with experience who, and he was put as the chairman, Mr. Wendell Mottley, and we should publicly thank him now [*Desk thumping*] for the work that he did, as well as some of the Members of Cabinet, and we immediately began negotiating both with upstreamers and downstreamers to stabilize this most important part of our economy for the provision of gas from upstream, for the supply of downstream ammonium, methanol, et cetera, and that was taken to a point. That was taken to a point by the technocrats, by those who do this on a daily basis and it could not go anywhere. It could not go any further.

We were pushing, we had been in negotiations for months. What we were facing was a complete drop-off of the future provision of gas in Trinidad and Tobago. We do not sit and deal with one thing at a time. At the same time for the first time ever in the history of Trinidad and Tobago the Prime Minister spoke to

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Venezuela and it is not cross-border gas being shared with Venezuela, it is across border, and we said, you know what, just in case, because of our mature province and we do not want to be held to ransom as a country by any upstreamer, let us find an alternative supply of gas and we went for Dragon. We have heard a lot said about that by those on the other side, but I caution the provision of that gas from Venezuela is critical for the future of Trinidad and Tobago, and any patriot would get behind the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to ensure that that gas flows from Venezuela and is commercialized in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

So we reached a certain point with negotiations with those same big entities, the bp, the Shell, the EOG, and some decisions go on with BHP. What we did as an administration coming in, Madam Speaker, is we focused, and understanding the importance of this industry leading the charge for the energy sector, because of how important this industry is, because diversification has been bandied about since the '70s and '80s, but we are a hydrocarbon economy, and it will take a while to change that. Out of the Office of the Prime Minister and under the leadership of the Prime Minister you are rebuilding—and I use that word very, very carefully—the rebuilding and the strengthening of the relationships with the energy upstreamers was undertaken by the Prime Minister, leading the charge, because that is what leadership is about, and going to those boardrooms all over the word to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago remained a focal point. [*Desk thumping*]

What we had, because I remember when we came back from Houston—allow me to digress—again this same former Minister of Energy, suffering a tabanca obviously, rushed out and said, but I met with Dudley, Bob Dudley in bp, and I took pictures with him, et cetera, and we asked the important question—But did you sign any contract with him, did you secure the future supply of gas for Trinidad and Tobago?—the answer is a resounding, no. So where we reached with those negotiations from here, because we have been doing it for months, along with NGC, along with the personnel from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, it reached to a bottleneck point, and what did we do? We did not sit back as a Government and cry. Immediately the Prime Minister again led the charge, went up and in a two-day period met with Shell, BP and EOG, [*Interruption*] and the criticism that we are hearing, and they go again, “by themselves”, it was not “by themselves”. As usual the Opposition, and they are showing it in the most blatant of manners now, Madam Speaker, they like this fake news, alternate facts. We have just heard, “oh”, it was not \$16 billion, it was

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\$12 billion. They are feeling the reels of it, and let the population know that they took the country to the brink and almost threw us off the cliff because they did absolutely nothing for the energy industry. [*Desk thumping*]

We went up there, we negotiated, and we managed by being on the phone. They may not have known of technology, because, of course, when somebody had to travel it is “a whole string band have to go along”. We are cutting cost. We are making sure you get value for money here, right, and some day I may not be able to move too freely very soon. So what has happened, Madam Speaker, is the Prime Minister went, led the charge, and we had the supports of the technocrats, and we negotiated and were able to agree a future gas price for Trinidad and Tobago. Thank God. [*Desk thumping*]

2.55 p.m.

Madam Speaker, the point being made that it was an increased gas price again shows that there was no study. Whoever provided the Member for Siparia with the information on energy for her contribution to this budget debate is devoid of any knowledge or understanding of the energy sector, because all of those prices were negotiated years ago. The whole energy industry has changed now and the prices that we managed to negotiate and get are some of the best prices in the world, and we are proud about it. [*Desk thumping*]

So I go back now to talk about the state that they left us in. Many of these discussions should have started and should have been completed by 2014 and by 2015. Unfortunately they were not, and it is our responsibility to work through these very complex agreements which were negotiated at a time when the gas architecture was very different, and to bring those to completion. And that is the explanation for the price being different, and that is the explanation for what we did. Sen. Mark wrote this; he is part of this.

What we were immediately able to do, coming out of that two-day period as well, is secure at least—at least—the investment of US \$10 billion from two of the entities. [*Desk thumping*] “So doh stand up on no horse or no pedestal” and say you are responsible for Juniper or you are responsible for this and that, because the truth is you almost crashed and burnt the energy economy of Trinidad and Tobago, and then have the audacity to come here today and once again try to mislead the population.

The report goes on that the work is ongoing and is moving at a very rapid clip, and this is where we get to the claims:

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“Chairman, in the case of claims, the company”—this is NGC—“has received \$4.53 billion in claims directly related to gas curtailments in the 2010 to 2015 period.”

So the same person who likes to go out there and say that the Minister of Finance does not know what he is talking about, nothing is happening in the energy industry in Trinidad and Tobago, let me tell you and tell the Member for Siparia and all those on the other side, what they were responsible for.

“...in the case of claims, the company has received \$4.53 billion in claims directly related to gas curtailments”—not to maintenance—“to gas curtailments in the 2010 to 2015 period. NGC does not accept these claims and is legally challenging these claims. These claims go back to that period and regrettably very little work was done on those claims.”

You should have been speaking to Dudley instead of taking selfies.

Madam Speaker, I would like to just move on from the energy sector. So that is what we have found. What is it that we have done? We have stabilized the energy sector. We are now seeking, and continue to sign a number of contracts with upstreamers. [*Desk thumping*] We have secured the continued participation of CGCL in Trinidad and Tobago. They have also this week met with me. They are looking to invest more in Trinidad. Also, very importantly—because what we have met is a very difficult revenue stream and a drop in revenue in Trinidad and Tobago. I would like to personally thank, on behalf of Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West, and to applaud the Minister of Finance and his staff at the Ministry of Finance for spreading the burden for the first time in Trinidad and Tobago. I say it openly and without fear of contradiction. What this country now has and what I tell the population of Trinidad and Tobago it now has, is a leadership in government that is not afraid to take on anyone in the areas of corruption—as we will soon see—but also two very, very important provisions in the recent budget—banks getting an extra 5 per cent on their net profit, and then the royalty, and I would like to explain this royalty that we are charging of 12½ per cent.

What we found out is that the revenue stream has dropped, as we have said. Over 90 per cent of revenue earned from oil and gas has dropped from 2014. What astonished us and surprised us is that all of the gas coming up from the ground that is for every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago—that is how we see it; I do not know how others may see it—every citizen and the future generation that is their gas, not a single cent was being paid for that to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. So what we have done is at the well head gas being

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extracted, you will pay a 12½ per cent royalty. I have heard it being suggested that it is only one player that would affect, not true. There may be production sharing contracts in place, but it is our duty as the Government to protect the future of Trinidad and Tobago, and as we have done in the last 24 months we will continue to do. [*Desk thumping*]

No corporation will hold a gun to the head of this PNM administration. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: Royalty on the fake oil.

Hon. S. Young: They talk about royalty on the fake oil, we will hear very shortly about the corruption. Madam Speaker, the banks—again, within recent times you have found, and I am telling the population of Trinidad and Tobago without fear of contradiction, you have found a brave government. When it looks at the landscape and you have banks earning over \$1 billion in profit after tax, spread the burden. We will take an extra 5 per cent from the banks and we asked them to do it openly and to do it transparently, and that is their contribution to the continuation of Trinidad and Tobago. I must use this point to just mark a real record of disappointment to have the managing director of one of those banks immediately react. They are making over \$1 billion a year in net profit consistently, and I would like to remind them that their biggest shareholder now are the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Through the whole CLF deal, 54 per cent of the shares are owned by the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. We have been elected to protect the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and we will continue to do so fearlessly. [*Desk thumping*] The first thing that managing director did is run out and say he has other stakeholders including employees. If you are earning over \$1 billion after tax profits, do not threaten a single strand of hair on one of those employees and do not threaten the Government. Pay your tax.

CLF—I would like to just speak about CLF very briefly to give the citizens an understanding. [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Order!

Hon. S. Young: Yes, in 2009 a PNM administration came in and intervened, and they put \$5 billion in to save the collapse of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. But what happened over excessive periods thereafter? There was no securitization of the money. The money that was then directly put in by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago between 2010 and 2015, ballooned from \$5

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billion to \$23-plus billion. The citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and taxpayers, there was not a single piece of paper securitizing, which means that if the shareholders tell you, “Ah not paying yuh back a cent,” there was no easy way to get the assets for \$23 billion. Again, this administration, this Government was brave enough, in the face of a lot of adversity, to go and protect the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago. What did the shareholders do? The shareholders “turn round” and say, “We are not signing any more agreement. We are not giving you any security over it”. In fact they then went to appoint two more directors that they wanted, which would have outdone the Government directors and left the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago exposed for over \$15 billion which we had not yet recovered.

This Government took the very difficult decision, but the right decision, to protect the taxpayers and went to put in liquidators. At the time there was furore. Everybody was criticizing the Government. How could you go to liquidate CLF? All sorts of cards, including the race card was played, unfortunately, but we stood our ground, and fortunately now for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—not the PNM—but all of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, the Government has protected the investment into a private company. Well, not the investment, the bailout, into a private company of \$23 billion by putting it in liquidation. I would like to go further.

We have taken a decision to use some of the assets out of that for the future generations of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is what that National Trust Fund is about. It is not being sold off to any percent. It is not being handpicked and given to anybody, because that is what they were saying, including some former Ministers of Finance who have the audacity, because they were there at the time and did not do anything to fix it. All of a sudden now he is an expert, and wants to say what to do. But he was advising in the backroom and telling the same shareholders how to try and shaft the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago. Thankfully we stood our ground; provisional liquidators are now firmly in place, and those assets will now be put together in a mutual fund for the future generations of Trinidad and Tobago.

So it is not a selling off of assets. [*Desk thumping*] It is not like what happened with the FCB IPO and this one, and you just throw the money into a black hole. What we have done is we are going to ring-fence these important assets, some of which might be Angostura and other important assets, and we are going to allow every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago the opportunity to become a shareholder in this cumulative fund of some of the most valuable assets

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of Trinidad and Tobago, directly or indirectly. And the beauty of this is the future generations one day will thank this administration, [*Desk thumping*] because they will continue to have ownership of the assets, and they will not lie with any 1 per cent, 2 per cent, 5 per cent, however much percent. It is for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, importantly the future generations of Trinidad and Tobago. That is one of the most important facets—that is one of the most important facets of this budget that has been overlooked.

So we have done it for the first time. Going to the well head and making sure any gas extracted will attract a 12½ per cent. We have made sure that those who can afford—and that is how it is. We have a country to protect, and there are some of those who are less fortunate. So those who can afford it will pay an extra 5 per cent in corporation tax. You are making over \$1 billion in after tax profit. I have heard it said—and they came and lined up outside, the casino workers, et cetera—we are not against casino workers, and I plead with the casino workers, do not let those few who are living the lavish lifestyles use you. [*Desk thumping*]

Another big important part of the budget, Madam Speaker, that has not been focused on—and what is interesting, if you would permit me to digress once again, this was a response to a budget presentation presented by the Leader of the Opposition, it was supposed to be. I want the country to understand that she had three hours and 20 minutes to respond to what was presented. The Member for Siparia had three hours and 20 minutes to respond to the budget. And the explanation at the beginning is: They represent the people of Trinidad and Tobago and those who voted for them. Those that you represent, understand that the Member for Siparia only gave you 20 minutes out of three hours and 20 minutes in response to the budget; did not talk about any of the incentives; did not talk about any of the taxes, et cetera. But what the Member for Siparia attempted to do was rewrite history. It seemed like a speech from 2015, and once again unfortunately mislead the population. Well, we on this side are clear that we have been given a mandate. We will continue. [*Interruption*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: 48(6), Madam Speaker. The Member for Siparia did not mislead the population.

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Dr. Gopeesingh: A mad man rant again.

Madam Speaker: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, please continue.

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Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much. So, Madam Speaker, what we have set about to do and what this budget has achieved respectfully—and I would like to touch on the incentives. One of the ways you stimulate an economy is at different tiers of the economy. So you would try to stimulate what we call “small businesses and entrepreneurs” who need that little extra push, that little extra help, because what they would do is go out in their communities and employ people. Trinidad and Tobago is a very innovative country, and there are a lot of these small businesses that are looking for that help. One of the things that will come to fold, in addition to what the Minister of Finance has spoken about in his presentation and the direct incentives of this grant along the lines Shark Tank concept, is we have also given and agreed that the Ministry of Trade and Industry will have a \$25 million facility that it can then distribute via grants of up to \$250,000 being 50 per cent for the importation and the purchase of equipment to help these small businesses in a number of areas. The Ministry of Trade and Industry will speak about that in the other place.

So what we are trying to do is make it easier for those small businesses, and to encourage them and to support them and to get the economy stimulated at that scale, because as we heard in the budget speech, places in Europe have as much as 80 to 90 per cent of their economies driven by small industry. That is what we are doing. That is one of the planks of diversification. The same thing is being done in agriculture. I am certain that my friend, the Member for San Fernando East, they had a lot of talk to give about housing. I will digress to housing to deal with the Member for Oropouche East in a short while. But what happened in housing is one of the incentives granted, and the Member for San Fernando East will deal with it, is to stimulate the whole housing economy.

The Member for Siparia came out on the first day after the budget presentation and talked about bankruptcy, and is bankrupt to this and bankrupt to that, and she did it again today. Again I ask the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to look on and to listen. What kind of leader is it that wishes a country to slide into bankruptcy? That is what she said. She wants the country to slide into bankruptcy. Well, let me tell you something, population of Trinidad and Tobago—*[Interruption]*

Madam Speaker: Order!

Hon. S. Young: And that is the point. When we came in, you have heard us say before, and the facts set it out very carefully and clearly. *[Interruption]*

Dr. Gopeesingh: Standing Order 48(6), Madam Speaker.

Hon. Member: She did say that.

Hon. Member: She did not say that.

Madam Speaker: Continue, Member.

Hon. S. Young: The *Hansard* will reflect it. The public was listening. They have wished this country into bankruptcy, and you know what the ironic thing is? They almost put the country into bankruptcy. [*Desk thumping*] [*Dr. Gopeesingh rises*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: Standing Order 48(6). I stand on a point of order, sit down. You have to sit.

Hon. Member: We have a new Speaker! [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: Shut your mouth; you cannot tell me shut my mouth.

Madam Speaker: Members. I guess lunch might have really energized us, but hopefully it has not energized us to the extent that we have forgotten the Standing Orders. I believe when a Member stands on a point of order the person who has the floor will sit to allow the point of order to be heard. I understand too that maybe we are all very anxious and excited, but let us please abide by the Standing Orders. Member for Caroni East, do you have a point of order?

Dr. Gopeesingh: Standing Order 48(6) I stood on, Madam Speaker. He said that we—he said they telling that—you heard it. [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, please proceed.

Hon. S. Young: I will explain to the country how you bankrupt it, and I accept, Madam Speaker, that I will get some injury time, or I ask for some injury time at the end.

When we came into office, within a few days it became apparent when the Central Bank came to the Minister of Finance and told him that the overdraft is at its limit. If those on the other side do not understand that when an overdraft is at its limit and you have spent \$16 billion from NGC and left it with no money, and you have drained every other state enterprise and indebted them—they mortgaged the Green Fund. Let us not forget citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, EMBD in August \$400 million short-term loans. TGU and T&TEC, \$1.6 billion in a six-month rollover debt. That is how you bankrupt a country. Because they knew by then what the revenue position was. They knew by then what the revenue position

was. The revenue position was down, they pushed and pushed and pushed the expenditure up, and to meet that—do not let them fool a single person in Trinidad and Tobago—they spent all of the cash that was available. They leveraged and mortgaged all of the savings that they could not get their hands on, for example the Green Fund, and they pushed as much borrowing as they could have gotten.

I think in that last two months they pushed about \$5 billion to \$6 billion out and immediately distributed it, and we will hear very shortly in the next coming weeks how some of that was distributed, who was involved in that distribution, and for the first time in this country the country will be told, through the following of the money, where that money went. [*Desk thumping*]

We heard a lot about the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act and the delay in proclamation, and they want to know why. Again, the hon. Minister of Finance explained the position to the country. It is out of our hands. Unlike what they did, always proclaiming legislation and leaving the State exposed, because in proclamation of legislation—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your original 45 minutes have expired. Would you like to extend?

Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. When you are proclaiming legislation make sure all of the infrastructure for the implementation of the legislation is in place. Let the public know that once again on the eve of the 2015 election, with this same piece of legislation, the only parts of the Act that were proclaimed were the parts to appoint people. Why was that all that they proclaimed? They did not put a single thing in place for the public procurement legislation.

Let me tell you all something, and I will say it here very, very openly today. We are waiting with bated breath and anticipation for the proclamation of this legislation, and I will tell you all why. For the first time in Trinidad and Tobago it makes bid rigging—you know what bid rigging is, Member for Caroni East?—it makes bid rigging an offence.

Hon. Member: The *Cabo Star*.

Hon. S. Young: Madam Speaker, I was not going to go to *Cabo Star*, you know, but I had listened to the Member for Oropouche East talk about *Cabo Star* and I want to tell the population about something that was discovered when we put that one-man team in place, Mr. Mouttet. I would like to publicly thank him here today, [*Desk thumping*] because he took on the task for the population of

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Trinidad and Tobago, of going into the port and pulling documents together and pulling the story together with evidence, not loose talk, with evidence to say what it is that happened.

Dr. Gopeesingh: He seized the computer.

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East.

Hon. S. Young: Member for Caroni East, were you participating in Cabinet Minute 972 of April 03, 2014? Were you part of the Cabinet in April 2014?

Dr. Gopeesingh: Madam Speaker, am I under inquisition here? Am I in court? [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: I am really happy for the light spiritedness. Please direct your contribution.

Hon. S. Young: This is about *Galicia* and this is the Cabinet Minute that dealt with that former administration deciding to bring the *Galicia* to Trinidad and Tobago, which is what led to all of these problems with the inter-island ferry service in Trinidad, the cargo service in Trinidad and Tobago.

So a Cabinet in April 2014 decided to use—listen to me, if I may, very carefully—they used the list of selected tenderers based on firms known to operate in the ship leasing industry and firms which had previously submitted unsolicited offers. So they have made a lot of weather about unsolicited offers being utilized in a procurement process. Ironically, they are the ones that did that in 2014 that have us in this problem.

They then went on to take a decision, using unsolicited offers, but it then turned out—and that will come to pass in another place—that the person who was hired to advise and hired to procure and hired to assist with the procurement process, is the person who was then invited to tender and it was then the person who passed it on to somebody and identified the *Galicia*, et cetera. But I am talking about what the Cabinet did.

The Cabinet then took a decision for the space of one year to make the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago liable for a boat called the *Galicia* for \$56.3 million. That is not the real offensive part, you know. What they hid from us and the nation is they then went on, that:

The Ministry of Transport, in consultation with the Ministry of Finance and the Economy identified funds to meet the expenditure associated with the

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charter/hire of the *MV Super Fast Galicia* as indicated hereunder. The sum of \$23.9 million—so \$24 million—for infrastructural adjustments to facilitate safe berthing and operationalization of the vessel.

They took a decision, and we have seen the documents now.

The port was saying this vessel cannot berth either in Port of Spain or in Scarborough safely. The vessel is unsuitable for those reasons. The depth of the vessel is too deep. There is not sufficient space in the channels in Port of Spain. But they went and they put us, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, into a contract to get that vessel. The vessel could not be used for about just under two months, fifty-something days, it stayed moored outside there, but they knew at the time, because they put aside \$24 million to get a barge. Not even to dredge; they did not even do the dredging, to fix the jetty in Scarborough, et cetera. So talk about *Cabo Star*. This is one of the things.

I can assure the population that the work that is being done—and I heard—you know it always surprises me, because being part of the legal profession you are supposed to look up to people who are at the Inner Bar, and those who have Silk are supposed to lead at the Bar. I heard another curious thing fall from the lips of the Member for Siparia this morning, saying how could the Attorney General get involved, “where de police, how they seizing this, how they seizing that?” It is trite law that an employer who owns the equipment of an employee is entitled to take the equipment of the employee and to look through the equipment of the employee, because it is the company’s equipment, and stuff like that. But once again it does not surprise me,

And as you talk about Attorney General, whoever said Attorney General, I also heard from the Member for Siparia this morning talk about witness tampering. I have realized that what is going on, on that side, is the leader is beginning to throw people under the bus. It happened with the Member for Oropouche East last week. He did not even realize he was being thrown under the bus when we spoke about crooks in Parliament. And then what we heard this morning was talk about witness tampering.

My recollection is for the first time in Trinidad and Tobago in the history of this country, and it is not something for us to be proud of, a former Attorney General, her Attorney General, has recently been charged for witness tampering. [Desk thumping]

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(2).

Madam Speaker: I rule it is not *sub judice* within the context of the rule.

Hon. S. Young: Crime—a lot of ado was made about crime in this morning’s response to the budget. Ironically once again, at the time that the Minister of Finance was talking about crime, a lot of ado was made. It took him two hours, I think they said, it took him two hours in his budget presentation to reach crime. Almost exactly on point, two hours into the contribution of the Member for Siparia, she glanced across crime. She glided across it.

Mr. Charles: Seven pages.

Hon. S. Young: You wrote the seven pages. So what happened is once again the politicization of crime. One of the things that a government can do—because this Government is concerned about crime—and one of the things we can do right here in this House is legislate to deal with issues of crime.

So again, I tell the population of Trinidad and Tobago, when this Government has come with legislation to deal with the issues of crime, those on the other side on every single occasion—every single occasion—are standing in the way of any legislation being passed to deal with crime. I remind the population, anti-gang legislation was brought by them. The anti-gang legislation was brought to the Parliament and supported by this side then in Opposition, with a sunset clause. Also, amendments to the Bail Act that allowed the police service, when there is a repeat offender with illegal firearms to keep them in prison without having access to bail for a period of time.

3.25 p.m.

They brought that legislation. It was supported by a PNM Opposition, let the public be reminded, and when we have brought it again they stand in the way and let the public look on. FACTA, every single piece of legislation being brought, the Commissioner of Police, every single piece of legislation being brought is being opposed by the Opposition without, respectfully, sensible opposition. And that is what a government can do to fight crime. So, if you are really serious about fighting crime and you “doh” want the politics in fighting crime, we the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago call upon all parliamentarians to do it.

The hon. Prime Minister met with the Leader of the Opposition. We sent them afterwards a package to deal with the anti-gang legislation saying, what are the amendments you would like to make? This is important, How can we move it forward?

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Mr. Al-Rawi: Silence.

Hon. S. Young: Not a word, not even a response, but I will tell you what they did and I feel I know who did it. They blanked out who it was sent it to and they sent it out to the media. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva North.

Miss Ramona Ramdial (*Couva North*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for this opportunity. And as I stand to deliver my eighth budget contribution in this august House [*Desk thumping*] I am at pains to say that this budget, and it must be said, that this budget has been the worst I have heard in my eight years here in the Parliament.

Madam Speaker, where it is that we depend on a Minister of Finance to deliver to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, I find myself delivering in a personal capacity [*Desk thumping*] more than what he can speak about. Now, Madam Speaker, I want to go straight across—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Order. Order.

Miss R. Ramdial:—I want to go straight across to the Member of Parliament for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West and he spoke a lot about energy issues, and I must say that I am not fully aware of all of the energy details that he spoke about, and I know that there are other Members and colleagues who will respond to him in a fair manner. But I want to say, Madam Speaker, that after this budget was read, we believe nothing that this Government has to say. We believe nothing. [*Desk thumping*] And we do not trust them. So all that the Member spoke about has yet to be verified and clarified because there was a lot of mishmash going on there with respect to information being given to the public.

Now, Madam Speaker, I do not know if the Leader of the Government Business is aware that the actual and substantive Minister of Energy and Energy Industries could have come to the House today to respond and to speak on energy matters, so I need to ask, who is the real Minister of Energy and Energy Industries? I need to ask that. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, in addition to that the Member spoke a lot, again, on the Mitsubishi plans, we have heard his words before, and it is something that he has repeated time and time again and he is always using it to come in here and talk about patriotism and if we are patriots that we would not disturb the plans of the Government in terms of dealing with these energy negotiations, especially with that of Venezuela and the Dragon Field.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva North, please,

Miss R. Ramdial: Thank you, Madam Speaker. So what I have been saying is that he has been very repetitive with his patriotism talk in terms of labelling us as non-patriots, and I want to let him know that all of us on this side are true patriots of this country. [*Desk thumping*] We are elected Members of Parliament, and I will talk about what he said a little later on with respect to threatening the banks, you know, threatening the banks and threatening people about raising fees and all of that because they are doing what is right for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And I want to ask him because he did not say, the hon. Member, I want to ask the hon. Member because he did not say, and I make reference to the banks, that if it is that they intend to increase fees and bank charges that they will be dealt with, but he did not say how they are going to be dealt with. So tomorrow if the banks were to increase the fees and charges to the ordinary citizen and the citizenry in Trinidad and Tobago, how is the Minister of Finance and the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West going to deal with these sorts of issues? How is it?

So you come here and you pontificate, you stand and you pontificate and you threaten and you are aggressive and, you know, this kind of arrogant behaviour that we have been seeing with the Minister of Finance, [*Desk thumping*] the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West and no plan in place or no details have been given with respect to how these issues are going to be dealt with in the event of. And that is the problem that we have been having with this Government from day one, and they come and they come here to the Parliament and they talk about saving the country and doing what is right for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and yet still from this morning's protest outside the Parliament we would see that they are clearly disillusioned. [*Desk thumping*] They are doing nothing really for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

They have not been able to recover from this so-called downturn in the economy with respect to energy prices and they want to take credit for all of the hard work that we would have done during our tenure in building the energy sector. [*Desk thumping*] So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I leave it like that for the while being.

I also want to clarify, no not clarify, but I also want to put forward to the House and to the public that the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Siparia never used the term "bankrupt" to mean bankrupting the people of

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Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] The term “bankrupt” was used to describe the Minister of Finance’s contribution and presentation of the budget debate because when you looked at all of the measures that were implemented, they are all harsh measures that are doing nothing to help the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So bankrupting the nation and the Minister, of course, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West is not here. He is not here in his seat, but he chastised the Member for Siparia for not being in her seat to listen to him and he is not in his seat to listen to what I have to say or to respond to him. So, I do not know what level of hypocrisy we have on going with this Government. Double standards in the least. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move on.

Now, I was speaking about the Minister of Finance’s contribution with respect to the budget debate and I want to point out that the Minister’s arrogant and disrespectful nature came out to the people of Trinidad and Tobago on the day that he read the budget. Some people have described him as a “potty-mouth” and in other quarters—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, “potty-mouth”? Clarify or withdraw, one out of the two.

Miss R. Ramdial: I withdraw. I withdraw, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the description of the Minister out there in the public is that we have an angry population at this point in time, [*Desk thumping*] an angry population who has seen no sort of remedy or heard any sort of remedy to ease the hardships and the burdens under which they have undergone since 2015 under this new Government to date.

Now, the latest of his poor statements was at the post budget forum and the Member for Siparia spoke about that earlier, and while we understand that our economy is not a buoyant one and there are many challenges to face as energy prices continue to be low or not as high as we have been accustomed to in the past, this does not excuse the Minister of Finance from his failure to deliver a sound economic recovery plan for the people of T&T. [*Desk thumping*] It does not excuse him, and, all we have seen is the same rehash from 2015 until now. You tax, you borrow and you put the people of Trinidad and Tobago under further hardships.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he has failed for a third time to bring workable strategies to generate much needed revenues. Instead, he continues to believe in implementing new taxes and increasing existing taxes to generate revenues. This budget has shown that the Government continues to be at a loss, they are bereft of

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ideas and plans and all they can do is really come here with a rehash of previous plans, copycat the People's Partnership and some of their measures that would have been at the respective Ministries, copy them, bring them in, change them up with a few English words and make it their own.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us go back a bit to last year, the last fiscal year. The Government's performance has been poor in every sector. When we look at national security I cannot say that they were any noteworthy achievements. Crime continues to spiral out of control. And, of course, we are experiencing within that national security that Ministry of National Security issues and challenges: low detection rates; record high numbers of murders for 2017; illegal gun trade continues to flourish; the drug trade also and it is really sad to see the police service at the state that it is in.

I think that the Ministry of National Security has been lost and there is a lack of vision and leadership at the helm, and it seems as though that the Prime Minister himself seems to have washed his hands from taking some blame on what is happening with crime and criminality in Trinidad and Tobago. It is a quite different tune he is singing today as compared to when he was Leader of the Opposition.

Now, the Minister of National Security to say the least also has appeared to have washed his hands from getting directly involved in dealing with the police service and the other protective services to deal with runaway crime. I saw him recently dancing up a storm and I said to myself, if he was only half as good at his job as a Minister as he is on the dance floor. [*Desk thumping*] So he is a good dancer, but I cannot say the same as a Minister.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, these issues are serious issues, eh. I mean, we have political picong, but there are serious issues. Crime really has run away in our country, it is at very high levels. We have our women who are being murdered mercilessly, and there are issues that need to be dealt with.

We have seen, of course, 40 women to date being murdered mercilessly and, of course, these would have emanated from domestic violence issues. In instances where women have gone missing, we assume human trafficking at work. In other scenarios, it is predators luring young women with promises of jobs. In recent times we have seen vulnerable elderly women also being viciously attacked, killed and it goes to show that the criminals are doing their homework, but not the protective services.

We continue to get complaints of reports made by abused women seeking protection from the police and not being taken seriously at all. So this something that we need to put focus on. And as you would know and I would clarify a bit, women would tell you if you interact with them, especially those from domestic abuse situations, that when they go to the police stations and they make complaints against their abusive spouse or otherwise, that in most cases they are not taken seriously, they are sent home and then something may happen and then we want to act after the fact.

So, I really think that the Minister of National Security needs to focus a little bit with respect to training and education probably with the policemen and women who work at these respective stations in terms of taking a report, in terms of fast tracking the process for protective orders. I know that there is a court process also and probably with a little more help and support it can go a long way in protecting our women in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me also shift a little bit to just general crime and also to remind the Minister that he did promise us in the last fiscal year that the police station in Enterprise, and I know my colleague from Chaguanas East will speak about that, but he did promise us that the construction was supposed to have started in the Enterprise area with respect to the police station. So, I ask that question, again, of the Minister and I hope that we get some kind of clarification later on with respect to what is going on with that project; that is a very, very important project.

The Police Youth Clubs, also, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think that it would be a great initiative to encourage more of these police youth clubs within the region, not just central alone. I know that the Minister had made a plug for additional funding in the last fiscal year and I do not know if he was able to get it, to encourage the increase in the Police Youth Clubs throughout Trinidad and Tobago, I mean, to date I have heard of no extra or no additional being implemented in any area, so I ask that question of the Minister and I am sure that he will clarify when he speaks.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to shift a little bit to scandals. This particular Government has been plagued with a number of scandals over the past fiscal year, not just Sandals scandal, but the fake oil scandal, and you have, you know, [*Crosstalk*] yeah the ferry scandal, you have the roaming and the romping scandal and all of that. And it just goes to show it is indicative of the Government and persons and Ministers within the Government not being mentored properly, not being informed properly of how government works, and just thrusting them

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into positions like that without any sort of training can be detrimental to the Ministers themselves and otherwise.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it does not end there, because today, information came to me, and I do not know if you want to term it as a new scandal, but information came to me that a \$200 million contract was given out to build a Diego Martin stadium or sporting arena and it is being kept quiet. And I want to ask the Member for Diego Martin Central, the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs whether or not—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members, please.

Miss R. Ramdial—it is true and why the public has not be informed of this? Is it true that a \$200 million contract was given out to construct a brand new Diego Martin stadium or sporting complex and it is not public knowledge?—because *[Crosstalk]* hold on, because I looked at draft estimates and there is provision for the Diego Martin sporting complex, but when you look at the Estimates being allocated, the last estimate allocated was in 2016 for \$21 million and there was no allocation for 2017 and 2018.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Member, would you give way for an answer?

Miss R. Ramdial: Hold on, just now. So there was no allocation for 2017 and 2018. So I am asking, is that one and the same project or is this construction of the Diego Martin stadium the same project as the sporting complex; and why no moneys have been allocated? Because I understand work is ongoing on the site, the contract has been given out at the cost of \$200 million, and why it is that the public is not aware of this contract? All right? So *[Crosstalk]* no. When you are responding you will—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Miss R. Ramdial: Okay. I will give way. Go ahead.

Mr. Al-Rawi: I thank you, hon. Member, for giving way. I am able to say as a Member of the Cabinet that no such contract has, in fact, been given out and I would also relay the information to the Member for Diego Martin Central who will add further particulars, but I can tell you that as a matter of fact from the Cabinet's perspective. *[Desk thumping]*

Miss R. Ramdial: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will still ask the question because that has not been clarification enough. I will still ask the question, if work is ongoing on this site, where is the funding in the Estimates for this particular

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project and under which state agency? Is it under the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs? Is it under the Ministry of Finance? Is it the local government corporations? Because I looked at the Estimates and all I could have found was that the Diego Martin Sporting Complex and the last tranche of funding for \$21 million being given in 2016 and nothing in 2017, nothing in 2018, and I speak from reliable—and the contractor, there is no information also. So I would like to know who is contractor who is working on this Diego Martin stadium or sporting complex as we speak. So, Minister—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Couva South, I am hearing you. Proceed.

Miss R. Ramdial: Yes. Mr. Deputy Speaker, so you know, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West will get up here and talk about our tenure and when we were in Government, but when you ask them questions under their current tenure what is going on, they cannot answer you, [*Desk thumping*] they cannot give clarification. It is not enough clarification, AG, it is not enough. So when you speak you will clarify in detail for us, please. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: I can give it to you right now.

Miss R. Ramdial: Now, another issue that we are seeing here that is going on and I am hearing the Member for Toco/Sangre Grande—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Miss R. Ramdial:—muttering, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I need, yes. So anyways, at the end of the day these are questions that should be answered. When we were in Government and we initiated any major projects or programmes like that it was made public. Look, the Member for Moruga/Tableland turned the sod for \$178 million road works, [*Crosstalk*] \$178 million road works. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member. Member for Port of Spain South, is it on a Standing Order? Please, Members. Proceed, Member for Couva North.

Miss. R. Ramdial: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As I was saying, I was drawing reference to the fact, you have the Member for Moruga/Tableland benefiting from a \$178 million road upgrade project in the Moruga constituency. I am very happy for him, but it has been made public, the information is out there and everybody is aware of it and the cost to the contractor and all of that. So, I think that this project with the Diego Martin Sporting Complex is shrouded in secrecy, and I ask as an elected Member of Parliament for the details, for the clarification, and I think we owe this to the public [*Desk thumping*] as elected

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Members and as a Government, you owe this to the public in terms of giving the correct information.

Mr. Al-Rawi: If you give way, I will give you the answer.

Miss R. Ramdial: Now, in addition to that—I gave way earlier, you did not give the answer.

Now, in addition to this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I saw today that, of course, a release from the Office of the Prime Minister gave an update or sought to give an update on the Sandals project, and it is, of course, stating the press release is, of course, stating that a memorandum of understanding will be signed soon with Sandals International and it is to be noted that the Government will build a resort and Sandals International would manage it. My question, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is: Where is the Government going to get the financing for the structure? These are questions that need to be asked. How much is this venture going to cost; and over what time period? Because I am sure in the discussions that these details would have been spoken about and I hope that the Minister of Tourism is able to give some clarity and some more information to this particular press release that came out today stating the Government's intention to construct the Sandals hotel and, of course, to have Sandals International manage it. So these are some of the questions that need to be asked. Again, at the end of the day it is taxpayers' money and it needs to be accounted for.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want move on to tourism a little bit and I just want to summarize briefly that for the Ministry for Tourism for this fiscal year the Development Programme was \$22.7 million for the development programme. Tourism sites and attractions and upgrades, a \$9 million allocation was given, and I would need ask which sites do the Minister have in plan and in train for upgrades this fiscal year? When you continue to look at the budget estimates you see that the tourism baseline survey is \$800,000. How far have we gone into this research? Is there any sort of preliminary findings that, you know, we need to be appraised of as a Parliament? There was also a \$900,000 allocation to the development of the national tourism policy. Now, I know that there is an existing policy that was done some years ago and we look forward at the cost of \$900,000 to probably see a few different elements as to how we can move forward with our tourism industry.

Consultancy for the development of a strategic tourism and incentive plan, half a million and for the tourism agency of Trinidad and Tobago a \$10 million allocation was, of course, given to this new entity that has replaced the TDC, and I

know that earlier on this week the board was appointed with, of course, the same chairman that was under the former People's Partnership Government. So, let us see if this same chairman with the rest of the members of the board are able or will be able to do anything differently. Because when you look at the allocations for the Ministry of Tourism, honestly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think it is very low. You know, the Minister of Finance stood and spoke about diversification and tourism and moving the country away from oil and gas and all of that, but yet still when you look at the avenues in which we are supposed to diversify our economy which is that of tourism and agriculture, you would see some of the lowest allocations being given to these Ministries.

Of course, the biggest chunk of expenditure under the Ministry of Tourism was that of the recurrent expenditure of \$55.8 million. So, Deputy Speaker, it is really disheartening to see, again, the hypocrisy of the Government talking about diversification and really giving little or nothing to the various Ministries that are responsible for leading the diversification thrust.

Now, when we move across to the THA and to Tobago for their development programme we see, of course, tourism again being given \$19.7 million for this fiscal year. The Tobago tourism energy getting the largest chunk of that with \$10 million, again, for set up and functioning and all of that.

When we look at the agricultural, forestry, fishing aspect with respect to the THA, the fishing industry has gotten \$7 million for improvement to beaches and landing facilities, for land management you would have a total of \$27.6 million and for the agri/access roads you have a total of \$24 million.

Now in 2017, which is very interesting \$40.8 million was allocated for access roads. I want to ask whoever would be speaking on Tobago issues, whether or not these moneys were utilized to build access roads in 2017, \$40.8 million, and where they are?—a list of the location of these access roads. And then see, of course, a lower allocation this year of \$24 million.

Again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you have this Tobago tourism agency being put into place with \$10 million to market Trinidad and Tobago especially Tobago with the Tobago aspect of it and you are seeing paltry sums of funding being given to these units to do their work. So, I do not think that the Government is serious about diversification. I do not think that they are serious about tourism, I do not think that they are serious about agriculture, so it is all lip service being paid by the Minister of Finance to appear to be wanting to do something differently with respect to stimulating the economy and driving us away from the oil and gas industry.

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Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I continue, let me also add that the year for tourism, the past fiscal year for tourism, of course, was another year of poor performance. Again, as I said before, the Minister of Tourism found herself in the middle of the roaming scandal and all of that, and I want to say that public opinion weighed heavily and negatively because for all of us who monitor the airwaves and look at social media, the public opinion was, of course, that the Minister should have paid the additional moneys which exceeded her monthly limit on the phone bills. [*Desk thumping*] And that did not, I do not know if that happened or not, but at the end of the day an investigation was launched according to the Minister, an investigation was launched— [*Crosstalk*] no, no, an investigation was launched. There was no follow up in terms of giving answers as to the particulars of the bill and all of that and we have to understand something. Social media now is a tool that influences the thinking of the population of Trinidad and Tobago. And if you go on to social media and you see the comments and you see what is going on out there— [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Port of Spain South, please.

Miss R. Ramdial:—you would notice that people cannot be fooled and will not be fooled anymore and they are asking all the right questions. [*Desk thumping*] So, I would like to urge the Government to pay a little more attention to what takes place on social media because it really is a tough situation when you come and you have to deal with being in Government and you cannot deliver to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, in addition to that in the last fiscal year, we had TDC which was shut down and we looked and we saw what played off in the public with respect to the union representing the workers of the TDC going to the Industrial Court and all of that. Unfortunately, it did not turn out the way that they expected, but at the end of day, I want to ask some questions: With the new tourism Trinidad company, how many of the original TDC workers have been reabsorbed? Because a commitment was given by—again, the Member for Port of Spain/St. Ann's West was not in his seat as usual—that a commitment was given to consider the reabsorption of some of these workers or most of these workers.

3.55 p.m.

So, I would like to know from the Minister of Tourism or the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, whoever is in charge of tourism at this point in time, what is happening with respect to the reabsorption of these workers. Is it

happening? Is there going to be new staffing? How many persons are now going to be employed in this new Trinidad Tourism Company? The same goes for the Tobago Tourism agency and their counterpart. We would like to know the answers to these questions; how many workers are going to be hired and all of that and how soon would we have these companies up and running?

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I move on, let me also say that this Sandals project was touted at the beginning of this Government's rule that this Sandals project was going to be one of the most important projects that would lead Trinidad and Tobago out of the oil and gas sector and into the new diversification thrust. We are three years into your governance, into your poor governance I must say, and nothing really has emanated out of this Sandals project, except today via a press release to say that the Government would be constructing the hotel. *[Interruption]* Right, so we need to know. Five hundred million US was touted by the Minister of Finance in 2015 saying that it would generate that amount of revenue in terms of the construction fees. But today I want to ask the question again, so far what has happened is that the Buccoo Estate was acquired for \$170 million, if I am not mistaken, or thereabouts, and that has just been it.

So, the land is there, now they are going to construct the hotel, and we are asking how long this is going to take. Now, in addition to that, we have seen for the last fiscal year that the Tobago hotel businesses claimed \$25 million in losses due to the air bridge and sea bridge issues. This is something that has been plaguing Tobago for the longest while, and I think it came to a point, a boiling point over the past fiscal year, where it is we had a really bad situation, especially with the sea bridge, and of course with the Tobago hotel businesses claiming \$25 million in loss. We know of private operators who have lost property in trying to repay debts to the banks and all of that, and I know that we would have asked or pleaded with the Government to try to get in to do something between lobbying for on behalf of the Tobago Hotels Association with the banks so that we can continue to not have to see these private operators lose their lands and their property in repaying debts to the banks.

We saw also during the JSC, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just by way of mention, of the failure of the Port Authority, the Ministry of Works and Transport in procuring proper vessels to work the sea bridge issues which has led to Tobago experiencing one of its worst years in business and tourism arrivals. The same goes for the air bridge where getting a reliable flight to Tobago and back is virtually impossible. Reliability is the biggest issue within the tourism sector, I think. Reliability of transportation, and I think it just got progressively worse

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under this new Government. And I am not the one who is saying that, because you hear it from the different stakeholders out there. You hear it from the Tobago business chamber, you hear it from hotels association, you hear it from the truckers association, you hear it from every single stakeholder over the past year who have been affected, and they have been calling out and pleading to the Government for assistance, and I think with this budget that the Minister of Finance read, it was really a wishy-washy budget, bankrupt of ideas. [*Desk thumping*] Bankrupt of ideas, bankrupt of details and clarity, that now we will have some of the individual Ministers standing to defend and to give details, and I think it is really a poor and a sad state of affairs for the Government at this point in time.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to that, in the short term, before we start to market our islands, because we have heard the Minister over the past couple of months talking about marketing Trinidad and Tobago as a tourist destination without seeing any sort of real marketing taking place. We are hearing the talk but we are not seeing it happening. We look forward to the marketing strategies that are going to be implemented very soon, I hope.

Now, another issue, going back to the Sandals situation, is the concessions that are going to be demanded by Sandals International as a major franchise. We saw what happened in Antigua, or we are seeing what is playing off in Antigua between the Government there and Sandals in their play for concessions, the 25-year tax breaks, we were seeing threats of shutting down the hotel in Antigua whilst these negotiations take place. I really hope that our Government is taking note of that and not putting themselves in that sort of position for the future of Tobago and the tourism industry.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we talk about a plan for tourism and we talk about diversification, but are you aware that this Government in 2015 threw away \$1 billion in investments in our attempt to push the tourism agenda forward? Are we aware of that? One billion dollars were—and I will explain. The Chaguaramas Development Authority, before we demitted office, we had investors lining up to the tune of \$1 billion to invest in Chaguaramas for different projects. And I speak about the entertainment—to make it an entertainment and tourist hub with water parks, petting zoos, hiking trails, hotels and a host of other services. These were pledges made by local investors to the tune of \$1 billion. Now it is in court. It is all tied up.

There was a JSC recently, and we of course examined the CDA; this of course was part of the process that we were privy to in terms of the information that

came out. And it is really a shame because you talk about trying to attract investors to invest, and here it is we have a billion dollars of investment that is now tied up in court and we do not know where that is going to go. So, I put full blame on the shoulders of the Government in terms of deterring investors away from the tourists or the tourism agenda in Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know a lot of people who sit home and watch us on TV say, well, okay, as parliamentarians you are there and, you know, you are battling, it is a debate, it is the Westminster system and you are battling, but we really do not hear much recommendations coming from either side sometimes. And today I want to recommend or to give some suggestions with respect to the tourism industry as to where we should be or where we should be going.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the number one marketing strategy for tourism in this day and age is on, of course, the global social media platform. The tourism product needs to be marketed intensely on the global social media platform. How often do we see on our smartphones pop-ups and ads inviting you to visit Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua, and the Bahamas? You are on Instagram and you are scrolling through and a pop-up will appear in front of you and they would be advertising with Barbados—for Barbados, Jamaica. I have seen nothing so far on Trinidad and Tobago. Have you seen anything?

Hon. Member: Three pop-ups appearing—

Miss R. Ramdial: Right! Have you seen any pop-up or ads on social media with respect to marketing tourism in Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Member: Only murders and crime.

Miss R. Ramdial: I have liaised with counterparts in other countries also and they have not been seeing it on social media.

Mr. Hinds: How long?

Miss R. Ramdial: For a long time. Over the past two years, we have not been seeing anything like that happening. Now, it is the new way to go in marketing destinations, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter are all social media platforms which can be utilized to market Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, have you seen in recent times any ads? And I would ask again, any ads on social media for Trinidad and Tobago? None! And the answer, of course, is no. At the end of the day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, I would reiterate to this Government that they are bereft of ideas and innovation in terms of dealing with new strategies to generate revenue. [*Desk thumping*]

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Another point with respect to tourism, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we need to be cognizant of, is the upgrade of tourist sites in Trinidad and Tobago. How can you, with \$22.7 million in the development programme, do any sort of substantive work within the tourism industry to attract tourists to your island? How can we do that with \$22.7 million? We have the Maracas upgrade, but that is a special project under the Ministry of Works and Transport. But how many other sites can be developed with \$22.7 million? So these are some of the important areas we need to look at. And then everybody is lauding the Minister of Finance across on the other side. Lauding him for a budget to save Trinidad and Tobago. Oh my God, the Minister of Finance is saving us. We are sinking into an abyss, and this budget is really the blueprint to take us out of that abyss. Really, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Hinds: Yes.

Miss R. Ramdial: Really! And I hear the Member for Laventille West saying, yes. But the Member for Laventille West got two demotions in two years [Laughter] and saying yes to this. [Interruption] I mean, really, two demotions and saying yes to this. [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, silence!

Miss R. Ramdial: The sycophancy—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence!

Miss R. Ramdial: The sycophancy of some of them, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Now, some of the issues that we need to also focus on, and I move away from tourism, because I understand that the Minister of Tourism has her contribution yet still, and I am sure she is going to be clarifying some of the issues I raised.

Mr. Indarsingh: She has no plan.

Miss R. Ramdial: Let me also say, some of the other issues that we have heard a public outcry on is that of the increase, the sharp increase in the diesel prices.

I understand that we need to erode, and of course make the fuel subsidy as small and as tight as we can in light of what is happening, but I do not think that it was necessary for such a sharp increase in just this one year. Because it is an increase of more than a dollar. From \$2.30 to \$3.41. It is a very, very, very sharp increase with the other tax increases, and with the other initiatives, introduction of new taxes and increased taxes that have come on board with this new budget, it is

something that I do not think the working class will be able to afford for much longer.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this has really hit the low-income earners the hardest. We all know that with any increase in fuel prices the cost of living increases, and I refer to transportation costs, food prices, and other costs that the low-income earners will not be able to carry the burden of for much longer. And the Member for Siparia spoke about it. The hon. Opposition Leader spoke about it this morning. You come with general strategies, broad-brush measures for everyone. Okay, so diesel—there is a sharp increase in diesel, but it does not impact on every citizen the same way. It is not a uniform result that you are going to get at the end of the day. The poor and the low-income earners, and the hard-working middle class, working class, they are going to feel it the hardest, and they are always the ones to bear the brunt of these tax measures the most. And for three years we have been having these gradual increases in the price of fuel, and we all know that with increases in the price of fuel the general cost of living goes up.

You are hearing from the supermarkets association that the food prices are going to go up. Transportation for these supplies from the port to their respective retail shops, the transportation methods are of course reliant on the diesel fuel. With such a sharp increase you are going to have these increases in food prices that, of course, the low income earners and the working middle class, they are not going to be able to carry this burden for much longer. And we would have heard a number of union leaders over the past couple of days speak about salaries remaining the same, some as far back as 2010, others as of 2014, salaries did not increase. So, you are not assisting the citizenry, especially the mass of the citizens in helping them burden these new tax increases that you have put upon the shoulders.

And we are all elected Members of Parliament. When we go to our constituency offices and we sit there for the day, we have constituents coming in, it is all about either you are unemployed and you are looking for a job, or you do not have enough funds to send your children to school, you do not have enough funds to purchase groceries so you are coming to the Member of Parliament to ask for some sort of assistance.

You cannot at this point depend on the social safety net, because a number of measures and programmes that were put in place to assist the low-income earners and the poor do not exist anymore. And I speak about the availability of food cards, the availability of grants, and other small help that would have been given in the past not being available to the people of Trinidad and Tobago anymore. So,

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what is there left to do? What are these low-income earners and of course the working middle class to do at this point in time? How many hampers as Members of Parliament are we going to go on a weekly basis and give out? How many hampers are we going to give out? Who is going to keep sponsoring these initiatives for us? The business groups? The business stakeholders from within the constituency? They themselves are now being burdened with higher taxes and increased taxes. [*Desk thumping*]

So, I think, Mr. Deputy Speaker, really, that the Minister of Finance showed no innovation at all in his budget presentation for this year. None at all. There is nothing to say that the poor man or the small man could look forward to at this point of time in assisting. We have high crime, we have a high cost of living that is about to skyrocket again. We have stagnant salaries, and I want to predict that next year is going to be a very, very difficult year.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, your time has expired. You have an additional 10, you care to avail yourself?

Miss R. Ramdial: Sure. Yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Kindly proceed.

Miss R. Ramdial: Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I do not know how this Government is going to deal with this. I predict that next year is going to be a very tough year in terms of governance for the Government, because we have the unions that are agitating and bubbling and waiting. They are justified in their cause. I do not blame them.

If it is that you have a group of workers under your union who have not been given salary increases since 2010 or 2014, and the cost of living keeps increasing, what do you expect them to do? What do you expect them to do? Are you going to lock them up? How are we going to deal with that? Are you going to expand the social safety net? Are we going to see some sort of support being given from different portals in the Government to assist these poor people? And, again, I would say, we are all elected Members of Parliament, and the reality out there does not exist from what you hear from the Minister of Finance and others, They are severely disillusioned. [*Desk thumping*] Severely disillusioned.

Now, at the end of the day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to speak a little bit about my constituency, because my time has more or less run out, and in the region of Couva—the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation—I understand there was a further decrease in the allocation for the

Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation; I do not know what is going to happen or how much money is going to be left after the recurrent expenditures, of course, have been separated from moneys being allocated for development programmes within the particular regions, so I guess they would just have to make do with what they have.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, an important issue, and it is the plight of the fishermen especially, and, of course we had a Minister of Government visiting the constituency a couple days ago to reopen or re-commission the Orange Valley Fish Market, and he was of course bombarded by a group of fishermen the day after the budget, because of the increase in the diesel. The big boats rely on diesel fuel. So, these fishermen are under threat of being completely shut down. They employ communities. These fishermen employ hundreds of workers within their communities to go out there and of course have the fishing industry running. They are saying to me, “MP, it is going to now take an additional \$16,000 per week”, for their big boats, for fuel, to go out there and ply their trade.

So, I really want the Government to take note. I know that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries is not here, but I know he is also aware of the issue. The fishermen in this country have a huge and heavy burden to bear in light of the sharp increase of the diesel fuel. So I ask as Member of Parliament, I remember speaking at the ceremony and I asked for a rebate, a small rebate to be given to the fishermen with respect to the purchasing of fuel. I think it is very unfair to them. You would have heard from the farmers also, the farmers who rely on their diesel-fuelled transport to take their products from the garden to the market and all of that, they are also speaking about increased costs. Again, that would be shifted onto the shoulders. That burden would be shifted onto the working class and the low-income earners, and we really need to deal with those issues.

Again, within the constituency, Madam Minister of Tourism is aware of the strong and the vibrant cultural and heritage tourism within that Couva region with the Temple in the Sea, the Indian Museum, the 150-year-old dirt temple, we have a lot of tour operators bringing tourists into that area, and I want to ask quite nicely to consider some funding for the upgrade of these sites to encourage the cultural and heritage tourism. If we are really serious about diversification—and the Minister talked about diversification and tourism and all of that—I would really like to see some funding being put towards cultural and heritage tourism. It is a growing sector for tourism in our country. A lot of people visit us for Divali, for Eid, for Hosay celebrations. They come to visit these eco-tourism sites also,

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and therefore I would ask for some funding to be allocated to these sites and to these areas for upgrade. That would, of course, in the long run generate revenue for the said Government who is trying to tax everyone into prosperity, and of course it is not working.

So Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the end of the day I want to say again, how disappointed I am in this budget presentation by the Minister of Finance. I think that he is between a wall and a hard place in terms of getting any sort of ideas from either his technocrats or his colleagues in terms of generating any sort of new revenues for our economy. And I know that the experts have been out there responding, they have been giving ideas, but of course he is into “sterile conversations and academic debates”. [*Desk thumping*] So, I think we have another two years to go without any sort of innovation or any sort of new ideas for revenue generation to be taken seriously by our Minister of Finance, supported and aided and abetted by the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West.

So, with that, I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of State in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Dr. Lovell Francis): Good afternoon, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wish a hearty good afternoon to Members of the House on both sides.

The obvious and clear template for beginning this kind of contribution is, of course, to give a direct response to the Member who preceded you. I have always wished never to speak after the Member for Couva North. It is unfortunate that I find myself in that dubious position this afternoon. [*Desk thumping*] So, I am forced to give a response of some kind to her discussion for the last 55 minutes. [*Interruption*]

I do thank you, Member for Couva North, for your graciousness in congratulating people of Moruga—not myself—the people of Moruga/Tableland for their road upgrade. But aside from that, I really did find it difficult to find any common thread or common argument in your entire contribution. Literally, I have no idea as to the central point, if there was one, that you were trying to make. What I did get is a lot of pseudo-bacchanalia, some very circular arguments, and a lot of wild accusations without any kind of substantiation.

But, it is not for me to blame the Member for Couva North who has just, for—I am assuming good reasons—left the Chamber. Because she is following a template that we have seen—well, I have seen it personally in this House for the last two years, but the nation has seen it for a much longer period. She is simply following the template of her political leader, the Member for Siparia. Now, it

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was made very clear to me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I would be one of the first speakers on the Government side in terms of this budgetary debate. I was not sure whether I would be taking first strike—to use a cricket analogy—or whether I would be standing at the other end of the pitch. It turns out that my colleague from Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West had to take the first ball, and then I would of course come in after to face the fast bowling.

And in the good tradition of the good old West Indian cricket, one understood that if one is an opening batsman, one is gearing up oneself to deal with pace, and there is a certain adrenalin and excitement and anxiety that goes with that. Unfortunately, that is where this analogy dies. [*Laughter*] Because in dealing with this debate—and last year I also had the dubious pleasure of responding to the Leader of the Opposition. All of that emotion that I have just described quickly goes out the window.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I knew I would be speaking very early, I listened with intent, great intent, to the presentation of the budget on Monday by the Minister of Finance. And I want to commend him for [*Desk thumping*] presenting a rational and coherent budget in the midst of difficult times. Unfortunately, because of the fact I knew I would be standing early, I was also forced to listen with great intent to the discussion of the Leader of the Opposition. And whereas both speeches had similar times, a little over three hours, that is where the similarity ended.

The Minister of Finance took great pains to provide a coherent and logical argument for his budget presentation. He talked about international circumstances that are prevailing worldwide. He segued into discussing how those international circumstances affect the local milieu in terms of our economy. He then used that to discuss the need for transformation in terms of our economic superstructure and economic operations. And at the end of his entire dialogue, he pigeonholed all of that to discuss the particular measures that he was going to implement in terms of the budgetary discussions for this year.

So, whether or not one agrees with, one understands, one is interested, one is focused on the budget, it is still possible to see a coherent thread of logic in his budget presentation. The Leader of the Opposition does something remarkably different. Three hours and 14/15 minutes—and literally this morning, I am regretting the fact that I arrived here at 10.00 today. Because, if I were called on to respond as the first responder to our budget presentation, I could have showed up here at 2.00, not having heard a word of what the Opposition Leader said and

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still come and give a coherent discussion in terms of what she was saying. One did not need to hear any of that argument to give a response. [*Interruption*]

Why? One, I have literally heard the same discussion for the third year. I have been wondering if this is a déjà vu experience and, given how that is typified in the dictionary, does not really obtain, because it is not a vague sense of having lived something before. It is a definite sense of having lived something before. So maybe Groundhog Day is what we are experiencing because I have heard the same speech delivered by the Leader of the Opposition for the third year in a row.

In fact, when I walked in the Chamber this morning and I looked at her budget contribution it was remarkably thick, and I was thinking that perhaps it might mean that there would some added substance this year as opposed to the two previous years. Once again, this entire House has been disappointed. What the nation expects, what I expect, what anyone who has any concern with the entire budgetary process in this Parliament was expecting was that the Leader of the Opposition would do what a responsible Leader of the Opposition should do, which is to critically analyze the budget, look at the Minister of Finance's presentation of the milieu that governed it, look at the particularities of the budget, maybe look at their weaknesses, look at their inherent contradictions, dissect them, evaluate them, show their shortcomings, and—if there are any—and then present a logical counterargument.

What we got, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was something quite different. We got a three-hour-and-14-minute meandering, which was more concerned with ego, with presenting an argument as to the efficacy of her reign as Prime Minister, the performance of her Government, the great things they did for the nation, an argument which this nation has rejected in 2015, on September 7th, and that the majority of the people of this nation still reject today. [*Desk thumping*]

4.25 p.m.

The Leader of the Opposition is today still more intent on hammering home an argument that very few people in this country are interested in listening to or really want to hear, than with doing what really she should be doing, which is to critically analyze the budget and give an opposing argument. We got none of that. What we got was hyperbole—this is a budget that is an act of terror. What we got were misrepresentations and untruths. For example, the Leader of the Opposition asserted that the Soca on the Seas event cost the State or the Ministry of Tourism something like \$3 million. Very far from the truth. The actual figure is something closer to the tune of \$290,000.

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She asserted that the PNM Government has not constructed or is not constructing any houses anywhere, when almost the entire nation, including many people who are awaiting houses receive videos every month, many of them being hosted by the Minister of Housing, basically detailing the agenda in terms of the HDC where houses are being constructed, the state they are in and then the process of allocation. This is something received by thousands of people in this nation, yet she stood in the Parliament, the Leader of the Opposition stood in the Parliament and stated—

Hon. Member: 48(5).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: What Standing Order?

Mrs. Newallo-Hosein: 48(5).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Well, I think he corrected it. Proceed.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Yes. When there is ample evidence in the public domain that renders that assertion, false. It is still made in the House and one wonders as to the real purpose of it. So, we got a lot of exaggeration; we got a lot of misrepresentations; we got some untruths. What we did not get was the kind of quoted analysis of the budget that would have been expected.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could go on and on discussing the—

Mr. Charles: Nothing.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis:—shortcomings of the Leader of the Opposition's response today, and I am very thankful to the Member for Naparima for giving me the apt word to describe it. It was truly nothing said, three hours and 15 minutes of nothing that none of us will ever get back. [*Desk thumping*] But if I were to do so I would be just as guilty of perhaps replicating the sin that she committed which was to waste the Parliament's time,

Dr. Khan: Well sit down, "nah".

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: So I would choose to do something more fundamental—
[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, please. [*Crosstalk*] No, please. Proceed Member.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Thank you, Sir. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will choose to use the time that is allotted to me to do something more fundamental. I am very

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intrigued by the way the Member for Couva North typified the use of social media and the role it now plays in terms of rendering information in the public domain to be more of a kaleidoscope than a very narrow pigeonholed thing, which it used to be. I am sure that, like myself, most Members here on both sides have been monitoring the debate over the budget in the public domain and it has gone in many directions. One of the things that has intrigued me is that, though I do not have any scientific data to back it up, there is a definite age difference, demographic difference, in terms of the way that people perceive the budget.

Now, I was remarking to some of my colleagues during the lunch time period upstairs that I made a very simple observation, which was that a number of our citizens who tend to be a little older have one particular view of the budget whether they like it or not. And whereas those who are younger tend to have a different view. Excuse me. And the observation I made was that we have in this nation generations of people, in fact, an entire generation of people—I will use the overused cliché, the overused term, “millennials”—who have never experienced difficult times in this nation.

The majority of them who would be either in their late '20s or close to 30 would have been born after the difficult times that many of us would have experienced and would have lived during a period within which we experienced rapid and continuous economic growth and development. So they have never experienced in any lived way this thing called a recession or a period of structural adjustment. So they have no frame of reference within which to interpret it and many of the responses that we see on social media, in the traditional media, on the street, in the maxi taxis, and in the taxis are to some extent determined by the fact that we have some people here who have a lived experience, vis-à-vis a recession, and then we have thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands who do not.

Now, if one is like me, a child of the '80s, this is not something that is peculiar or unusual. When I was in primary school in Standard 5, 1986, the price of oil fell to \$10 a barrel. And what was once a thriving oil and gas-centred economy, basically nosedived and we entered into a difficult economic period that was far worse than the one we are experiencing now. I am sure that there are many people in this Chamber right now who have that particular age, who can remember having lived those circumstances. And for me as a child it was very poignant, it was easy to identify that something had gone wrong. Because I grew up in a house where at Christmas time one was able to access these foreign goods, these apples and these grapes, in particular, as children. These are the fruits you like, even though perhaps you should like more local fruits to consume. And then

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all of a sudden these things disappeared. And I distinctly remember as a young man maybe eating a grape or an apple sometime in 1985 and then the next time in my life I remember being familiar with these things being available again, was close to Y2K. And that was one of the consequences of the fact that we are falling into very difficult times.

The situation we are facing now, as detailed by the circumstances we face but also as detailed by the kind of budget that must be presented, does not fall into that same circumstance, into that same stringent category. But there is a fundamental issue that must be dealt with here. It is no coincidence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Minister of Finance chose to centre his budget on the theme and on the idea of diversification, the theme and the idea of transformation of the economy because it is tremendously important to our continuation, to our survival as a nation. There is a paradigm here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the nation must understand, that the Parliament must understand, that the people must understand that we must change. [*Desk thumping*]

Our society has been one that has grown, and been transformed and evolved tremendously since our independence. But there are some aspects of our development that are still part of our DNA that we have not been able to overcome. And one of the places it is most easy to observe is in our economic development or depending on your perspective, our lack of economic development. I will use a very simple analogy, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In Trinidad and Tobago, we have what I would call a tent-pole economy. And what do I mean by that? Basically we have always had an economy that was diversified. People talk about diversification as though it is some kind of panacea, but oftentimes they do not understand what they are talking about. We have a tremendously diversified economy. There is a lot of varied economic activity here. What we have not had sufficiently is an economy that was very diversified in terms of its export earnings. That is one of the failings we have had. And we have had that failing to a great extent because we were conditioned from, we evolved from and have developed along the line of being the kind of society which will have one central economic activity that basically drove economic development.

We were born out of a crucible in the late 1780s—this thing called sugar became king and that was central to our economic development. Even back then we were diversified. But sugar was the driving engine of our economic development. That at some point became for a short while cocoa, and then from the 19th Century onwards it became oil. It did not mean that we developed an economy that was centred solely on one industry. What it meant was, we

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developed an economy that would be driven by one main industry, and that has its strengths but it also has tremendous weaknesses.

One of those weaknesses is that if you survive as an economy on exporting, maybe one or two major goods that are internationally traded, that are priced internationally, your economy will follow the pattern of the prices of those commodities internationally. So, when the price of oil and gas is up, we boom. When the price of oil and gas is down, we bust. And we have lived for over 200 years on that very simple economic roller coaster. And it was always possible because at some point, whatever commodity we were selling even though there were periods of collapse it would recover.

So, oil and gas collapsed in the early '70s; by 1973, we booming. A collapse begins in the early 1980s, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by the 1990s we are booming again. And then oil and gas collapsed in 2013/2014. And what we have not understood and we need to understand and what the Minister of Finance understands, and is trying to translate to us through the budget, is that this collapse does not follow the pattern that has determined our existence economically for the last 100 years. Because this collapse is really a watershed event. Because of the rise of shale oil, which has been discussed already by the Minister of Finance, and the projections that most international institutions have in terms of whether oil and gas will recover to the heights of a period before, what we are really facing now is not a recession. What we are facing now is not even really structural adjustment. What we are really facing now, is a watershed event. It is a paradigm change, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

From this point onwards and it is very difficult to presage what the history books will say, but if one had to make a calculated or educated guess, what they will say is that the history of this nation, economically, will have to be altered, because it may not be ever in the case of our history, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we will be able to afford the idea or the actuality of having a tent pole in our economy any more. It may no longer be the case that we could have one major industry that drives our development and we have one minor industries that make up the money. If those who are reading "the tea leaves", economically, are correct, we have come to the end of that journey.

So what are we to do, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Are we to continue along the same path that we have treaded for the last 200 years. The end result of that will be a failed economy very quickly. It is our contention as a Government, as a PNM Government that the old paradigm within which we have existed for so long, that has maybe served us well, but in other ways underserved us in terms of our

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development, can no longer stand. And if one were really listening with intent to the presentation presented by the Minister of Finance, it would have been clear that he spent far more time emphasizing the innovations he was attempting to input, the small transformations he was attempting to engender, the churning he was attempting to do to help propel, to jump-start something that is absolutely critical to our development. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have talked for decades about diversification in this country and it has never been accomplished—

Mr. Indarsingh: In this country.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Yes, in this country. Thank you, Sir. It has never been accomplished and we spend a lot of time wringing our hands trying to understand why it has not. [*Crosstalk*] There are a number of simple answers for that. One of the simplest, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and do not worry, Sir, the Member for Couva South's mumbling cannot affect me. One of the simplest explanations for that, Sir, is that diversification is on one hand very difficult and on the other hand it does not give you purchase as an industry or as a nation that a large mega industry does. I could give you a very simple example that is a major part of this history of this nation that we have not fully ventilated.

In the early '80s, given stringent times after a boom period, a PNM Government decided to diversify the main agricultural industry in this country, which was sugar, centred on Caroni (1975) Limited. And this plan would be implemented from the early 1980s throughout to the 1990s. It had successes in some areas but in the overarching sense it was a failure for a number of reasons. One of those which has not been fully understood, and which makes the whole idea of diversification something very difficult, is that there is an economic cultural issue involved therein. And what do I mean by that?

If one looks at Caroni during the '80s and its business model and its business practices what you would see, despite what the popular feeling is, it is a very important, very—to some extent powerful, very significant company to have had a very big business in sugar. If Caroni invested \$1 billion—well, that is a large number—let us say \$500 million in a year, it would earn tens of millions of dollars in foreign exchange which we needed during the '80s at a very critical time. [*Crosstalk*] At the end of the year—because I know what I am talking about, so you will stay quiet, Sir, thank you. [*Desk thumping*] At the end of the financial year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it might lose something like \$300 million or \$400 million—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: At the end of the year, Sir, it might lose a tremendous sum of money which, of course, would not be bad for the Exchequer. So you attempt to diversify and Caroni did that to some extent successfully. And a whole suite of things they were doing as afterthoughts became frontline industries. A particular one that stood out to me when I was doing my research was rice. So Caroni took resources away from sugar, took manpower away from sugar and started to produce a whole suite of agricultural products. Some of them relatively successfully. But when you have a company that is wedded to investing hundreds of millions of dollars—profit or loss, does not matter—in a commodity like sugar and then you expend probably \$10 million in rice and you make a \$3 million profit at the end of the year, it is a good thing for your books or in terms of your business model, that is basically peanuts.

The problem with diversification, Sir, one of the fundamental problems with diversification in an economy like ours is that basically the industries are small, the margins are small, the figures, either profit or loss, are small. And it is very difficult to contemplate running an economy within which you have lost \$19 billion with diversified industries. What it really calls for, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a different kind of thinking, it is a different way of viewing your economy. Instead of relying on one large industry to be your saviour what you really need maybe is hundreds of small industries that have economic activity that can bridge that gap that you are missing. We always had the large tent-pole industry and its existence made it very difficult to have the kind of mindset, the kind of philosophy, economically, that would have promoted fundamental diversifications. But I have already made the case that we have come to the point where that kind of thing can no longer stand.

So, we are forced to diversify and if it was the case historically that areas like tourism, like film, like the arts or afterthought, they now must become as outlined clearly by the Minister of Finance. These must now become diversified industries that become, maybe not a pillar but poles that can hold up the economy. It calls, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for a number of changes that pervade a number of areas. I could argue, for example, as I will argue, it calls for a whole new perspective on the issue of education.

There is a substantive Minister of Education here who will speak today and it will be his job to present an accurate picture of the work done by the Ministry for the last budgetary year. What I can do is to give an overarching view of how the transformation in terms of our economic development must and are engendering

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transformation in terms of how we view education, because it is absolutely critical. Just a week ago I had the distinct pleasure of speaking with ROYTEC at their accreditation ceremony celebrating the fact that they have become an accredited institution. And I said to them that in this nation we are going to be approaching or must be approaching or have to be approaching a golden age of education, which sounds like very fancy talk, very exaggerated speech, rather hyperbolic. It was really not meant at all to convey that idea.

Instead, it was meant to convey the very real-world conception that if we are to survive as a nation, if we are to strive, if we are to move forward, if this experiment that we call Trinidad and Tobago is to have a step to a higher threshold then we have no choice but to look at education in a slightly different manner. It was very heartening that reverting to an earlier type—the question of education has gone back to having the highest budgetary allocation in terms of the budget for 2017 and at the Ministry we really do wish to thank the Minister of Finance for affording us that.

It is absolutely critical, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we understand if we are to transform our economy in a way that will allow us to survive and to thrive beyond the paradigm that we have existed in, the way that we look at education, the way that education functions must be radically transformed. And as politicians who work at the Ministry—Ministers have a particularly important part in carrying through that function because policy directives regardless of the Ministry are supposed and are expected to emanate from the Ministers. In terms of policy, that has been one of the problems that one can argue that has plagued the question of education in this nation. In that, we tend to have start-and-stop policy instead of a situation of continuity.

There are a number of ways, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that that issue can be handled. What we have adopted or what we have attempted to do at the Ministry of Education is to look at the way in which policy in education is made. And we have tried to put in prescriptions to ensure that the way that the policy is formulated is done in a far more coherent and measurable way. For example, one of the things that we have championed at the Ministry, Mr. Garcia and I—I in particular have been at the helm on—is the creation of something called a Standing Research in Education Committee. As a vehicle, to ensure the creation of better policy and there is a pathway to ensure the creation of better policy. Now, why is that?

One has to ask ourselves, historically, how education policies were made in this country and that is a whole separate dialogue that we want to get involved in.

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But one gets the sense at times that education policy is formulated for reasons that transcend education. It might be political expedience. It might be the personal whims of the particular Minister or Ministers in charge. Now, it is the case that in education now we have two Ministers who have a wealth of history, decades of experience in education. That has not and will not always be the case. Do you want to leave something as critical as the education of the nation's future in the hands of someone who may have no notion or interest in best practice? One of the things we have done is to form this committee and to initiate a research agenda in the Ministry.

Now, it is not just meant to capture research; that is important. Right now the Ministry conducts a lot of research, but one has to ask oneself: Is there any concerted agenda, is the research done collaboratively, is it done in silos, does it translate into any meaningful impact on the way policy is made? The answers to that might not be the best answers possible. What we have done is to ensure that this committee is going about the business of attempting to transform the culture of the Ministry. So that everyone in the Ministry—from the Minister to the clerk, and everyone in between—begins to become wedded to the idea and to the culture that education policy must be based on verifiable data, must be based on accepted best practices. It is tremendously easy to say that, but given the culture that has reigned at that Ministry and given the actions or past Ministers who have made education policy that has nothing to do with either of those criteria that I just identified, this kind of change is tremendously important. So that is one.

One of the other areas we have looked at, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is looking at the way education must be tied to the developmental needs of the nation. Now, we no longer have that large offshore or may not any longer have that large offshore economic driver to ensure that we keep moving forward. So it is absolutely critical for our continued development that the money we spend on education redounds to the direct benefit of the nation's development. [*Desk thumping*] It has not always absolutely been the case and within that purview, within that paradigm there have been a number of issues we have been looking at. One of them I will point out, in particular, has been the whole question of nursing education in this nation.

Now, myself and the Minister of Health, the hon. Member for St. Joseph, have convened a committee to look at this issue of how we educate nurses. And the meetings we have had, aside from a number of reports which point to numerous attempts to rationalize education, none of which have fundamentally gone anywhere, what they have unearthed is a glaring gap, a glaring short-fall, an

impending problem in terms of nursing in Trinidad and Tobago. For example, it was made very patently clear to us, one of the first meetings we had, that we could very easily be facing a crisis of nursing in this country. Why is that? Because on the establishment of the Ministry of Health for nurses there is a startling number of positions that are vacant. The number is 1,000. So this nation is missing 1,000 nurses. But that is not even the most disturbing part. What is far more disturbing is the fact that of the nurses who are in the system now, operating, 60 per cent of them are aged 60 years and over—meaning, that they are all very close to retirement; [Crosstalk] 60 per cent of the nurses operating in this nation right now are aged 60 and over. [Crosstalk]

4.55 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members. `

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: That is the information that is presented to us. I am simply repeating what was presented to me by the experts in the area. That figure is remarkably frightening. It might seem tremendously oxymoronic but that figure is very frightening, and it can be very frightening. What it means is that we run the risk in this nation, not only on the one hand of not having enough nurses to basically go through our normal procedures in our hospitals, but of losing a large cadre of nurses at the same time and all of the institutional knowledge that goes with them.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Education, in conjunction with the Minister of Health, we are in the process now of looking at the different schools of nurses, looking at the shortfalls, because there are other concerns. We do not produce enough specialist nurses in this country. That is a major concern, trying to find a rational pathway forward that can be agreed upon by all stakeholders, by all parties, so that we can suggest a logical, sensible developmental plan to Cabinet that can be taken over. It remains a work in progress.

There are other areas of the Ministry where we are trying to make the kind of fundamental change that would redound to the kind of education system that would redound to the kind of economic development that we need. It is the case in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and I am sure the Minister will talk far more about this—that every year after our Secondary Entrance Assessment Examination, we have far too many students who do not present, or are not able to exemplify required standards in reading and mathematics. The Ministry's benchmark—and we could argue that it is a bit arbitrary—is at 30 per cent. This year we had just over 2,000 students incapable of getting past 30 per cent in either Maths or Language Arts, and a similar response in terms of Creative Writing.

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So, basically, it means that out of 18,000 students who did the exam, we have over 2,000 students who cannot meet a basic, or a minimum expectation in terms of at least getting over 50 per cent in that exam, who cannot show the required or expected attributes, qualities, performance, in terms of their language art skills and their mathematics skills. And if one is fooling oneself into thinking that that is some sort of an anomaly, when one checks the figures at the Ministry, it is basically a pattern that recurs far too often.

In my mind, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that bespeaks a national tragedy. Because whereas you might bemoan the issue of oil and gas, there is no Member of this House on either side who will not agree with me that our nation's most precious resource is our children. And if it is that after seven years of primary schooling and, perhaps, two years of early childhood care, we have such a large number of students who are unable to get more than 30 per cent in the standardized test, in my mind that is a national crisis. It is also one that we cannot allow to continue.

So for the first time in the history of this nation, the Ministry of Education will be implementing, not just creating a paradigm, not just making a plan that is never implemented or never followed through on, but implementing a student monitoring system where we attempt to identify those students who have difficulties of whatever kind: academic, intellectual, physiological, psychological, of whatever kind, and making a meaningful intervention in terms of their education at the point that we can. And the Minister, perhaps, will mention this and he will give more specific details on that.

But the point is this, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If you want to have a more evolved economy, if you want to have the kind of economy that will allow this nation to develop, not just survive but continue to develop, the education system that we pay for out of our public funding must not only exemplify the same qualities, but must be dovetailed to ensure that we create the kind of students who could lead the kind of developmental thrust that we need at all levels.

In addition to all of the things that I have mentioned before, it was made very clear by the Minister of Finance in his presentation that that old pseudo-colonial tradition of development being centred along the urban areas and the rural areas of this nation being allowed to lay fallow, is a situation that is no longer tenable. I am, of course, the Member of Parliament for Moruga/Tableland. I have stated on too many occasions in this Parliament—and it remains one of the most underdeveloped regions of this nation. So it is particularly pleasing to me, as the Member of Parliament, but also as someone who still lives in Moruga, to see that the kind of economic development being proposed by this Government and being

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driven by the policies coming out of the Minister and the Ministry of Finance, countenances the importance of ensuring that all areas of the nation, be they rural, be they urban, become part of that centralized economic thrust. So my colleague, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Couva North, has already graciously commended—well not me, but the Government by proxy, in terms of the plan—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Your time has expired. You have an additional 10 minutes. Do you care to avail yourself?

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: In terms of the road upgrade that is poised to begin on Monday in the Moruga/Tableland constituency, I have made the case in this Parliament, I have made the case in public, I have made the case in writing, so I really need not belabour it, but some things are worth mentioning because they transcend what they appear to be. That road upgrade is important as an economic driver. When I was at school and we did Geography, there was something called communication that had nothing to do with anything verbal, had to do with the kind of infrastructure being laid down that leads to development.

I have always said that my home community, Moruga, remains an untapped giant—a sleeping giant—because there is tremendous potential there lying in the ground that has never been, in any way, encouraged to bloom. Part of that is not just the remoteness of the area; has to do with the fact that the communication in the geographical sense that was required to encourage the kind of development needed, had never really fundamentally been put in place. I am tremendously proud to be an MP in a Government that prioritizes rural development—[*Desk thumping*]*—tremendously proud. This development, which has been waited for, for more than a generation—I am 42 years old and I have never seen the Moruga Road upgraded—[Interruption] Yeah, yeah. Fine, but 42—in any substantial way, never. What they have been have been slipshod, short-term, badly formulated fixes that will be put down today and would go sliding down the hill tomorrow. What is proposed at this time is a fundamental transformation that will open up a community for economic expansion. Because, interestingly, if one listened to the budget presentation, at the same time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that a road upgrade is being contemplated, Government is also going to be instituting an agro-processing plant; is also in the midst of formulating a new fishing port at Moruga.*

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All of these things may seem discrete but they are really all interconnected because Moruga has great fishing potential. It is the largest fishing port in Trinidad and Tobago. It has great agricultural potential. We have—

Hon. Member: Best peppers.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Yes, we have the best peppers. Tableland is the standard bearer nationally and may be regionally, for pineapples. There is a great amount of agricultural potential that is lying dormant in the ground. The road upgrade is not meant to be a conceit. It is not meant to be a gimmick simply to appease people and to garner votes, it is fundamentally meant to ensure that the community of Moruga, the constituency of Moruga/Tableland, which has all of this latent potential, is allowed to participate in the larger national economic development like every other part of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] That is something that is held with great esteem by the people of that constituency. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is time to wrap up. [*Interruption*] Your humour, as usual, escapes you. Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Focus here, please.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis:—in this nation, whether we wish to admit it or not, whether we like the fact, whether we have lived the experience or not or whether we have not, we are facing difficult times. This has been the case long before 2015. The PNM Government is just far more honest and willing to deal with the circumstances, unlike the government that preceded us. [*Desk thumping*] We understand the responsibility that has been entrusted to us. We are in the midst of managing a fragile, but strong in some ways, economy, during very difficult times. We understand that if we mismanage this, we imperil not only the present but the future of this nation.

There are many people in this nation who would love us to operate in the old, established traditional way. I want to say to them, in particular this evening, that if this Government were to try to manage in that way it would lead directly and swiftly to the wreckage of the company.

Hon. Member: Of the country.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Of the country, Sorry, thank you. Finally helpful—wreckage of this country. It is our responsibility, as the people who have been entrusted with it by the population, to ensure that we make the best we can of the situation, but also that we provide the kind of leadership and guidance required in very difficult times. Not every decision that is made by this Government will be

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popular, but the nation can rest assured that we will always make the right decisions at the right time to ensure continuance of this nation. Thank you, Sir. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Fyzabad. [Desk thumping]

Dr. Lackram Bodoë (Fyzabad): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to join this debate on the Appropriation (Financial Year 2018) Bill, 2017. First of all, I would like to congratulate the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar [Desk thumping] and the Member of Parliament for Siparia for her very incisive and insightful contribution. Her three-and-a-half, or three-plus hours' contribution, I must say, was delivered with surgical precision, which would have resulted in a much more enlightened citizenry this morning after her contribution.

I also would want to congratulate my colleague for Couva North [Desk thumping] who had a very spirited and informative delivery. Before I go into my contribution, I would just want to respond to my colleague from Moruga/Tableland, and to indicate to him that Moruga/Tableland has been earmarked as the 19th seat for the UNC. [Desk thumping] And based on the performance we have seen here, of course, that looks like we are well on track. [Crosstalk]

Hon. Member: I wish you good luck, Sir.

Dr. L. Bodoë: We are on the way. We are on the way. But I just wanted to— [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, silence.

Dr. L. Bodoë: I wanted to indicate to the Member for Moruga/Tableland in his comparison of the Leader of the Opposition with the Member for Diego Martin North/East, and to indicate that, perhaps, for him to remember that the Leader of the Opposition, the MP for Siparia, was a Minister of Education in a previous government and perhaps the Member would do well to learn a few things from her. [Desk thumping]

I would also want to take note of the fact that the Member analysed the problem very well that is facing us in terms of diversification, but unfortunately, they offered very little solutions. I also want to make the point, in terms of the research, that the Member mentioned there is a research unit, and perhaps, Member, could you at some point or maybe your senior colleague could indicate whether that research unit was able to provide any further enlightenment and

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information with regard to the fiasco that recently happened with the CXC? So we look forward to the results of that research. [*Desk thumping*]

I am also a bit concerned that the figure—not the 1,000 nursing shortages. I do know that we have quite a few nursing shortages, but the figure of 60 per cent being over 60 years, I think, perhaps, that we would need to correct that. But I trust that my colleague, the MP for Chaguanas West, former Minister of Tertiary Education, perhaps would be able to shed some light on that.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, last Monday the hon. Minister of Finance made a budget presentation in this Chamber with the grandiose theme of “Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path”. This budget presentation was met with disbelief and bewilderment and, indeed, has left a large number of citizens in a state of despair and hopelessness. [*Desk thumping*] There appears to be a huge divide or a gap separating the so-called theme of this budget and the contents and fiscal measures enunciated therein.

It does not establish, nor can it establish any new paradigm which can be used as a template to navigate us through the turbulence and the choppy waters that our oil and gas dependency syndrome has left us in. In my opinion, the measures outlined in this budget will create a very tenuous month-to-month situation for our citizens as they try to navigate their way going forward during the next financial year. I also believe that this much anticipated budget statement was really an anti-climax which followed the meeting which was held at the Hyatt the previous Wednesday and it also appears that many of the suggestions that were brought forward at that meeting were not taken on board. So one is left to wonder, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether that meeting was merely a glorified public relations political stunt.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, some are saying that this is a hit-and-miss budget, like a lottery or a game of chance which, you know, the outcome sometimes may not be certain. I further believe, after careful analysis of the budget as well, that this budget statement has failed to invoke and harness the innate resilience, the advanced state of the built infrastructure, our abundant human capital and our entrepreneurial base that is very endemic in Trinidad and Tobago, in a way that would have allowed us to deal with the financial crisis that chases us.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I agree that all hands must be on deck to tackle the economic and financial hurricane that has been with us since 2014. However, it is imperative that the Government inspire confidence in the citizenry in order for there to be cooperation, collaboration and, indeed, personal sacrifice. I am of the

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opinion that this budget will not mobilize the confidence and support of the people of Trinidad and Tobago to buy into the package of measures because the measures appear to be disjointed, sporadic and impulsive.

So I want to suggest, and I want to quote a former President of the US, Ronald Reagan who once said, and I quote:

“Government’s view of the economy can be summed up in a few short phrases: If it moves, tax it. If it keeps moving, regulate it and if it stops moving, subsidize it.”

One wonders, then, whether this is not a reflection of this Government’s take on this nation’s economy because the mantra of this Government seems to be tax, tax, tax. I just want to make the point that these taxes will be passed on to the consumers who will have to bear the brunt of this. In fact, the ordinary man in the street will have to pick up the tab eventually.

I would want to just raise a few issues for the Government to answer in terms of their response, and this came about from a forum that I would have had in my constituency last Wednesday—this Wednesday, in fact. And there were quite a few pertinent questions raised by the constituents and I just throw these out for consideration by the Minister of Finance. And one of the questions which was raised was whether a rebate on fuel for agricultural purposes will be considered. The constituency of Fyzabad is heavily dependent on agriculture and this was just a question that was raised by one of the constituents.

The other issue, of course, was whether the restriction removal on the maxi-taxi licences was meant to be a scaling down or down-grading of the Public Transport Service Corporation. That is what some of the constituents were asking and perhaps the Government may want to answer this, going forward. The other issue was with regard to the new agricultural financial support programme and I would seek clarification from the Minister as to what is meant by “certify” or “qualify”. Constituents were raising the concern, Minister, as to whether a degree or a diploma would be required to go into agriculture. I was also asked to bring to the attention of the Government whether this grant will be available for the New Age farming, for example, aquaponics and vertical farming. So these are just some of the concerns, Minister, that would have gone through the minds of the constituents, all valid questions, I am sure, that you may want to respond to.

With regard to the National Crime Prevention Programme, there were representatives of the police youth club and the police community council at that meeting, and they were concerned—well, they were really wondering how this

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will impact and how it will incorporate these organizations; in fact, whether funding will be provided to some of these councillors and so on. And I am sure that is something that you would want to address in your delivery. *[Interruption]* Minister of National Security, I am asking. *[Laughter]*

With regard to the proposed review of the utility rates by the Regulated Industries Commission proposed in 2018, very valid questions were asked, it came down to the kind of service that was provided by WASA and the questions were asked were: How, as a citizen, could they relate to an increase in water rates and electricity when they are not getting value for money? So that was a question—and in terms of the assessment.

One very interesting point was raised—and I think I have to mention this—by one of the members of the regional corporation who was present, and this was the councillor for Siparia West/Fyzabad, who asked that I seek some clarity from the Government in terms of where the local government reform is headed and where we are at the current time. *[Desk thumping]* This, interestingly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a councillor who belongs to the opposite side. So I thought that was quite interesting and I thought I should raise that for the Government to answer.

There were also some concerns about the housing incentives, and there was quite a bit of concern about the ministerial committee that will be appointed to deal with these houses. And there was concern, of course, that there would be—the view was expressed that perhaps non-political persons should be involved in this. And, in fact, one of the things that came about is that this could be used for voter padding and I just say this—I am just quoting a constituent. I am not saying that. I am quoting a constituent, but I take that as meaning that there is a lack of trust in the Government's policies. So I thought I would convey that message. One of the constituents also mentioned there was nothing in the budget for the working class, the elderly and the differently-abled. So the Minister may want to refute that.

So I just want to go on to discuss a few issues with regard to public administration, and if I could just take the opportunity, in the absence of the Minister and my colleague for La Horquetta/Talparo, just to wish him a very speedy recovery, as I talk about public administration. Mr. Deputy Speaker, our challenge as a nation is, how do we embed a culture of increasing productivity and efficiency in a declining economy? And if I may just refer to the Minister's budget speech and look at page 18, where the Minister of Finance talks about the old paradigm, and, in fact, I think the nail is hit on the head here when we talk

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about—the Minister has mentioned several indicators of the old paradigm, but he is speaking about:

- “a highly staffed public sector, in terms of numbers, coexisting with staff shortages in key departments;
- a tendency for wage increases to outpace productivity;”

I am just quoting from the budget document:

- “inefficient capital expenditure management, characterized by inordinate delays and cost overruns in project execution, often overlooked...since funding was not an issue;”

I think this is very important because in the grand scheme of things we have a situation where the Government comes up with its policies; the Minister brings a budget to the Parliament and then the execution of those projects are supposed to take place over the financial year, and we have a situation where we have seen on many occasions that it is difficult to complete, sometimes, the capital programmes. So there seems to be a problem with execution.

But more than that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to draw to the attention, the fact that, you know, we spend a budget of about \$10 billion on public sector wages, approximately, so it takes up—that is about 20 per cent of the budget, and the question, really, from both the Government’s point of view and from the public’s point of view, is whether the public service is giving us value for money. I think that is the question that needs to be answered. And, you know, we hear talk from the other side about doing more with less, and really we are speaking as to how we can increase the efficiency of the public service, which is the delivery arm of the Government. So, you know, we can come here and we can debate this budget and we could speak about all of these nice things, but if it is that we cannot deliver, and if it is that we have constraints that we are not addressing in the public service, then I think that becomes an issue. I also think it is important to note that there seems to be some challenges. The Government seems to have some challenges in terms of engaging the labour movement. That was evidenced by the non-cooperation of the labour movement, non-attendance at the Government’s forum, pre-budget exercise last week. But it is important to realize and to understand that if you are going to improve productivity in the public sector, then of course, you have to be able to engage the unions and to work with them.

One of the issues that came about in the last Member’s contribution, the Member for Moruga/Tableland, was the fact that even though the figure may not

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be correct, is the fact that we do have a large number of people in the public sector who are now approaching 60. And, therefore, I think, one has to give consideration to whether the retirement age of 60 is, in fact, appropriate for a society. And Member for St. Joseph, Minister of Health, this is something that you may want to look at as well, because I am sure you are facing a situation where you have—you know, I had not thought about this question until I approached 60, which will be in a few months from now. But only to realize that at 60, that you are still quite well; you are still healthy. I saw the Minister jumping up with the children in one of the schools and he tells me that it was a challenge for the children, not for him. So I commend him on that. But the point about it is that it is important to understand that, you know, 60 to 65, all the evidence is there that one can perform quite well. There is quite a bit left and quite a bit of institutional knowledge.

And therefore, the time has come when perhaps consideration should be given to raising the retirement age from 60 to 65. I know this is a debate that took place, would have been raised by economists, by social scientists and so on, and therefore, I think it is something that we should look at.

5.25 p.m.

As I said, some of the doctors who, for example the nurses, they are quite able to go beyond 60. They can work as mentors. In terms of the contracting situation, Minister, perhaps one can look at revising their contracts after the age of 60 so that perhaps these people could come back as part-time and not full-time and have specific jobs and duties and so on, and that will fill the gap, not only in the health sector, but in the other sectors. So it is something that can be considered. Of course, there are other benefits to this measure if it were to be implemented in terms of mitigating the growing pension burden that any government would face, and especially in a time when dollars might be short is something that would be an added benefit. So it is a drain that perhaps should be stopped. We need to look at that.

So we spoke about increasing productivity in the public sector and I just want to quote from the Minister of Public Administration's contribution in the last budget debate in 2017 and I quote:

“We cannot turn this country and this economy around unless we tackle the real problem”—of public administration in this country.

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And the Minister went on to say:

“We cannot turn this country around unless we remove the inefficiencies that are so much a part of doing business in”—and out of the government in—
“Trinidad and Tobago.”

So I was a little bit disappointed in the budget presentation that this issue was not addressed in a realistic way, but perhaps contributions on the other side will address that. But I want to make the point that if one looks at where the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications is going and what has been happening, to do that what I would have done is I would have tried to find the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications’ Report—it is an annual report that is produced by the Ministry. The last one I was able to find was October 2013 to September 2014. That would have been during the reign of the previous Government—and there were quite a few initiatives that were started.

I know some of them have been continued, but I would just want to find out from the Government in terms of some of these initiatives, for example, the Trinidad and Tobago Diamond Standard which was a certification for quality and excellence service. I know that quite a few agencies and Ministries and so on were involved and perhaps we can get a response as to where we are in terms of that, what are the numbers, how many more Ministries and agencies have actually been on time and certified in terms of public administration.

There was also the issue of the Open Government Partnership and that was a laudable initiative. Open Government is defined as a demand of citizens and an aspiration that has been an important drive for the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in recent years, and what the initiative seeks to do is to strengthen public sector governance by improving openness, transparency and accountability in Government. Something that is really talked about all of the time in this Parliament and, of course, to promoting greater citizen participation and collaboration in public affairs.

Now, I know that Trinidad and Tobago would have been one of the first—
[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. I think at this time, as agreed by both the Leader of Government Business and the Chief Whip, we will go for tea and we will resume at six o’clock.

5.29 p.m.: *Sitting suspended,*

6.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

Dr. L. Bodoë: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and welcome back to the Chamber. Just before the break I was asking about a few of the initiatives in the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications and seeking some answers, and we were on the issue of the Open Government Partnership. I am informed that Trinidad and Tobago is one of the first Caricom states to join this Open Government Partnership, and the question is: Are we still a member? Perhaps I can get that answer through the Minister, or acting Minister of Public Administration?

With regard to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, the virtual contact centres, if I can get an update status on that as to where we are with that. There is also the issue of the human resource modernization renewal thrust within the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications, and the documents speak to the new public service officer and they speak to the management support officer. I know these terms have been bandied about in successive presentations in the budget, and therefore, I would want to find out again where are we exactly in terms of the implementation of these new categories of staff to modernize the public service.

In terms of looking at other initiatives that can increase productivity and efficiency in the delivery of public services, the issue of flexitime, the issue of hot-desking, I believe that some of these were introduced and I would want to know whether they are still being used, they are still being operated. I am told that because of issues with supervision that some of the flexitime arrangements have been discontinued. That is the situation where some people will come to work early and leave earlier, so you would have better utilization of office and time and so on.

One of the other issues that can improve productivity, of course, is the decentralization of Government offices, and I would want to know: what is the Government's intention in terms of trying to move some of the Government offices perhaps out of Port of Spain? I know there has been some movement in that direction. I think it is also important until such time as we can solve the transportation issues on our roads with the difficulty in getting to work, especially for those who live in south and having to reach to work in Port of Spain, that is really a major challenge and some consideration, of course, should be given—I

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know we have spoken about changes to the speed limit and the transportation Bill and so on, but there is also the issue of perhaps creating what we call an HOV, or higher occupancy vehicle lane, in the highways coming into Port of Spain. That is something that could perhaps ease in getting people to work.

One of the other issues I would want to raise as well is that I know some field officers in the public service, even though they go out in the field they have to report back to the office at the end of the day, and whether consideration can be given to these officers producing their report perhaps from home rather than have to face the traffic going back to the offices. Looking at the budget with regard to the development programme—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: [*Mr. Imbert is on his feet*] Member, please leave in silence. Thank you very much. Member for Fyzabad.

Dr. L. Bodoë: Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Order. Order!

Dr. L. Bodoë: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I just wanted to draw attention to the Development Programme, and looking at the estimates going from 2016 to 2018 but with particular reference to the 2018 in terms of the Development Programme, I note that there was an Item of an implementation of an ICT plan which the Estimate was \$5.8 million in 2017 but there was no expenditure incurred at all in 2017. So perhaps there can be an explanation for that. I also note allocations for the E-government and Knowledge Brokering Programme and the establishment of a virtual call centre in the public service, that there has been no expenditure last year and no expenditure budgeted this year, and perhaps there is a real good reason for that, again I would want to seek information as to what is the status of these services.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Would the Member give way?

Dr. L. Bodoë: Sure.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Member, some of those projects have become legacy projects, and what we have been attempting to do is move them from the DP unto the recurrent because of the length of time that they have been in existence. So some of those that you are asking about have been moved to the recurrent expenditure. They are no longer a project so they may not be appearing on the books. Okay?

Dr. L. Bodoë: I thank the Member for her response. Thank you very much. One of the other issues is the modernization of institutions, and again I quote from the Minister of Public Administration and Communications in his last budget debate, Madam Speaker, when he said that:

“As one of the core strategies to address this manpower issues, the Ministry is collaborating with the Public Service Commission and the Service Commissions Department in a major initiative to strengthen and modernize those institutions.”

So again, I would want to find out exactly where we are with these institutional strengthening projects because time and again we have the issue being raised of challenges with the Public Service Commission and the service commissions in terms of filling vacancy in the public sector. So I look forward to these answers.

With regard to the technology and the provision of Wi-Fi and so on for citizens, I know that some of the smart centres were started a few years ago. I know under the previous regime four centres had started. There was supposed to be another four, and I look forward to an update as to how far we are, how many of these centres have now been operationalized in Trinidad and Tobago.

With regard again to the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications, I just wanted to make a point with regard to the closure or the proposed closure of CNMG, and the reversion to TTT, and to seek further information—I know that that has been mentioned—and to seek further clarification so to the rationale as to why this is happening. To me it sounds as though you are closing one company to start a new company, which is basically going to serve the same function, but perhaps the Government has a reason and perhaps we can get an explanation as to why that is being done. What I would be concerned about is that you would be letting go employees from CNMG with no guarantee of these employees being reemployed with a new company, TTT, and therefore, I look forward to the explanation and the rationale as to why this would have been done.

Madam Speaker, I just want to move across very briefly to touch two issues in health, and one of these concerns is the distribution and the availability of drugs and supplies, which is an issue that many constituents would come to my constituency office concerned about, and to ask the Minister of Health perhaps for an explanation. When one looks to the budget allocations for drugs and other related materials and supplies, and if you will permit me to quote, Madam

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Speaker, that item in 2016 was just over \$600 million—\$626 million—2017 would have been \$508 million, and 2017, this is the expenditure, where it would have been \$564,000. I see there is an increase expenditure estimate for 2018, but just to indicate as to why we still seem to be having challenges in terms of the supply of drugs and other supplies in the hospitals, whether it is a procurement problem. I know the Minister has indicated that this matter was being addressed and I look forward to an update on that matter.

The other matter I would want to mention in passing, of course, is with regard to hospitals and I look forward to the further construction, the continuing construction and completion of the Point Fortin hospital. Some of my constituents in Fyzabad live closer to that area and would access that hospital, but just as well I would also want to ask as to what the status is with regards to the Couva Hospital. I know that the issue of the public/private partnership has been bandied about, has been thrown back and forth. I also want to raise that issue in the context of diversification perhaps for medical tourism and, of course, with the fact that we also have so many unemployed, over 200 unemployed doctors. So again, I would look forward to the Minister's response with regard to that project.

Madam Speaker, I would want to just raise a few issues now within the constituency of Fyzabad and to bring to the attention of the Minister of Education and ask about the status of construction of the Siparia Union Presbyterian School. I know that school has been promised to the students within that school. They have had the misfortune of having a fire just a few days ago, and if perhaps the Minister of Education can give an update and status as to where we are in terms of completing the Siparia Union Presbyterian School. Likewise, the Dabie Avenue ECCE Centre remains uncompleted, and Minister I would want to get an update as to what is happening at the Dabie Avenue. That is in Avocat. It is an ECCE centre which may be about—it looks like about 60/70 per cent completed. So maybe we could get an update on that in your response, Minister. There is also a proposed heroes' museum in Fyzabad which has been on the budget for several years. I note that there has been no allocation this area. So I would want to get a response from the Government as to what is the status and what are the plans with regard to that project.

In terms of the diversification of the economy, Madam Speaker, in the constituency of Fyzabad there is the Oropouche Lagoon and it is a great opportunity for eco-tourism. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries would have visited the constituency on that very site a couple of months ago. So

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again, I would want to get from the Government a response and an update as to where we are headed with that project.

One of the other concerns with regard to the impact of the increase in the diesel and fuel prices is with regard to the state of the fishing industry in Otaheite area which falls within the constituency of Fyzabad. The fishermen have raised concerns as to how this will impact on their livelihood, and again I would urge the Minister of Finance perhaps to look at whether that grouping can be given some sort of consideration with regard to the fuel pricing.

Madam Speaker, the issue here with regard to public administration and the public service is that we are looking at a situation, as I mentioned earlier, where we are being asked to do more with less. I think that the Government has a golden opportunity in these difficult circumstances to take the bull by the horn to ensure that the time has come to ensure that the efficiency and the effectiveness of the public service has increased. I think there is no better opportunity than to do it now, and I would hope that the Government has its strength—I am sure that we are asking for sacrifices all around, but I think it is important that we address the issue in the public service.

As I mentioned, we are looking at a wage bill of over \$10 million annually, 25 per cent of the budget, and I think if we lose this opportunity to improve the service it will not happen and we will never get that chance again. So with those few words, Madam Speaker, I would want to thank you very much for the opportunity. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs (Hon. Darryl Smith): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for giving me the opportunity here to participate in this august House for the debate of the budget for 2017/2018. First of all, I would like to thank God almighty for giving us health and strength to be here this evening. [*Desk thumping*] I would like to congratulate and thank the Members of Parliament for Diego Martin West and Diego Martin North/East; the Prime Minister first of all on his second year as Prime Minister who has been charting this country through these economic challenges so far. And I want to thank the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning, Member for Arouca/Maloney, who has presented and worked tirelessly since April this year with all the Ministers and all the stakeholders to get this budget here for us to present and go through. [*Desk thumping*]

As it is the start of the new fiscal year, I want to thank the members of the Parliament staff including yourself, Madam Speaker, for last year and the last two

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years and wish you all the best to ensuring that when we come here that everything is in place that we could do the people's business. I want to thank my staff at the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs for the past two years as well and moving forward for this fiscal year that we could continue the successful work that we have been doing.

Of course, I always say first and foremost, Madam Speaker, I am a Member of Parliament for Diego Martin Central and I want to thank the people of the Diego Martin Central constituency, who I am very close with, for the continual support and I am here to represent you and I will continue working as hard as I can to ensure that living in the constituency continues to improve. [*Desk thumping*] I would also like to thank my family for the support, as MPs and Ministers here know it is a difficult job, late hours, hard work and they have been very willing to work with regard to that. I also want to send our prayers to our Member of Parliament for La Horquetta/Talparo and wish him that he will be back here with us soon and on his feet. I am sure he is watching us wherever he is now.

And finally, Madam Speaker, to all the countries that had issues within the last few months with regard to natural disasters—Dominica, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Puerto Rico and the US—we want to send our prayers to all those countries, to all those who may have passed, all those who may not have a shelter over their head as we speak right now. We want to send our prayers and we want to thank the Prime Minister for his vision for ensuring that Trinidad and Tobago is helping these people. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I want to start on that note. The Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts, the Member for St. Ann's East—I know she may have had a part of it. You would have seen young people coming together last week to have a concert at the Queen's Park Oval to assist these people with a food drive. Again, you would see this week and next week with sport, young people coming together for football and cricket at the Oval as well. And at the USA game, I want to encourage the Members to try and attend these events and support our brothers and sisters at these events while they are being entertained with sport and so on.

Madam Speaker, this is my third budget debate, and so far work at the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, we have been doing our best. We are not perfect. Nobody in this room is perfect. We have never said that we are perfect. We all will make mistakes. We have made mistakes and we will continue to make mistakes as we go along. But the main emphasis is for us to come here to report what we have done within the last year of report to the people of Trinidad and

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Tobago and to explain what we have planned for the year to come which we just started. I feel sorry for the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. He had to come here and use his time where he is supposed to report also to his constituents with regard to what he is doing in his constituency. He is doing a lot of work in a number of Ministries—Office of the Prime Minister, the AG's Office—and he would have wanted to come here with a prepared presentation to discuss the work that he has been doing. He had to come and defuse a number of untruths that were spread by the Member for Siparia. He spent all his time doing that, [*Desk thumping*] and it is really disheartening that we still at that stage.

I myself have to spend some time defusing something that was said by the Member for Couva North which I would not spend too much time, but I thought we would have reached a level of maturity now where we all work together. I think the Prime Minister has to be given kudos for hosting the spotlight last week Wednesday [*Desk thumping*] which is something, never done before, and for those who do not know he was planning this since last year to have something similar to this. So it was not to do with the budget at all. It was something that they planned to ensure that all the stakeholders of Trinidad and Tobago have an opportunity and a chance to come out and hear, and more so for people to express themselves with regard to what is going on in Trinidad and Tobago and how most importantly we could put our minds and our hearts together to ensure that we come out of this hole that we are in. So kudos to the Prime Minister for that.

Let me deal with the Member for Couva North one time so that I could get to the business of Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs and Diego Martin Central. That project is called northern. It is the field—I grow up in Diego Martin—in Diego Martin West where the Prime Minister is the Member of Parliament. However, it is bordered by the Diego Martin Main Road which is across from Diego Martin Central and very close to Diego Martin North/East. It is actually when you look at it, it is almost at the centre of the three Diego Martin constituencies—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Lee: Bagatelle.

Hon. D. Smith: Bagatelle. You know it well. Well Pointe-a-Pierre as you all do not know is my favourite constituent. He lives in Diego Martin Central. He is very comfortable there. But nevertheless, I played in many football games and cricket there. It is a field that has been left for 10 years. The foundation has been down. There was a contractor that was given the contract, SRI Construction, 10 years. When I was the Chairman of the Diego Martin Regional Corporation

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two/three years ago, one of your Ministers of Sport—you all had so many. I think it was number three or four—Brent Sancho I met with. We went down there and we did a site visit, and he promised to start the project back with the same contractor—he did the foundation, there was nobody who could have done it—and it was left again.

My job as Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, along with a number of other Ministers here, is to clean up the Ministries. It is not all about starting new projects. I have spoken to a number of those on the other side and they have shared that, and it is true to extend, starting a new project is difficult from scratch, from planning and stuff. However, going into a project that has been left for 10 years is even more difficult including the Brian Lara Stadium which I will come to in a little while. But nevertheless, we came in 2015, we assess all the projects that were incomplete in the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs and we decided to move forward with that project. We put \$20 million to get the project started and that was done. What we did was—which we saw when we came in as well, a number of state agencies had a number of loans. Billions of dollars when you add it up, Madam Speaker, that these state companies had and Sport Company was one. I think they had as much as \$300 million or \$400 million in loans and they were not even earmarked for any major project.

We took money from that loan, that ANSA loan, and we were able to put it—and it was not \$200 million, Madam Speaker. It was \$120 million, and it is going to be a fantastic facility, similar to what the Member of Parliament has in Siparia with Irwin Park. As you know, she has a project that I think it is almost \$200 million there. It is going to cost us 130 max and it is going to be launched this year. So I just wanted to rest that so that I could move on to the business of reporting.

Dr. Tewarie: Where is that, Minister? Where is that?

Hon. D. Smith: In Siparia,

Dr. Tewarie: No, the—[*Interruption*]

Hon. D. Smith: Diego Martin North, it is on Diego Martin Main Road.

Madam Speaker, I want to start off with youths in my contribution. I am going to report what we have done with youths because for far too long—and it is not just Trinidad and Tobago. I have had the opportunity this year to go to the UN Youth Conference in New York earlier this year and I was able to meet a number of Ministers of Sport, Ministers of Youth Education and so on, and you would be

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quite surprised to know that we set up a WhatsApp group and so on, and a number of countries and Ministers are going through the same issues and situations that we are going through.

In fact, a number of them when they hear and they read and they see and we discuss what is going on here, they said they went through this teething problem four, five years ago, where their country was living at a level of comfort—whatever their resources may have been—and they had to come down through the economic crash worldwide. We are now going through that with the realities of what this Government has found coming in, in 2015. It is a reality. I am not here to blame the Opposition. It is just a fact of the oil price and we have been dependent on oil and gas for so long. You would have heard other speakers speak of that and we intend for the next three or four days here the same discussion with regard to diversification. But the young people of Trinidad and Tobago, we have been working very closely with them and we have been doing a number of programmes throughout the length and breadth.

The issue is—and I am sure a number of Members of Parliament here will tell you that on any given day I could get as much as 1,000 to 2,000 WhatsApp messages from all different people from across the country, from some of your constituents as well for whatever reason it may be, and a lot of it is negativity. For the first time we have had to deal with fake news. There is a section in the newspaper that actually deals with fake news now. When you get something on your phone or on your Internet, you actually have to ask is this real or is this in Trinidad and Tobago. That is the sign of the times that we live in now, Madam Speaker. We have been doing a lot for the young people, but for some reason the media, we have not been having the media coverage that we would have liked and we do not have the budgets that the former Government would have had to splurge on full page ads and so on. We send press releases, we invite the media to come to a number of our youth events and we do not get that coverage.

So I would just touch base. We are seeing the results. However, some of your constituencies as well, we have been seeing the result and we will continue to trudge along and try our best. We hosted our annual Camp Vibe, summer camp, which is throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago. We had over 400 kids learning various life skills and so on, agriculture, arts and craft. We sponsored the first ever Trinidad and Tobago Youth Convention. We have a

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young Senator who is in charge of that, an Independent Senator, and we have been working closely with this organization. This is the second year. Other Ministries came in and got involved this year. At SPEC, I was invited this year and Minister Garcia was there and a number of others as well.

6.25 p.m.

We know that there is an issue with regard to rehabilitation at the prisons and our Minister of National Security from Point Fortin has been working very, very hard with the prison system. So much so he got, in Cabinet, passed this year, 50-something million dollars to do some work at the prisons. I was able and was fortunate to work and go in there with a person that we all know, Mr. Clayton Morris, the former Strike Squad captain, who is doing a fantastic football programme at the prisons right now where we actually have murderers, who would have been at each other's throats, who have a lot of influence on the outside, actually playing and working together and getting the younger kids in the prisons to play the game of sport and we plan to expand that to the Women's Prison. And I am guaranteeing this year that the Ministry of Sport would put aside money—we have already done that to ensure that that programme gets help with regard to equipment.

I have also attended a number of youth programme graduations that we have been hosting throughout the country. We have had plumbing, we have had Latin dancing, decorating, linen and drapery. We have had YTEPP utilising a number of our facilities for classes and so on. So, the youth facilities are being utilised to the max for the first time.

We also signed with the Government of Chile through the Ambassador of Chile a programme called Futsal Mas. The Cabinet Note was passed and we are finalising to get that started before Christmas. And it is a programme that has been going on in Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, in the hotspots where we have former footballers, psychologists, social workers going into these hotspots where sometimes police cannot even go in and work with the young people through sport to teach them with regard to social sports' workshops and lifestyles, and that has been going on for a number of years. And we have just signed with them where they are going to be funding 90 per cent of it and it is going to be here for three to five years. The Member of Parliament for Laventille West and the other Laventille met with the Ambassador and we plan to utilise and have that programme started there, and the plans to spill over to Port of Spain

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North/St. Ann's West and others, and maybe Chaguanas. If it is successful in the first two years, we have no problem spreading it in those areas.

You would have heard my colleague from Moruga talk just now and plead with regard to what is going on in Moruga, and I am pleased to say that one of our plans, in these hard economic times, what we have done is we have—Trinidad and Tobago, per square mile, has the most sporting facilities in the world. In fact, last year, we were the only country to launch and finish so many world-class facilities including the Brian Lara and the aquatic, the racquet, the cycling, without hosting an Olympics or a World Cup. [*Desk thumping*] So what we plan to do is utilize these facilities to the maximum where we are going to be doubling up and using them for youth facilities as well where we are going to give the young people offices at the Hasely Crawford Stadium, at the Aquatic Centre and so on. However, we plan to build the first youth and sport facility at Moruga. That Cabinet Note was passed a few months ago and work—UDECOTT will be building that and I am sure that the Member of Parliament for Moruga/Tableland is very pleased to hear that that will be done this year, [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, not everyone could run, swim, jump. There are a number of young people that are doing great things throughout the world for Trinidad and Tobago and not getting the recognition. There is a young man called Sanjeev Mahadeo who represented Trinidad and Tobago in the Mathematics Olympiad in Brazil. “You all aware of that?” And did quite well. The highest ever Trinidad and Tobago has done. But those things do not make the papers, “we do hear about those things”. Young people are representing us well. Matthew Batson and Siddel Ramkissoon were selected from the entire world and they won an award with the Queen's Commonwealth Young Leaders Award to actually meet the Queen. Two “Trinis”, all paid for by the Commonwealth. We do not hear about those positive things that young people are doing. In-between there, we have programmes at the Persto Praesto and Chatham Youth Development Centres. I was very fortunate last year to attend a graduation where we had over 100 young men going out in the working world. It is a two-year cycle so of the new cycle that has started and we are working with those young people there as well.

The Trinidad Youth Council hosted its Eleventh Annual Family Day this year of which I attended and we supported and we are working very closely with the Tobago Youth Council. And I am very pleased to say as well that the Cabinet has passed, last month, for us to go ahead with a new youth policy. We have not had a new youth policy for the last five years and the problem that we have been

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having, with not only with the youth policy but the sports policy and other policies, is implementation and monitoring of these policies. And this year, we are going to ensure that when these things are kicked off this year and finalised and launched that we are going and ensure that they are implemented for the first time.

Madam Speaker, this year, to talk a little about the finances of the budget, I was allocated \$302 million. Last year, we were allocated \$325 million but we actually got in releases \$243 million, so we had “ah lil” drop off there. But just like the year before when we got \$600 million and a drop to \$325 million, we were able with that drop to have, what most people have said and with the Sports Company and the Ministry calibrating, the most successful year in sport in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Never before has Trinidad and Tobago won so many events in the non-traditional sports. We tend to calibrate success in sport making it to the World Cup or winning medals in the Olympics but there are 50-plus sports that are registered at the Ministry of Sports and over 100 sports that are played in Trinidad and Tobago that we do not recognise, but we tend to always look towards the two major sports, maybe cricket as well. And let me just go through a few of the sports. It is a long list that I have, I will take up my whole time and I apologize to those who I may not call.

And let me congratulate the national award Chaconia Gold winners this year, our men’s relay 4x400 team in the IAAF World Championship that won it in London earlier this year. Also, Jereem Richards won the bronze in the 200 metre at the IAAF. He was also given the national award Chaconia Gold.

This year, as you know, part of my and the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs job is not only about podium, it is about sports tourism, it is about grassroots development. We have also mandated all the NGBs to ensure that they push—once you have females in your sports, to ensure that we uplift the female aspect of your sports and the para side of your sports. If you have para, as part wheelchair, people with disabilities that—a sport that could be played, we want to encourage that.

And not only in sports tourism do we want to host events of a sporting nature, there is also a big market out there, Madam Speaker, in our efforts to assist with the diversification of the economy from oil and gas, sports conferences. Right? Why can we not host a FIFA conference here? Why can we not host an ICC conference here? It does not have to be a T20. Hyatt could be utilized, there are hotel rooms and so on, to have business of the sport and that is something that we

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are targeting and you are going to see a number of that and I think next year we are planning to have the most ever as well with regard to conferences.

But there is also coaching of the coaches, coaching of the umpires, coaching of the referees is another part of sports that we have totally ignored and it is something that I am very pleased to talk to with regard to ASATT, the swimming association, who won the bid for the CCCAN, first of all, hosted, for the first time in the Caribbean, the CCCAN competition and Trinidad and Tobago, for the first time, won the CCCAN which is the biggest aquatic meet in the Western hemisphere. We had 40 countries and 2,000 athletes visiting Trinidad and Tobago.

For the first time, as you know, there are a number of new sports that are coming up. Synchronized swimming and diving is new. For the first time, we had somebody represent us in diving and young Alyssa Ramlakhan won two gold medals in diving; 12 years old, [*Desk thumping*] for the first time in our history. We had the most medals ever. Trinidad and Tobago won the most medals ever in CCCAN. We had the most ever athletes participate, and as I said before, apart from breaking 10 CCCAN records, they did something that was unprecedented. They hosted and piggybacked another conference here and where they coached over 100 coaches, referees and umpires who got FINA certified at the event. So people from different islands came to Trinidad just to get certified in these different events. So again, different angles with regard to sports tourism.

In terms of the Commonwealth, for the first time, we sent a women's beach soccer and men's beach soccer team to the Commonwealth Games in the Bahamas and we won gold. The women won gold for the first time attending and the men won silver. In cricket, the under 14 schools' cricket team won the Secondary Schoolboys Cricket Tournament for the first time in Somerset, England. First time, again, and again, I could go on and on with first times.

I want to congratulate national award winner, Hummingbird winner Akeem Stewart who won two gold medals in javelin and discus, not only in the Olympics but in the Paralympics Games and he also holds the world record in the two. Nyoshia Cain won the bronze medal in the 100 metres for the first time in our history. We have two young men and I know the Member of Parliament for San Juan/Barataria will be interested in this because he is involved in body building and I think he has family members who are in this. We have two young people who are going to get their Pro card in body building. Right. They got first place in the Arnolds in Germany, Mr. Iziah Kanhai won in Las Vegas and he also became

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a pro. First time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, we have two professionals in body building, that they got their cards and they are going on to represent us.

But it is not only the older ones, Madam Speaker, there are young ones as well. We have a nine-year-old, for the first time, Alex Powell won the Epcot Center Go Kart race and qualified for the world finals in Italy. A nine-year-old making papers, front page in Miami and Florida. Nobody heard about him down here. Right. For the first time, we have a grand master who is a female in chess. Young Miss Johnson from St. Joseph Convent. The Carifta women won the water polo under-19 for the first time and it took me a while to “ketch” this young lady’s name so bear with “meh”. Her name is Jenna Ross, won the Ironman in Mexico in the triathlon qualifying for the world championship in South Africa. Her name is Jenna Ross. For the first time, we have somebody representing us in the Ironman in South Africa. The rugby women 10 won the championship in America. We won the most medals in Carebaco which is the badminton tournament that we hosted here, 46 in all. And in other various sports as well. Scrabble, Daniel Henriques came third in the Junior World Championship in England, in Scrabble, the highest ever for a Caribbean player. And I could go on and on, Madam Speaker, but I do not have much time so let me move on.

Of course, not for the first time, we won the CPL. And, Madam Speaker, I must talk on this for a little bit because in 2015, we hosted the CPL finals here for a whopping cost of US \$3.5 million. This team was able to negotiate for the same finals for US \$1 million [*Desk thumping*] saving the country US \$2.5 million to host the finals, Madam Speaker, and we won it at the Brian Lara stadium. So the first major tournament that the Brian Lara Academy has hosted—and I was glad to see a number of you all there at the finals—that we were able to win. We won the Super50 men’s cricket. We won the 23rd Goodwill Swimming Championship in Guyana, and I could go on and on. The volleyball men and women won the CAZOVA. Just this weekend here, we won in Sambo. The schoolboy’s boxing won in Guyana. And there is a number of new sports that are coming up that we are encouraging young people to play. Triathlon has become the fastest growing sport in Trinidad and Tobago along with dragon boat racing. The Member for Arima and myself always go to the dragon boat racing in Chaguaramas and I will come back to dragon boat when I am discussing the trip to China. BMX. I was privileged to be able to attend the first handball game in Trinidad and Tobago. And also, there is a new game called “street tennis” that has taken off in Trinidad as well and up the islands.

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But what we have been doing as well and all this hard work with the athletes, we have been righting a number of wrongs that occurred over the years. Case in point, Jehue Gordon, who also won the Juniors and the IAAF and was promised a house by the last Government, we came in—and I have to thank the Member of Parliament for San Fernando East who was working with me to ensure that Jehue Gordon got his home. [*Desk thumping*] There was a cycling technical director, one of the best in the world from the United States, who was hired by Trinidad and Tobago under the last regime, and I do not want to get into the details, because “ah hear is ah lawsuit” that is going on with regard to his dismissal. We were able to negotiate to get him back here. He just coached Canada and Canada did the best ever in the Olympics, and he is back here in Trinidad, running the cycling velodrome and working with us, Mr. Erin Hartwell, doing a fantastic job.

Madam Speaker, we also, as you know, part of my portfolio, as part of the manifesto for the People’s National Movement, which is now policy, is to work with regard to development at the grassroots level, and I am happy that the Member for Tunapuna, who works very closely with me in that area, was able to work with me. Just imagine, Eddie Hart league has been around for how many years, as much as 100 teams and in 2014, 2015, 2013, they did not get any funding under that Government. Imagine that? We were able to get the league back going for the two, three years. We went to the opening last week. And most importantly, Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara, when he was Minister of Public Utilities, were able to light that field for the young people could recreate and play throughout the night. [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Mr. Antoine for that.

We have also helped “Gally” Cummings with his finishing school. We have started a number of leagues. We have partnered with the private sector. Milo with regard to the Barcelona skills tournament where we have young people going to Barcelona for trials. The primary school track and field event. We hosted the Boston Celtics Avery Bradley Clinic where we had 100 kids getting to train with an NBA player for free for the first time. The southern games, the Milo games and a number of other grassroots competitions and tournaments that we have brought back. The Poor House League in St. James, the infirmary league that we call, we have been working with them and so on. We have been giving out boxing equipment across the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago to all the gyms. And what we have mandated from a number of the NGBs is to start back primary school tournaments and secondary school tournaments and a number of them have started that back at the grassroots level.

Madam Speaker, we have a lot of work to do with regard to the reform and the governance and you would have heard the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Finance, talk about the sports commission which has been a lot of debate going on with regard to that. I have the original Cabinet Note on my desk from 2004 when the Sports Company was formed and it was supposed to be morphed into the sports commission. Of course, the Sports Company went about its way and just never looked back. Right, we are planning to work. The Cabinet will have to decide with regard to finalizing that but this year, we want to put that to rest and have the sports commission started.

One of the things as well that we are looking at, which is outdated, is boxing boards. Across the world, they do not have boxing boards anymore, they are combat sport commissions. There is a number of sports that are more dangerous: sambo, kickboxing, kung fu, karate. There are others that have hand to hand combat. The Boxing Board commission was laid in Parliament in the 1930s. This year we plan to bring it. The AG and us will be working together. Once the Cabinet approves the final move forward that we would be forming a combat sport commission.

We are looking at restructuring operations at the Ministry of Sport. For the first time, we are going to have an image rights Bill. And for the first time, we are going to be having naming rights for our new facilities. Now, you notice we opened all these facilities without the political side of naming it after athletes. That is because that is a thing of the past. We will be looking to get foreign investors. And what we have been doing is working with a number of the international bodies to have them utilize our facilities for world training centres. UCI, which is the cycling world body, has already committed. By December, we hope to sign, where we are going to have as much as 2,000 athletes from the world coming here, and the minimum that I am hearing that they pay is US \$5,000 here for two weeks to utilize our facilities. So that is going to bring in some revenue for us.

Volleyball, we met with the President of volleyball. And in fact, I, as Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, for the first time, met with the most international world presidents for sports. We met—and the Prime Minister and myself met, as you all know, with the FIFA President, Gianni Infantino where we made football a home and we had the sod turning last week at the Ato Boldon. We met with UCI President, Mr. Brian Cookson. We met Carebaco badminton Director for Development for the Pan American region, Mr. German Valdez. For water polo, we met with Mr. Dale Neuberger and so on and so forth. We have met with so

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many Presidents from different world bodies who are interested in coming to Trinidad and Tobago and utilizing our facilities that we are well on our way for utilizing them on an international level.

Madam Speaker, in terms of infrastructural projects, we have done a number of projects last year, starting with the Brian Lara Cricket Academy which was opened early this year, finally after 10 years. We are finalizing the plan with regard to moving forward with the academy where we want to work with UTT and so on, where we are going to have young people, not just playing cricket there but actually going to school and learning as well while they are there. Not just from Trinidad and Tobago, from across the world.

We lighted for the first time, Madam Speaker—just imagine, we have had all these stadia: the Hasely Crawford, the Dwight Yorke, the Ato Boldon, the Mannie Ramjohn and nobody ever thought about lighting the training fields to ease up and utilize and maximize the revenue that you could get. So we have started that process. The Member of Parliament for Laventille West, when he was the Minister of Public Utilities, worked with me with that project to light the Hasely Crawford training field, and now we are getting double the revenue with regard to rental so you could use it in the night. [*Crosstalk*] “It too late.”

Nevertheless, we also resurface the Hasely Crawford training track for the first time. The Member of Parliament for La Horquetta/Talparo, he is very happy that we were able to finish the Phase 5 Pavilion. Morne Diabolo, “we finish that pavilion”. As was mentioned before, the lighting of the Eddie Hart ground. Again, the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, we did Todd’s Road Recreation Ground, we plan to do that ribbon cutting soon. The hockey centre by Tunapuna seat by Eddie Hart Ground, we did a total upgrade. We had some issues getting US to get the turf here but I am hearing that they are finalizing to get that. And of course, for the first time, we are going to have a cleaning machine, not just for the turf but for all the stadium tracks because we are focused on maintaining what we have.

We also did work at the Southern Regional Indoor Pleasantville facility, and as I said, the projects that we plan to complete this year are the Brian Lara Recreation Ground in Santa Cruz by my neighbour in St. Ann’s East. That is another project that has been going on for 10 years. It is part of my job to clean up and we are going to do a ribbon cutting for that within the next few months, and of course, the Diego Martin Recreation Ground which just sat there for 10 years, that is going to be completed this year as well. You would have seen in my draft estimates for my PSIP, the projects that we have down are: the Dwight Yorke Stadium, and this is something that we have done in the past that we are trying to

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rectify where we would build all these mega facilities and we do not maintain it, and now it has to shut down and we have to come and pump all this money to bring it back up. Right, so it is something that we are going to do. Dwight Yorke, as you know, has the sea blast and we want to get that back up for Akeem and those guys to utilize it finally, so we have put some money there for that.

The Member for Laventille West would be happy that we are going to do a pool in Laventille. We had some issues finding the final location for that but we have done that and we plan to move forward this year. I spoke about the Moruga Youth Facility. The Member for Point Fortin would be very pleased that we put aside money as well for the Mahaica Oval. That is a project, again, that started many years ago and was left and it is our job to ensure that taxpayers' money is not left there and we are going to finish and complete that project as well.

Madam Speaker, I keep hearing and for some reason the Members on the other side seem to have a problem with the sport of golf and the irony of it is a number of Members—I know Oropouche East, I know Caroni East and a number of others play the game all the time, so I do not know if they are afraid, I do not—I recommend that you all try it. It is a very, very relaxing game, it is challenging. If you want me to organize, I will set up for you all to get that practice but it is a fantastic sport. And let me tell you this. Trinidad and Tobago—I do not know if you all know of a man called Stephen Ames. We had one of the best players in the world at one time and I will let you know this. We have a young lady, Monifa Sealy, the first Caribbean—if I am not sure but I know for sure Trinidad and Tobago—person, woman to break into the LPGA. She is on the cusp of doing that. Golf has been doing fantastic. In fact, they hosted the 30th youth junior golf tournament here this year. We had almost 20 countries. They came fourth, the highest that they have ever come and they are doing well. So I do not know if because you do not know of the sport, you think it is some stigma with golf but try it. Member for Oropouche East will tell you about it. I do not know if Chaguanas West “does” play it but nevertheless. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: Caroni East too.

Hon. D. Smith: “Caroni East does play it too?”

Hon. Member: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Hon. D. Smith: Nevertheless. Last year, when I came in for the mid-year review, you would have known the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, public admin, passed over the St. Madeleine Golf Course. First time I ever visited. I do

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not know if you all have ever seen it. It is a beautiful facility—“yuh want meh give way?” Yeah, sure.

Mr. Singh: Member, just for your information, the Prime Minister’s golf tournament was started by Mr. Basdeo Panday.

Hon. Member: “A a.” [*Laughter*]

Hon. D. Smith: So in other words, so you all should understand how important golf is but “ah did not know that, some trivia that ah now learn there”. But my point is you all need to visit that golf course in St. Madeleine, it is fantastic. “Ah hear it have caiman in de pool.” [*Crosstalk*] Yeah, the pool has been just—and that is what I am talking about. Just like Dwight Yorke, just like all the facilities, we leave these things down to drop and then have to spend millions of dollars to get it up. If we do not fix it now, next five years, you all will come and say, “why allyuh eh fix the Chaguaramas golf course?” “Is ah damned if you do, damned if yuh do not”, Madam Speaker, and we have to fix it. We are going to fix the St. Madeleine. We are looking at a public/private arrangement. So we are going to look at doing Sevilla with Brechin Castle, I think it is in Couva South’s constituency—[*Crosstalk*] right, so we are working on that as well. So “do not be frighten of golf”, do not put a stigma on golf and who knows, some of the residents from Couva South could probably even utilize the golf course to walk as well when we work out things at the Ato Boldon Stadium.

Madam Speaker, I was privileged this year to be invited by the Government of the People of the Republic of China, and myself and Mr. Jomo Pitt, the councilman from THA, went to a youth conference over there and it was disheartening to see—apparently a team from the other side in 2013 or 2014 went to China as well and signed a MOU. I think the Member for Caroni Central was part of that. Was not you?

Madam Speaker: Member, please direct your contribution.

Hon. D. Smith: Sorry, Madam Speaker. But there is a MOU sitting down there for the past two years under them that was signed with China to do a number of positive things and it was never dealt with. Nevertheless, I was invited to reenergize the process and I am pleased to announce, Madam Speaker, we were able to secure 30 full scholarships to the number one sporting university in the world, Beijing Sports University for Trinidad and Tobago nationals, and we are finalizing that paper work now so we could have young people taking advantage of that facility that we have just put in the place by next year. We are also able to bring in coaches from China. As you know, we are learning synchronize

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swimming and diving for the first time. They are experts in gymnastics, they are experts in table tennis and they are going to be sending down a junior coach and an elite coach for each of these sports where we are going to be working with them.

And for the first time, Madam Speaker, it is something that all the Caribbean islands did. A number of issues that we have been asking and hearing from young people and I am sure you all hear it from your constituencies, is young people not having experience when they go for job interviews. So they may have their qualifications, they may have their degrees and so on but when they go to the interview, they do not have the experience and what they have been asking for is for internships. And we were able to negotiate with them to have trades with regard to internships where they will send their young people to Trinidad and Tobago to learn new things, whether it is oil and gas, culture, cricket, whatever different industries we may have in terms of sport or another industry, and we will be able to send our young people there for six months to learn agriculture, to learn technology, to learn science, to learn sports and so on, and that is going to be started next year. So good news again for the young people of Trinidad and Tobago and everybody's constituents that live in their constituency.

Madam Speaker, one of the things that we are able to do as well is—I spoke about the dragon boat. Of course, you know, dragon boat started in China and as I said, is one of the fastest growing sport. If you all have time, they are having the secondary schools' dragon boat race next weekend in Chaguaramas and you will see how many kids participate. And the Government of China has also invited the winners of those tournaments to attend the world dragon boat festival for free in China next year. So it is going to be an experience for a female school and a male school to travel to China to participate in this event. So it was a very fruitful trip and we hope that we start to bear fruits as soon as possible and we have already started to put things in place.

Madam Speaker, we have hosted a number of consultations throughout the year. The dispute resolution seminar where we want to start by December, and this is something sad to say that we have issues that people are not mature enough to iron out their issues behind closed doors. We see it in sports all the time where people put up in social media—they sit next to each other in boardrooms but they will talk to each other in the media. These things are killing sports with regard to corporate sponsors. Corporate sponsors do not want to put their brands to any sports that may have any arguing or bacchanal to use local parlance. So we want to set up this dispute resolution where if you are having issues in your sports,

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whether it is parents, coaches, athletes, you come to this centre and you talk it out and thrash it out behind closed doors, get it solved and move on. Because we have spoken to sponsors and they have said, clear as day, they are not getting involved with this sport, they are not giving money to that sport because there is too much arguing in the public and we want to stop that. I hope that message comes across.

For the first time since 2002, we have the final draft for a new sports policy. We have travelled the length and breadth. We have had over 20 consultations with athletes, with parents, with teachers, with various Ministers, with various Ministries, technocrats and so on, Tobago, UTT, UWI and so on, and we finally have a new sports policy draft that is going to be handed to Cabinet this month and hopefully either in October, November, December, somewhere, that we could have that new policy launched but again, monitored and implemented properly so we could have the best for our athletes.

In that policy, for the first time in our history—because both sides have played it to an extent, the politics with regard to when athletes do well. We want athletes to know what they are getting before. It is an incentive, not a reward, and this is how it is done in other countries. They do not call it an award, they call it an incentive and we have a fantastic plan that we have consulted with a number of the NGBs and stakeholders that will be part of the policy. We are also looking at the elite athlete funding and the development funding where we have to improve and of course, a new plan for our sports tourism policy that we are going to be implementing as well. We also, as I said before, started the consultation for the new youth policy which we hope to complete within the middle of this year.

One of the things that we did for the first time, Madam Speaker, in this economic hard time, is a lot of the money that we give to the NGBs goes towards rent. They may have to have an office, they pay \$10,000, \$25,000, wherever it may be that they are—just like I said that we are going to utilize the new facilities that we have for youth and sport, we also have started for the first time giving homes to sport. And as you would have seen the big shebang with football but also tennis, table tennis, badminton, swimming, water polo, diving, triathlon, cycling, volleyball, boxing, the NAAA, netball and basketball, we have found homes for where that money now could go towards the athletes' development.

6.55 p.m.

One of things that we did as well, Madam Speaker, is that the Sport Company used to rent a building with all expenses, lights and et cetera, for \$400,000 a month, for the past 10 years. And that was not part of the plan. We came in and

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we moved them and housed them at the aquatic and cycling velodrome where that \$400,000 is now going back into the development of athletes. So we are doing little things, Madam Speaker, throughout our time and tenure to ensure we save money and get the best bang for our buck,

One of the things, Madam Speaker, that we checked, the PS and I checked is that between our phone bill and our electricity bill at the Ministry and the Sport Company and the other facilities, we were able to save almost a million dollars when you compare it to the two years before we came into Government to the first two years that we have had, because we have a policy where we are telling all our staff to take off all the lights when they are leaving the building and to email rather than make phone calls.

We are looking at, even now, with regard to our drivers, when they have to deliver things, we want to cut down on that, paperless and so on. And I am sure the other Members and the Ministers here are doing the same to try and cut cost at their Ministry. So these are the little things that we are doing, Madam Speaker, with regard to ensuring that we are cost effective and get the best bang for our buck.

Madam Speaker, I cannot stand here and not talk to my constituents in Diego Martin Central. We have been doing a number of infrastructural projects in Diego Martin. Let me first of all thank the Member for San Fernando East, the Minister of Housing who, after almost 10/15 years with Victoria Keys, finally opened Victoria Keys [*Desk thumping*] and we were able to give—and all MPs know that is our number one request with regard to homes—and he was able to open that up in Diego Martin Central.

He has also, in his capacity, opened Chaconia Crescent, which we were able to house a number of young people as well. That sat down there for 10 years as well. And also View Fort, which is on the border for the Member of Parliament for Port of Spain South and myself, because we share Fort George. I know she is trying to claim it but we share that border. Right. I am very pleased and I know she will be very pleased to thank the Member of Parliament, because we have three towers that sat there for almost 10/15 years. Member, how long it sat there? And again, this is what we do. We come in there and it is very difficult to start a project that was stopped for so long and start it over, and I want to give kudos to the Member of Parliament for San Fernando East for alleviating that. [*Desk thumping*]

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Madam Speaker, the same ground that the Member for Couva North was talking about, the Diego Martin Recreation Ground, that is going to be the hub for Diego Martin for Sport, for Bagatelle, for Patna, for Diamond Vale, for River Estate, for Blue Basin, they are going to utilize that.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, finally for so many years, we are going to have a ribbon cutting, well I know it is completed, the Cocorite Fishing Bay. He completed the dock that is there now, and they have set it up and paved it nice for the fishermen, and so on. We are going to do a ribbon cutting for that for the people of Cocorite.

The Minister of Works and Transport, as you see in his PSIP, he is going to do the walkover in Four Roads, Madam Speaker, with the new highway there. The Member of Parliament for St. Joseph has put in his PSIP for a health centre in Diamond Vale. He did the soil testing and I know they are going out for tender soon. I want to thank him for that. So, soon we are going to have a health centre in Diego Martin Central.

The Member of Parliament for Laventille West, in his former capacity as Minister of Public Utilities, in St. Lucien Road in Diego Martin Central, he did a T&TEC substation this year, which is giving the constituency a better flow of electricity “and current” without—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member, your original 45 minutes are up. You are entitled to 10 more minutes if you intend to avail yourself of it. Please proceed.

Hon. D. Smith: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I would not be long. The Diego Martin River, I want to thank the Minister of Works and Transport. I remember when the Member for Chaguanas West was the Minister of water resources, some Ministry they had made, I was begging him to come and assist us with regard to that. We are finally getting the Diego Martin River worked on. [*Desk thumping*] Notice we had heavy rain, the water would have reached to the top but we did not have any major flooding in Diego Martin. Thank God.

I want to thank the Minister, the Senator of Local Government for his national clean-up campaign. Diego Martin was the first, and I will let you know this, the Minister of Health would tell you, just based on that clean-up we have had a reduction in chikungunya, dengue and other diseases because of that clean-up, Madam Speaker. So I want to thank him for that. [*Desk thumping*]

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Madam Speaker, this year, nine months ago, we won the Local Government Election. Diego Martin won it again. I want to thank the Chairman Susan Hong, and the three councillors from Diego Martin Central, Symon de Nobriga, Keron Seebaran and Marcia from Cocorite, who have been working very hard with me to ensure that the grassroots are cleaning and paving, and they are doing a number of work with regard to garbage collection, the box drains and the paving in all the districts in Diego Martin Central.

We were able to host a number of events with the young people. We hosted two family days in a row, two years in a row. We had a Diego Martin queen show for the first time, Diego Martin Got Talent. We had a toy drive. We did a summer and Easter camp, a Mother's Day lunch, a Father's Day cricket. So we have been working with the people of Diego Martin Central and I want to thank them for the continued support and again the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs continue to work with all the MPs, because as you know, once you are called, on both sides, we try to assist as much. It is Trinidad and Tobago, it is not just about the PNM side and the UNC side. We continue to work with everybody, for the young people, for the youths, for the athletes and I think that 2018 is going to be the best year ever for sport in Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. As I begin my contribution to this debate, I would like first of all to express my thanks and gratitude to the Minister of Finance for an excellent presentation. [*Desk thumping*] My appreciation also goes out to the Minister of Planning and Development who played no small role in ensuring that we have the type of budget that we are all proud of. [*Desk thumping*]

I would like to thank also my staff, both at the Ministry of Education and at my constituency office, for giving me the type of support that is necessary to allow me to stand today to give my budget contribution. [*Desk thumping*]

I would also like to show my appreciation to my fellow Minister of Education, the Member for Moruga/Tableland, for an excellent contribution this afternoon. [*Desk thumping*] And, of course the Minister who just came before me, the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, for an outstanding contribution. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, I would like to focus my contribution on value for money, and in our efforts at ensuring that the allocation that we have received is well used and well spent, in an effort to provide the quality of education that this Ministry and this new administration has now become proud of.

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It is important for us, Madam Speaker, to ensure that we keep foremost in our minds the mandate of this Government and of the Ministry of Education, and that is to provide quality education, to ensure that there is inclusion so that no one is left behind and to ensure that everyone has the opportunity or access to this quality education that we are determined to provide.

Madam Speaker, starting from the foundation, the very foundation that is, the ECCE centres, we have endeavoured to look at the curriculum that is now being offered to ensure that what is being taught to our students at the ECCE centres is in line with programmes that have been approved by the Ministry of Education. Towards this end, Madam Speaker, we have reformed the entire ECCE sector and that report is now before Cabinet and this House. In the not-too-distant future, we would be afforded a copy of that report.

At the primary level, Madam Speaker, we have put in place a number of programmes that will promote literacy and numeracy so that when a student leaves the primary school, that student will be efficient in these two major areas.

It is really very sad, in some instances, when we see students leaving the primary school after seven years of existence in the primary school not being able to read or write or do his or her numbers properly, and we are determined to correct this. And towards this end, we have put things in place from level one in the infant department right on to Standard 5, so that our students will be well equipped and they would be able to benefit from what is being taught. [*Desk thumping*]

Towards this end, we have embarked on a programme of physical supervision and this programme is designed to improve the levels of teaching and learning in our schools. It has been organized by the curriculum development division of the Ministry of Education and officers from the schools will be visiting every school to ensure that the curriculum is implemented in accordance with the directives of the Ministry of Education and our curriculum development department. We are at pains to show that it is not meant to be punitive but simply to be developmental. In other words, it is designed to assist our teachers as they implement the curriculum in the primary school and to a large extent in the secondary school. So, as much assistance as possible will be given to our teachers so that they will be able, truly, to provide the type of assistance to our students.

Side by side with clinical supervision, Madam Speaker, is another initiative that is referred to as the Student Monitoring System. My fellow Minister and the representative for Moruga/Tableland made mention of this and this will allow our

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teachers to track the performance and the progress of our students and also to identify areas of strength and weaknesses so that the teaching could be delivered in such a way that our students will benefit.

We have had to put a stop to national test because we found that that was not working in accordance with what was desired. And this system of clinical supervision, it is hoped, will replace the national test, so that our students will continue to have the opportunity of being monitored from the cradle right on, so that they, with the requisite guidance from our teachers, would be able to perform to the best of their ability.

Madam Speaker, I come to the SEA exam. This year, we have had a number of concerns expressed when the SEA exam results were announced. Every year, we find that our students, some of them do well and in fact this year we found that a large number of our students did exceedingly well. However, in our estimation, there were far too many students who did not perform to our satisfaction. In other words, those were the students who scored less than 30 per cent in the exam.

Traditionally, Madam Speaker, these students were left to wander, without any efforts being made to assist them, and we have found that the time has come when we must correct this. As a result, we have embarked on an initiative that will assist these students. We have categorized these students into two major areas. One is students who are above the age of 13 years and students who are below the age of 13 years; those students who perform less than 30 per cent and who are above the age of 13 years, we have allowed them to move on to secondary schools. However, at the secondary schools, we have put in place certain measures to assist them.

First of all, we have identified a number of schools that will admit those students so that those students will be in clusters. Teachers have been adequately trained and prepared to deal with these students so that they can give them the necessary support and encouragement.

Towards this end also, Madam Speaker, we have engaged the support of our Student Support Services Division, which will be able to provide the necessary assistance in diagnosing some of the shortfalls that some of these students might be experiencing.

The students who are under the age of 13, we have allowed them to repeat the Standard 5 class, and again, through the Student Monitoring Programme, and through other measures, including clinical supervision, including regular visits to the schools by our school supervisors and our curriculum officers, we want to

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ensure that they are able to deal with the requirements of the curriculum, so that when they write the exam, we will see a marked improvement in their performance.

All of these initiatives that we are putting in place will be supported by a system of school-based management. This is a system whereby we are ensuring that the governance of the school is put in the hands of the school community. In other words, Madam Speaker, we will be working closely with our principals, our vice-principals, our heads of departments, our school supervisors, our curriculum officers, all those actors in the education system, to ensure that governance of the school is of the highest standard.

We will be lending our hands to our stakeholders so that they will also assist in taking responsibility for the success of the schools, working together with the school community. Each school is required to have a school-based management team, again which will be closely monitored by our supervisors, so that members of that team would be able to assist the principal and the school administration in the execution of their duties. They will also have the authority and the responsibility to reduce inappropriate behaviour in our schools. And I will come to that in a little while. But this system of school-based management is really designed to improve both learning and teaching in our schools, so that both our teachers and our students would be able to benefit. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, an innovation that we have embarked upon, within recent times, is referred to as Penmanship with a Purpose: Handwriting matters right from the start. This initiative, really, is to improve and advance numeracy and literacy in our schools. It is to refocus on the handwriting skills. It is designed to engage our students in the discipline of handwriting.

Madam Speaker, some years ago one could have easily identified or identify a student from a particular school because of the handwriting of that student. Many of our schools seem to have fallen by the wayside, with respect to handwriting. In fact, Madam Speaker, when reports come to me, one way or the other, where students have been asked to write a report on any incident, sometimes I am appalled at the quality and the level of their handwriting. It is, in many cases, difficult to read or decipher. This Ministry has taken a decision to correct that, because it is our intention to see that every child who leaves primary school is able to write in such a way that he would be able to communicate effectively, so that persons would be able to understand what is being written.

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Madam Speaker, it has been shown that there is a connection between how a person thinks and how a person performs, by how a person writes. In fact, studies have shown that there is that connection where the brain operates, and that is exemplified and shown in the way a student writes. It is therefore believed that once we encourage our students to improve their handwriting skills, it will assist tremendously in the way they think and in the way they do things. And most importantly, it will allow them to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. So this is an area, Madam Speaker, that we are focusing on.

Madam Speaker, an initiative of which all of us at the Ministry of Education are very proud of is the Morvant/Laventille Initiative. In fact, it is the brainchild of the Prime Minister. And we have had a formal launch of this programme last year. We have had a school rally involving all the students in those schools that we have identified, and those activities were very successful.

Madam Speaker, 25 schools in the Laventille area have been identified, 20 primary schools and five secondary schools, and this programme has been based on four important planks. First of all, we are looking at advancing numeracy and literacy, in other words, curriculum development, where students in those schools are concerned. Secondly, we are looking at parental involvement. The third plank is promoting discipline, and the fourth plank is infrastructure and aesthetics.

In terms of literacy and numeracy, screening exercises have been conducted in all of the primary schools, all of the 20 primary schools in the Laventille/Morvant area. Teachers were trained. Teachers in that area have been trained to conduct these exercises, and as a result we have already seen an improvement in numeracy and literacy among those students because teachers having been brought, or the attention having been brought to the teachers of the deficiencies of those students, they are now able to assist the students in a way that they were not able to assist before.

It is important, Madam Speaker, for all of us in the system of education to recognize that we cannot do it alone. We need the active involvement of our stakeholders. An important stakeholder in our delivery of education must be the parents. And, therefore, parenting in education has been one of the important areas of this Morvant/Laventille Initiative. A number of workshops have been held under the direction of our Student Support Services Division and our parents have been working well in establishing productive partnerships between the home and the school. Again, this has proven to be very effective and very successful.

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We have now parents eager and anxious to come to the school to talk to the teachers, to find out more about their students. We find our parents are now eager and anxious to attend meetings of PTAs. In fact, we have encouraged our parents to join the PTAs in the school, whether it is a Parent Teacher Association or whether you call it a parent support group, whatever name it is called, we are encouraging our parents to effectively join hands with the school community, in particular the teachers and the principal, in ensuring that whatever is done in the interest of the child, those initiatives will have their support and their commitment. [*Desk thumping*].

Madam Speaker, this is another area that I have been talking about for quite some time, and that is discipline and violence. In spite of the fact, Madam Speaker, that we have been hearing a lot about crime and undesirable behaviour in the Laventille/Morvant district, we have found that because of this initiative there is a lessening in the areas of indiscipline and violence in our schools.

Madam Speaker, I am not saying this simply because I want it to sound good. I am basing this on evidence that we have been able to garner from reports from our school supervisors. Our school supervisors who have responsibility for schools in the Laventille/Morvant district, have been reporting to us that there has been a marked reduction in the levels of indiscipline and violence in our schools. [*Desk thumping*]

In fact, Madam Speaker, the entire country would know that in that area we have not seen any school or any parent protesting outside the schools. We have been having the active support of the parents and the teachers. There are problems. We admit that there are problems, but we have come together in solving the problems or in finding solutions to these problems. And, therefore, the reduction of violence and indiscipline in our schools has been marked.

And finally, the fourth pillar on which this initiative is based is infrastructure and aesthetics. It is our view and our hope that every school must have an environment that is conducive to learning and teaching. It is our belief that the working conditions of the teacher are the learning conditions of the child, and we have been doing everything that is possible to ensure that the physical conditions under which our teachers operate, and our students learn, are of a standard that will allow teaching and learning to be accomplished in a most effective manner.

We have embarked on a number of projects. We have had work done, in terms of plumbing, masonry, electricity. We have furnished those schools with furniture that, time gone by, they did not have and everything is working well except, and I

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must say except, that we have some concerns and some challenges with respect to the contractors and their ability to perform their duties,

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Many of the contractors have complained that because of the adults who sometimes form themselves into undesirable gangs, they are demanding certain stipends from the contractors. I have spoken to the Minister of National Security, who has given me the assurance that the Ministry of National Security is going to work hand in hand with the Ministry of Education at ensuring that the contractors receive the adequate protection when they go out to do the jobs. [*Desk thumping*] I want to thank the Minister of National Security for the support that he has pledged in this exercise.

I now turn to inclusive education. Madam Speaker, I spoke just now of the fact that no child must be left behind, regardless of the challenges that child might be facing. It is our view that every child has the ability to learn, albeit some students learn at a faster rate than others, or conversely some students take a longer time to grasp what is being taught. But, more than that, there are some students in our school system who suffer certain disabilities. We are pledged to assist these students.

We have been working, again, hand in hand with the Student Support Services Division and other stakeholders at ensuring that there is adequate support and assistance for these students who suffer certain challenges. Towards this end, we will be appointing 68 student aides, where persons will be able to sit in the classrooms with those children and provide the necessary support for those children. [*Desk thumping*]

In addition to this, Madam Speaker, this Government and this Ministry of Education have invested and supported 14 private special schools, who are doing yeoman services for children who are physically or emotionally or psychologically challenged. We have been giving them the necessary support both financially and our technical persons have been visiting these centres or these schools so that the information that is so necessary to assist them, our children, in dealing with the challenges that they now face; those children are now benefiting from what we have to offer. Fourteen of these special schools are now being funded to a large extent by the Ministry of Education. We hope to have an even closer relationship with these schools because it is our view that our special needs children are children also, and therefore they need the support that we will give to any other child.

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We are also strengthening our Student Support Services Division so that we will have more persons who are qualified and trained to assist in this area. Recently, we have put out advertisements online for the recruitment of a number of specialists in these areas and this is simply to assist those children who are special needs children.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to GATE. We have heard a lot about GATE but still it is my view that we can never stop talking about the success that this Government has been able to achieve where GATE is concerned.

Just a year or two ago, we were bombarded with reports from the national community, from our teachers, from our parents, from students themselves, about the massive wastage that occurred with respect to this GATE programme. We have had students migrating from one programme to the other. But most importantly, Madam Speaker, and I think I need to make this point again. Research has shown that the persons who were the beneficiary of GATE, or of GATE funding, were those persons in the main who could have afforded it. The majority of persons who accessed GATE funding came from middle to higher income groups and therefore they are the ones who are in a better position to deal or to pay for their tertiary education than those persons from the lower income group. And because of this, Madam Speaker, we have instituted and implemented means testing.

I have been told by the officers in charge of that at the Ministry of Education that this system is working well, in spite of what people have to say. Trinidad and Tobago is the only English-speaking country in the Caribbean that offers free tertiary education. There was a time when Barbados did that, but because of the economic position, Barbados had to discontinue it. But there are some who are bent on criticizing this Government for the steps that we have taken to ensure that we get value for money. We have been able to streamline now GATE operations and I can safely say that GATE is now operating in accordance with what was intended previously, and that is, to ensure that every child who is so qualified is able to access tertiary education.

We will continue to monitor and evaluate this system, and if it is necessary for us to make further adjustments to this programme, we will make those adjustments. But for the time being we will be monitoring closely the means testing that we have put into place to ensure that no child is disadvantaged where this is concerned.

Madam Speaker, I turn to technical vocational education and training. There was a time in this country—and I am sure it was no different among other

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territories in the Caribbean—where people would turn their noses down on technical vocational education. In fact, it was normal and customary for a parent to tell a child, you cannot learn in school go and learn a trade. That time has passed. This Government and this Ministry of Education have been putting things in place to ensure first of all that technical vocational education assumes its rightful place and I know what I am talking about because I was involved with technical vocational education for 10 years at a secondary school. [*Desk thumping*] I will go no further. [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker, we have a number of institutions that are engaged in the provision of quality technical vocational teaching and training. For example, we have MIC IT, we have the NESC, we have YTEPP, we have COSTAATT, we have UTT and also we have the University of the West Indies. Madam Speaker, time does not permit me to elaborate, but let me state or let me point out just two of the institutions that have doing yeoman service in the areas of technical vocational education. MIC IT for example, they have in place a number of programmes, for example, they have programmes in agriculture, in solar energy, in mechatronics, the master craftsman programmes, in solar photovoltaic, in the installation of these apparatus and the repair of them, and also in music and the playing of the steel pan. Again, as I meet with the chairman and vice-chairman of MIC IT on a regular basis, I am told of the success of all these programmes. A number of our students have been able to benefit from these programmes and they are doing very well.

Madam Speaker, in terms of COSTAATT: COSTAATT has been at the forefront of a number of initiatives, in particular, initiatives that support the health sector, for example, COSTAATT has prepared approximately 700 nursing graduates. They have outfitted and opened a dental training centre in Diego Martin and they are doing a lot of work in many areas of technical vocational studies.

Madam Speaker, let me talk a little bit about school feeding: The National Schools Dietary Services Limited continues to provide meals to our students in spite of what our naysayers might be saying. I have heard members on the opposite side say that we have stopped the School Feeding Programme; that is nothing short an untruth. From the beginning of this term—in other words, from the first day of this term, the 4th of September—the School Feeding Programme kicked in. Our students are now the beneficiaries of breakfast meals and lunches. Madam Speaker, on a daily basis 58,000 breakfast meals are served to deserving students, and 88,000 lunches are also served.

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Madam Speaker, efforts have been made to ensure that the menu that has been derived and has been implemented, that menu has been adjusted to include more local school products that will promote healthier meal options. [*Interruption*] Yes, local produce. [*Desk thumping*] This company is now serving 100 per cent fruit juices and water that will promote healthy eating habits among our students, and I must congratulate our Minister of Health [*Desk thumping*] for being in the forefront in ensuring that our students are served healthy meals and by ensuring that the Ministry of Health under his leadership has given the mandate that there should be no sugary beverages served in our schools.

Madam Speaker, with respect to school repairs and construction: of course there are many challenges, we know that, but we continue to let our population know that we have been able to achieve tremendous successes where this is concerned. For the sixth consecutive time, when school reopened after a period of vacation, all schools were able to open their doors to receive our children—[*Desk thumping*]
—regardless of what persons on the opposite side will say. We understand and we accept the fact that a large number of our schools are aged, some of them are over 50 years old, and as a result they will require constant attention. And as a result, you will find occasionally some schools have to be closed for a day or two because of unforeseen circumstances.

Madam Speaker, just let me share with you, there are two areas that we have very little control over, and that is sewer and plumbing. And simply because those reside below the surface and therefore when a school has to be closed because of problems with sewer, it is not our fault because in many cases, these are things that we have not been able to identify. The same goes with plumbing; we have had instances where some of our schools have had to close for a day or two because of burst pipelines that are buried underground; we were not able to detect that before. But our department, our EFPPD Department together with EFCL have been doing yeoman service at ensuring that all our schools are able to house our students, so that they can benefit from the type of education that we are determined to offer. It is very important that we make our schools available to our students—let me pause for a drink of water, Madam. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Hon. A. Garcia: Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, during the contribution of my good friend from Fyzabad, he had asked for some information with respect to two schools: the Siparia Union Presbyterian School and the Debe Avenue ECCE Centre. I am happy to be in a position to respond to his request, and to let him know that we are doing everything possible to ensure first of all, that

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the students of Siparia Union Presbyterian School will be able to resume their classes as soon as possible. Madam Speaker, it is known that sometime this week, I cannot remember the exact day, that school suffered a fire that destroyed one of its buildings. We are still awaiting a report from the Fire Services Department to ascertain the reason for the fire. We do not know at this stage; however, it has been decided that that section of the school that has been burnt will be demolished, and as soon as that exercise has been completed, we are going to reconnect the electricity supply to other buildings, so that the students will be able to resume classes. In the meanwhile, we are looking at places where we can house those students so that they will not be left untaught for an extended period of time.

In terms of the Debe Avenue ECCE Centre, Madam Speaker, as was admitted by the Member for Fyzabad, that school, that centre, is about 60 per cent complete. Because of our financial considerations and constraints, we are not able to include the construction, or the resumption of construction at this time, simply because we have identified a number of schools that are 90 per cent completed, and with the resources that we have, we would want to apply those resources to ensure that those schools are completed. So I want simply to ask my friend from Fyzabad to just bear with us; perhaps in the next financial year we will make sure that that ECCE centre is completed.

Madam Speaker, I now come to ICT. This Government and this Ministry is committed to improving ICT infrastructure in all our schools—in all our schools—and towards this end we have made positive strides and we are very happy to say this. With respect to the provision of laptops, and I am sure Members on this side will be eager to ask the question about laptops: What is the position with laptops? We are well on our way, Madam Speaker, to have laptops distributed to our students by now, by this time.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Arima, your original 45 minutes are now spent; you are entitled to 10 more minutes if you wish to proceed. Please proceed.

Hon. A. Garcia: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. There was an error at the Central Tenders Board during the tendering process which has caused the project to be paused. The issue will soon about rectified and as soon as that issue has been rectified, we will be in a position to have the laptops distributed to our schools, right?—to our schools.

Madam Speaker, I come to the Education Tower. As you know, it was last year August that we moved into our Education Tower on St. Vincent Street. This has had positive results in our efforts at delivering a quality education that we are

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now very proud of. Madam Speaker, this allowed us, this move allowed us to amalgamate all our services in one location. Previous to this we had several offices strewn all over the place; now with all those offices under one building, under one roof, we are able to monitor more closely the operations of these units and these departments. In addition to that, Madam Speaker, we now house the Student Support Services Division, we now house NIHERST, we now house UNESCO and this has allowed us to foster a harmonious and inclusive relationship among members of all staffs. It has given us the opportunity to interact more frequently with those we serve.

Madam Speaker, because of limited time let me turn my attention to my constituency, Arima, of which I am very proud to be the Member of Parliament and to serve. [*Desk thumping*] With respect to our First Peoples, Madam Speaker, you will recognize that with the support of the Minister of Community Development and of course with this Minister we have been able to lobby Cabinet to ensure that those First Peoples, that group is recognized publically and next week Friday, [*Desk thumping*] they will be enjoying, or the country will be enjoying a national holiday in recognition of the contribution of our First Peoples. I want to thank our Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts for the assistance that she has given in this area. Thank you very much, Madam Minister.

There are a number of community-related projects that we have embarked upon. Madam Speaker, I work very closely with the Arima Borough Council, I have an advantage being a councillor at that very council for five years, and we have established a very good and cordial working relationship; we meet once monthly and because of that relationship we have been able to ensure that a number of amenities have been provided for the people of Arima. Roads have been improved, street lighting has been improved, there is a marked improvement in our drainage and recently the Minister of Works accompanied us in his visit to a number of areas in Arima, where certain infrastructural needs were identified and towards this end we have had a road that has been macadamized for a number of years, the Maturita Extension Road, and that road is now on its way to being refurbished. [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker, I understand the deficiency of certain Members on the other side in not understanding the meaning of the word I have just used. Yes, it reminds me of a story that I was told that there was a gentlemen who was referred to a Gongolailai, [*Laughter*] and that description is really apt for some of those on this side. [*Crosstalk*]

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Madam Speaker: Order.

Hon. A. Garcia: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thanks very much for your protection. [*Laughter*] Madam Speaker, there are four areas of work that are being done of which I, as the representative for Arima, am very proud—the Arima hospital, we heard the Minister spoke about that in his presentation, the topping-off exercise was done a few weeks ago and again I want to thank the Minister of Health. You see, this Government follows what we refer to as the one-government approach, [*Desk thumping*] so you would understand, Madam Speaker, that we work closely with our Cabinet colleagues and the Ministers who have responsibility for different areas and portfolios, and this is why we have been able to accomplish so much, so I want to thank, again, the Minister Health.

The Arima Community Centre, I have been given the assurance by the Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts that the sod will be turned for the construction of that centre very shortly and I want to thank her again for that.

Holy Cross College and the Arima Central Secondary School are two educational institutions that will benefit from improvement so that students will be able to access sixth-form classes in many areas including the areas of science and technology. I want to thank the Minister of Planning and Development for that, [*Desk thumping*] but I also wish to thank myself as [*Laughter*] as being the MP for the area.

Madam Speaker: Members, I know it is late in the day and I am happy that you are still in very high spirits, but I would like us to remember where we are.

Hon. A. Garcia: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. My fellow Minister in the Ministry of Education and I have been able to enjoy a beautiful relationship; we work extremely well, we visit schools together, and every district in Trinidad and in Tobago, we have been able to visit schools in those areas. In fact, very shortly we will be journeying to Tobago, so that we can meet with the Tobago House of Assembly and talk about our initiatives in the area of education,

7.55 p.m.

Madam Speaker, with respect to our SEA exam, we have been able to take some decisive decisions where this is concerned. The first one was to remove that yoke that was on the shoulders of our students, and that was the Continuous Assessment Programme. We got complaints from parents, teachers, students and

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the general community. We have recently decided that effective 2019, the date of the SEA will revert to the last week of the second term of the academic year.

Madam Speaker, I think it is important for me to pronounce on this simply because I saw a media release signed by the President of the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association and the President of the National Parent Teachers Association condemning, condemning this decision. I want to make it clear—
[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your speaking time is now spent. Leader of the House. [*Crosstalk and laughter*] What I would expect is that next week we would all have such energy at 11.00 p.m.. Leader of the House.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, thank you very much. Madam Speaker, before I move the adjournment, I would like to ask the Opposition when we will be getting the schedule for the Finance Committee, please.

Mr. Lee: In about two hours.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: About two hours? Thank you kindly. [*Crosstalk*] Not efficient at all. We should have gotten it already.

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the House do now adjourn to Monday, the 9th day of October at 10.00 a.m.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 7.57 p.m.