

Condolence

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

CONDOLENCE

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I wish to bring to your notice the passing of a former Member of this House, Mr. Francis Prevatt, who served in this House as the Member for Port of Spain North/East from 1966—1971.

Mr. Prevatt had also served as a Senator for the period 1971—1976 and I think it is fitting that the House should take note of his passing. Under the circumstances, I ask hon. Members to stand for one minute's silence in recognition of this.

Hon. Members, on your behalf, I ask the Clerk of the House to send the usual letter of condolence to the family of the deceased.

Thank you.

The House stood.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, there are questions for oral answers on today's Order Paper. I understand that there is agreement on both sides of the House that these questions be deferred and that we devote time to the budget debate. Therefore, questions Nos. 1—6 will be deferred for one week.

The following questions stood on the Order Paper in the name of Dr. Keith Rowley (Diego Martin West):

Carenage Community Centre

1. (a) Is the Minister of Community Development, Culture and Women's Affairs aware that the Carenage Community Centre was constructed in 1995?
- (b) Could the Minister indicate the date on which the contractor handed over the facility to the Government?

- (c) Could the Minister further indicate whether the Carenage Community Centre will ever be made available for use by the Carenage community and, if so, when and under what conditions?

Overseas Travel

2. Could the Prime Minister state the destination and the expenses incurred in official overseas travel during the period November 6, 1995 to November 20, 1996 by:
- (a) Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries;
 - (b) Persons accompanying Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries.

Carenage Government Primary School

3. (a) Is the Minister of Works and Transport aware that the construction of the Carenage Government Primary School formed part of the development Programme as at the last quarter of 1995?
- (b) Could the Minister indicate the exact nature of the work which has been done on this project in 1996?
- (c) Could the Minister indicate how long it will take to have the school completed?

Questions, by leave, deferred.

The following questions stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. Fitzgerald Hinds (Laventille East/Morvant):

Common Entrance Examination (1996)

4. (a) Could the Minister of Education indicate whether any investigation was ever carried out into the allegations of massive corruption in the 1996 Common Entrance Examinations?
- (b) If the answer to (a) is in the affirmative, could the Minister indicate when this investigation was carried out and by whom?
- (c) Could the Minister also indicate the full findings of the said investigations?

In-service Training Courses (Teachers)

5. Has the Government discontinued the practice of releasing teachers for the purpose of pursuing in-service training courses with a view to improving themselves and thereby enabling them to make a better contribution as teachers?

Questions, by leave, deferred.

WRITTEN ANSWER TO QUESTION

Common Entrance Examination (1992—1995)

6. *The following question stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. Fitzgerald Hinds (Laventille East/Morvant):*

Could the Minister of Education indicate the performance in respect of the first 100 places in the Common Entrance Examination in terms of the various educational districts in Trinidad and Tobago for the years 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995?

Question, by leave, deferred.

**APPROPRIATION BILL
(BUDGET)**

[SECOND DAY]

Order for resuming adjourned debate on question [December 12, 1996]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Mr. Patrick Manning (*San Fernando East*): Mr. Speaker, this 1997 Budget presentation by the hon. Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism is a deceptive and dangerous one. While the Minister sought to convey the impression that his Government is a caring one, the reality of the situation is that the budget hits virtually every category of citizen; from the old age pensioner to the taxi driver, from the average consumer to the civil servant, from the teacher to the unemployed person, from the home-owner to the credit union member and from pharmacy owners to non-governmental organizations. The real tragedy is that those citizens who are at the bottom of the economic ladder and, therefore, who are most in need of the benevolence of the state are going to be hardest hit by this budget.

It is dangerous because it contains measures that signal a return to a system of taxation which is known to only have limited success in a protected economy. Moreover, it is totally irrelevant to an economy which is liberalized and is seeking to compete with the most efficient producers the world over, as we in Trinidad and Tobago are now seeking to do. Furthermore, the Government has not addressed the most important issues of the present economic environment which are exchange rate instability and poverty in a decaying social environment. It is apparent that this budget is meant to satisfy the political investors and friends of the ruling party.

Last year, we described the budget as one of “funny money.” This year the budget is best described as a “mobster’s charter” so it is from “funny money” to a “mobster’s charter”.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Mr. Speaker, in my response to the 1996 Budget presentation, I questioned the integrity of the revenue estimates. Categorically, I stated that these estimates were off by more than \$750 million. The budget documents provided demonstrate, quite clearly, how corrupt we were. The Minister's estimates on VAT were off by \$300 million—over-estimated VAT receipts by \$300 million—\$121 million on tax and international trade, \$112 million on repayment of past lending and \$435.5 million on his capital revenue estimates inclusive of extraordinary revenue.

10.10 a.m.

Trinidad and Tobago was saved in 1996, not by the fiscal wisdom of the Minister of Finance, but by the fortuitous increase in the price of oil which in the Minister's words, 'contributed an estimated \$100 million in windfall oil revenues to us in 1996'. Even with this, Mr. Speaker, the Government saw it fit to pick up expenditure by \$400 million.

Mr. Speaker while on this point, I wish to remind hon. Members that in 1990, we chastised the then Government for not taking from the oil companies, the country's fair share of the windfall profits that accrued as a result of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. When we came to office, one of the first actions we took in 1992, was to address the petroleum tax structure to stimulate activity in the exploration and production sector; to slow the rate of the decline of the country's oil production; and hopefully to reverse it. We also put into the new tax structure, a mechanism that ensures that the State will receive its fair share of any windfall profits arising as a result of any sudden and steep increase in the price of oil.

I am pleased to report to the national community that the Minister of Finance can boast of so much excess oil revenues in 1996, only because of the actions the PNM took in 1992. Foresight has been a feature of the operations of successive PNM administrations.

Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the national community, I thank Almighty God for smiling on us and saving us from a most difficult situation in 1996. We cannot understand on what basis the Minister now boasts of a surplus of \$523 million. The fact that the surplus is merely \$523million, indicates the Minister's failure at fiscal estimations. Simple arithmetic suggests that other things being equal, a \$1000 million fall in windfall revenue plus a \$400 million expenditure reduction, should have increased the fiscal surplus by \$1400 million. Thus if the targeted fiscal surplus were \$284 million, the revised surplus should be \$1,684 million, and not \$523 million as stated by the Minister.

Mr. Speaker, incidentally, if one uses the draft estimates, the surplus is only \$238 million, and so again there is a discrepancy between the *Draft Estimates* and the *Review of the Economy*. We have to wait to find out how the Minister will explain it. The reality is, that were it not for this oil windfall revenue of \$1000 million, there would have been a budget deficit of \$475 million in 1996 and this is after a cut in the planned expenditure of \$400 million.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance is warned that the country will not tolerate anymore funny figures from him. He is warned. He must get his sums right before coming to this Parliament or if he prefers, we can arrange a place for him in the Pleasantville Junior Secondary School where those whom his Prime Minister sees as criminals, would be only too pleased to apply a course of remedial arithmetic so that they can correct his problem in time for next year. That is, if he is still with us.

We also said that the effect of the Minister's first budget, was to compromise the expected growth in the economy, and so it has. While the expectation was for a growth rate of 4.5 per cent, it is now estimated that growth has slowed to 3.1 per cent for 1996. We said that the Minister's budget would not have engendered investors' confidence nor provide for the continuation of the exchange rate stability; and again we were right.

This Government cannot point to one single new investment that was not in the pipeline when it took office and the less said of current stability, the better. While on this point, I wish to state that Ministers of Finance and, indeed, Ministers of Governments must understand the psychology of transnational corporations. In a book published in 1973 called the *Multinationals*, the author, Tug Endath, reports that Exxon—Esso at the time—correctly predicted 69 of the 75 currency devaluations over a 10-year period in the countries in which it operated. That meant that Exxon speculated to their advantage in currencies of those countries. This action may even have contributed to the devaluations themselves. Oil revenues in Trinidad and Tobago are a function of oil production, oil price, and since oil is sold in US dollars, also a function of the exchange rate. In 1997, on the basis of projected price and production levels, the exchange rate that gives the projected oil royalties revenues, is approximately TT \$6.25 to the US dollar. It suggests, among other things, that the Government has accepted a \$6.24 rate for the time-being and all this talk about appreciating currency value is just a lot of “ole” talk.

What we did not say at the time and now feel able to say, is that in the Minister's attempt to fudge the revenue's estimates this year, the exchange rate

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

that gave the projected oil royalty revenues for 1996 was about TT \$7.25 to the US dollar. The unintended consequence of this misguided action was that a signal was sent to those who can do the calculation—and there are many who can, besides the oil companies—that the Government anticipated a depreciation of the currency to those levels in 1996, and the rest is history.

The Minister has continued his reckless ways into 1997. His goal, he claims, is to encourage the savings and investment effort but he does this by reducing the incentive for pensions and annuities contributions and for the purchase of credit union shares which are the main pillars of long-term savings. This, after in his first budget, where the Minister discouraged savings in the Unit Trust to the detriment of the small saver; reduced the income flow into pension plans by the removal of the dividend grossed-up provision and removed the tax incentive for the purchase of Government bonds. The reduction of the tax incentive on home mortgages will increase the cost of owning a new home. This will have the effect of a decreasing investment in new homes and make home ownership even more elusive.

Previously a home owner could claim a deduction of up to \$20,000 in mortgage interest payments plus up to one-sixth of his income on pension and annuity payments. For the typical salaried worker, this resulted in deductions in excess of \$25,000 per year for mortgage interest and pension.

For many home owners the savings in tax which resulted from the mortgage deduction of \$20,000 and deduction for pension payments, were just barely sufficient to carry them over the marginal income threshold required to qualify for a mortgage. The total deduction for these two items has now been slashed to \$18,000 per year which will place many first-time home owners in jeopardy and so seriously undermine the integrity of pension plans. It is also fundamentally unfair, since persons who invest in property mortgages and pensions are making a long-term commitment for their retirement and cannot make adjustments in midstream. There should have been a revenue-neutral approach to it.

Let us now examine the Minister's plan to increase capital expenditure from \$721 million in 1996 to \$1700 million in 1997. In February, the Hon. Prime Minister was informing members of the Contractors' Association that the Public Sector Investment Programme in 1996 had been cut by \$300 million because the Government was wary about fuelling inflation. The Prime Minister then was fearful, and justifiably so, that the high levels of capital expenditure without appropriate safeguards would lead to high prices and a further increase in the cost of living to all citizens. The allocation for the Public Sector Investment Programme

was \$1,400 million in 1995. It was reduced to \$1,000 million in 1996. Even so, only \$721 million is expected to be spent for the year.

10.20 a.m.

On what basis is the Minister contemplating an expenditure of \$1,700 in 1997? What arrangements is he making to overcome the constraints which have limited actual capital expenditure, as he has noted, to barely average \$700 million per annum over the last six years, or is it going to be left to chance? Our assertion is that he cannot spend all that money in 1996. It cannot be done. It could not be done last year on a reduced figure. He has done nothing to change that position.

How in the face of the expected private sector activity in the construction sector in 1997, does the Minister plan to assuage his Prime Minister's concerns about fuelling inflation, with its attendant negative effects on prices and the cost of living? Similarly, what are we to make of the Minister's hodge-podge of absurdities? We are told that we are no longer required to pay for car licences, instead we would pay an additional 10 cents per litre for gasoline and three cents per litre for auto diesel fuel; that is 45 cents per gallon for gasoline and 13.5 cents per gallon for auto diesel. The offset licence fee removal is indeed a new tax which would affect every citizen in the country, but mostly those who are least able to bear it. Taxi fares would increase. In addition, the cost of transporting goods would increase and, consequently, the cost of food would also increase. What the Government is not telling the country is that further fuel prices are in the offing, first of all, to offset the depreciation in the value of the currency and, secondly, to prepare National Petroleum for the privatization which the Minister of Finance announced in this budget.

Here again, there is a hidden agenda in the way in which this Government proposes to expose the domestic market to competition eventually. In Phase I, the Government proposes to increase the number of local entrepreneurs. After that happens, it would be the local entrepreneurs who would negotiate with the foreign companies if they wish to sell under a new brand name. This is where the real money is made in that change over from one brand to the next. Therefore, this Government is likely to sell gas stations to their friends and other political investors who stand to make windfall profits when new foreign interests are allowed into the local market, in Phase II of its plan. A different approach which could easily be adopted could result in these profits accruing instead to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is the approach which the PNM would have favoured.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Any Cabinet of ministers that proceeds in this way must be seen as criminals and should be treated as such. No new taxes? No new taxes, the Minister claims and then he proceeds to dismantle the tax reform package which began in 1989, and continued in successive budgets up to last year. The Minister has shown that the concept of tax simplification means different things to different people. To us, it meant few deductions, a reliance on tax credits and a gradual reduction in tax rates while maintaining progressivity in the rates. To the Minister of Finance, tax simplification simply means finding new schemes to increase the tax take from the public. Now there are only two rates of tax, 28 and 35 per cent. There is no more 5 per cent on the first \$12,000 of chargeable income and 15 per cent on the next \$8,000 of chargeable income. It is now black or white. It is either 28 per cent or 35 per cent. It is harum-scarum. Mostly everyone would pay more taxes in 1997. While the Minister boasts of not increasing the tax rates, he has shown his deceptive ways by increasing the amount of tax we all would have to pay.

In an address to the Chief Executive Officers which I had the pleasure of delivering on November 1, 1995, I signalled the intention of the PNM Government to reduce the rate of taxes at both the corporate and individual levels to a maximum marginal rate of 25 per cent by January 1, 2000. Most specifically, had we formed the government in 1995, the corporate tax rate would have been reduced to 33 per cent in 1996, instead of 35 per cent by which it was reduced with a corresponding reduction in individual rates.

We were pleased when in the Minister's first budget, the Government appeared to be following this strategy. We assumed, like the PNM, this Government was aware of the gains to revenue generating capability of lower levels of taxation within certain limits. This Government fails to appreciate that by reneging on this strategy in 1997. It has compromised business confidence even further, and has forestalled the positioning of Trinidad and Tobago as the most attractive location in the Caribbean for investment. Accordingly, the country's ability to attract investment in the non-oil sector of the economy may now be reduced. This is where the permanent jobs are expected to be created.

In the budget the Minister talks about re-establishing family values and then proceeds to remove the spouse and child allowances. By acting this way, the Minister has, in no uncertain manner, signalled his contempt for family life, because while doing this, he has seen it fit to retain the allowance for alimony. We, on this side, wonder if there is not an element of self-interest in this. [*Desk thumping*] I do not know if he accepted the advice of the Member for St. Joseph.

The retrograde step of removing the tax credits and reintroducing the concept of a basic allowance at \$20,000, coupled with the capping of allowances for pensions, annuities, and mortgage interest at \$18,000, places increased tax burdens on most citizens, especially the middle-income earners. This is one of the approaches to the budget that we consider dangerous, for it reintroduces a subjective approach to taxation from which this country has been moving away since 1989.

I do not know how the Member for Tobago East could have sat in a Cabinet and agreed to this approach. Experience shows that this approach leads to complication of the system; lower levels of compliance and, therefore, lower revenues and corruption. This measure now places public servants, teachers, police officers, soldiers, sailors, nurses and other categories of public workers, including doctors, at great risk. Without a salary increase since 1983, and traumatized twice before as a result of income reduction which affected their ability to service their mortgages and other debts, this group is once more called upon to bear a burden while the Minister boasts of a revenue surplus of \$0.5 billion. I suspect that TTUTA would consider this statement particularly provocative.

10.30 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, the allowances for increased employment belong to a system of the past, it has no place in the current environment in which firms must meet the competition of the global market place. Moreover, even the experience of the previous period suggests that it had no effect on employment. It was cumbersome to calculate, difficult to monitor and enforce and, therefore, did not aid simplification.

Employment opportunities are generated by confidence and growth in the present environment. No firm can afford the luxury of increasing employment merely to enjoy an increased tax break, it increases the cost of production and erodes the competitiveness of one's product. However, what is apparent is that companies of political investors which are likely to enjoy construction contracts under the expanded Public Sector Investment Programme will enjoy, not only the benefits of profits under these contracts, but will also avoid taxes on a significant part of the profits through this additional benefit of tax allowances, and the hiring of labour which they would have had to hire in any case. In other words, there was absolutely no need for the incentive.

The abolition of charitable Deeds of Covenant as a deductible item is shortsighted, greedy and a totally unsympathetic measure, as it cuts the main source of funding for non-governmental organizations and churches which are the backbone of social

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

welfare programmes. This measure will surely have a particularly harsh effect on the poor and the needy. It also seriously questions this Government's boast of caring about the poor and destitute, the drug addict, the socially displaced or even the boy scouts or girl guides. It is simply uncaring.

Mr. Speaker, the United Nations has designated 1997 as the Year for the Eradication of Poverty and the hon. Minister in his budget statement indicated that the Government will formulate a holistic approach to address the issue of poverty and social displacement. A National Social Development Council is to be established to ensure, among other things, that all citizens, especially the less fortunate members of our society, would have access to basic amenities like health facilities, shelter, potable water, electricity and other social services. This makes a good sound bite, but my advice to the less fortunate is not to hold their breath. This Government will not, and cannot achieve what it proposes; it is more concerned with repaying and facilitating its shareholders—those political investors who are reaping all the benefits—whether it be through the award of contracts or the grant of licences. The hon. Minister of Finance pays mere lip-service to the plight of the poor and destitute in Oropouche, Naparima, Caroni, Couva and indeed elsewhere in Trinidad and Tobago. He is more concerned with the welfare of his friends and himself, and apparently he has been able to convince the Members for Couva North and Couva South into like thinking. [*Desk Thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, in this season of good will and cheer when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ—a season to be giving and comforting not only ourselves, but more importantly those less fortunate than us—how can this Government justify the removal of the allowance for deeds of covenant? Which bodies or groups in the society are the beneficiaries of deeds of covenants? There are the churches, the girl guides, the boy scouts, organizations like Servol, Living Water, Rebirth House, the Coterie of Social Workers, the Maha Sabha and others too numerous to mention.

The point is that everyone in this country knows the invaluable work and contribution made by these organizations to the country; their main, and sometimes only source of income, is through a deed of covenant. The Minister has not justified the removal of this allowance. In fact, with the Minister's decision to grant licences for casinos, he should be increasing support to charitable organizations so that they can deal with the social fallout of this ill-informed and unfortunate decision. [*Desk thumping*] This Government has said that the poverty level in this country is between 35—40 per cent and, consequently, the Minister should be increasing the flow of funds to such organizations rather than cutting their support line. The

performance of the Minister of Social Development to date, offers little hope that this Government is capable of filling the gap. I am urging and hoping that the hon. Minister of Finance will revisit the removal of this allowance. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, then there is the open invitation to the mobsters of the underworld. The Minister went into some detail about the introduction of casinos and their perceived benefits to the hotel and tourism industry in his budget speech. Because of the strategic location of Trinidad and Tobago, coupled with the country's other advantages, my administration's vision was to position Trinidad and Tobago as the business and financial capital of the Caribbean and the gateway to the Americas. Now with the Minister's plan to legalize casino gambling, we fear that the same location advantages which influenced the PNM's vision of a business and financial centre may be converted by the UNC/NAR coalition into the money laundering capital of the Caribbean instead. [*Desk thumping*] Already, Trinidad and Tobago faces a major drug problem. A Government that is serious about crime would seek to frustrate the trafficking of narcotics and not provide infrastructure that would assist in institutionalizing money-laundering facilities. There exists no consensus that casino gambling is a necessary condition for growth of a tourism sector. Examples of Aruba and Antigua are easily contradicted with the examples of Barbados, St. Lucia and Jamaica. Moreover, if Tobago is to be the main recipient of this measure, why was the electorate not consulted in the recently concluded Tobago House of Assembly election? Are we to assume that the Minister with responsibility for Tobago is in favour of casino gambling in Tobago? That is the only reasonable conclusion to which one can come.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance and his Government are clearly unaware that casinos have created prostitution, mobsterism and a general decay of the moral fibre of those societies, but this is understood by other sections of the national community. No wonder it has been reported to me that school children in my constituency have been referring to the hon. Minister of Finance as "Brian Lucky Gargano Kuei Tung".

I now turn to the motor vehicle industry. Last year in his budget, the Minister legitimized the biggest farce we have witnessed in the industry by permitting the licensing of locally assembled used vehicles. I can say that in this respect, Trinidad and Tobago is perhaps unique as it is possibly the only country in the world in which the re-assembly of used vehicles is acknowledged and promoted. We all know that this measure was introduced to pay back a certain group of UNC financial supporters. So in 1996 over 2,000 of these locally assembled used

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

vehicles with "PBA" and "PBB" number plates found themselves on our roads regardless of their age and condition. We all know that there is the common belief that the used vehicle industry may be associated with car theft, under-invoicing, drugs and money laundering. It is also extremely difficult, if not impossible, to impose satisfactory controls on the importation of used vehicles and for this reason, most of the countries of South America have banned the import of these vehicles. However, in Trinidad and Tobago, without putting in place the necessary laws and controls, we have decided to open our market to used vehicles. Again, we must ask who are going to be the real beneficiaries of the over 15,000 used vehicles which are planned to enter Trinidad and Tobago in 1997? Might it be their friends at Neal and Bamboo, Mr. Speaker? The Minister appears to have taken a keen interest in the motor vehicle industry, he has gone further and removed the need to pay annual motor vehicle licence fees replacing it with additional taxes on motor vehicles, but as is the case with all the Minister's actions, I must ask, who will be the main beneficiaries?

10.40 a.m.

Will it be the man-in-the-street whose cost of transportation is sure to increase? Or will it be the large car rental companies who stand to save hundreds of thousands of dollars by not having to pay licence fees, with fewer charges falling to the account of the consumer? I wonder which of their friends are in the car rental business. *[Interruption]* Is whistling permitted in the House, Mr. Speaker? If you call the name, I would whistle.

With regard to vehicle spare parts, the move to unify the rates of duty is commendable but by establishing a rate of 30 per cent across the board, the Minister has effectively increased the prices of the majority of spare parts by over 20 per cent—more pressure on the small man. A quick check with one spare parts dealer revealed that the prices of more popular parts like spark plugs and decarbonizing kits will increase substantially as the present rates of duty on these items are as low as 2 1/2 per cent. Moreover, since the majority of spare parts carry a rate of duty of 20 per cent or under, all of us will feel the burden of this new measure. When one adds the effect of the depreciating currency and the price of car parts, the situation looks even worse. I wonder whether the Minister simply got his sums wrong again, or is it a case of more deception and more hidden agendas?

The Government's attempt at populism is more glaringly seen in its measure to allow the sale of non-prescription drugs in supermarkets. Since the mid-1970s the supermarket lobby has been vocal on this issue. Equally, the response was as

vocal. Since pharmacies are stringently regulated, their overheads are higher than normal. If the overhead costs are allocated only to prescription drugs, the costs may be prohibitive for a large section of users. This is so, firstly, because prescription drugs account, on average, for only about 10 per cent of sales and, secondly, because most users of prescription drugs are the elderly. Obviously, therefore, a decision to allow the sale of non-prescription drugs by other than pharmacies is both ill-informed and unwise, popular among supermarket owners though it may be. It will lead to significant increases in prescription drug prices and also a deterioration in services provided at pharmacies.

One possible approach at pharmacies, Mr. Speaker, may be to get rid of their pharmacists, to stop selling prescription drugs and to add other regular grocery items. If that should happen, then we know what would happen in these so-called pharmacies. It sounds good, but they have no idea whatever of the implications of their decision.

I now turn to that vexed question of crime. The UNC based its entire election campaign in the 1995 general election on two major issues: crime and poverty. The question is: how have they performed to date and what prospects are there for improvements in this regard, based on the budget for 1997? Despite the public relations gimmicks and the attempts to keep the nation's focus skewed and away from the issues that plague our country, Trinidad and Tobago is indeed a nation in crisis. It has become the norm for us to face each day with a spectre of gruesome news and criminal activities which distress most citizens. The statistics on crime continue to shock. Daily reports of murders of the most heinous type, domestic violence, robbery, car thefts and kidnapping have become routine.

Our youths are not immune to the tidal wave of crime. Sadly, too many of our young people have been lured into the vicious cycle of criminal activity and wanton lawlessness as the way to survive under this inhumane, corrupt coalition. The Prime Minister, who lamented the indiscipline in the society, seems unable to handle the crime monster. This Government, which boasted of having the solution to the crime situation, is now strangely impotent in dealing with this scourge which has enveloped Trinidad and Tobago. Instead of implementing a crime plan, this inept Government placed emphasis on the purchase of 100 Cherokee jeeps under the guise of solving the problem, but really the acquisition was a blatant reward for one of their party financiers. When it is not political investors, it is friends; when it is not friends, it is family. That is the way they operate.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Contrary to the Minister of Finance's claim that the Government has been arresting and convicting drug lords and cracking down on criminal activities, the police have indicated that they are unaware of these arrests. The fact is that this Government can make no claim whatsoever of having made any such arrests. What is really taking place is window dressing with the Minister of National Security behaving like Sgt. Scheultz of Hogan Heroes, who hears nothing, sees nothing and, worse, says absolutely nothing. [*Desk thumping*] It is tragic that such a person has been charged with the responsibility of ensuring that if one does the crime, one does the time. Mr. Speaker, the PNM maintains that little headway will be made on the crime front until proper management arrangements and disciplinary procedures are instituted in the police service.

The issue of poverty in our society is now endemic and the performance of this Government to date, coupled with the provisions in this budget, give cause for concern. It has been noted that the main funding pipeline to non-governmental organizations has now been cut. This is most unfortunate when the Government is privy to two studies which document the plight of the poor in our society. The survey of living conditions which was conducted by the Department of Behavioural Science of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, found that half of the population expects their income conditions to worsen over the next 10 years and that even though more than 60 per cent of household heads had jobs, poverty still existed mainly because of fluctuating job security or large families aggravated by dilapidated living conditions.

The Ministry of Social Development's study was even more instructive and should have galvanized this Government into immediate action. Mr. Speaker, listen to the statistics:

35.9 per cent of all households are poor; 73 per cent of all poor households are male headed; 26.7 per cent of all poor households are female headed; 6 per cent of all poor households are single-parent households; 35 per cent of all households deemed to be poor were constituted largely of elderly and unemployed persons. Of the households deemed poor, 48.4 per cent were headed by Africans, 30.1 per cent of whom were male and 38.2 per cent were headed by Indians, of whom 9.2 per cent were female; 21.9 per cent of all households deemed poor reported no income at all; 24.6 per cent of all households in Trinidad and Tobago have incomes under \$500 per month and 47 per cent of all households have incomes less than \$1,300 per month.

This is a survey which was done by the Ministry.

What is this Government's response to such a dire societal problem? When Members occupied this side of the House, they were quite vocal in their attack on the previous government's policies and programmes in the area of social development. They said that whenever they formed the government they would raise the quantum of old age pension payments from the existing \$356.15 per month to \$500 per month, an increase of \$143.85, not a meagre \$63.85 which, in any case, is illusory, given the many measures in this budget which will exacerbate the troubles of the less fortunate. [*Desk thumping*]

10.50 a.m.

Charitable and other non-governmental organizations are affected in their quest to provide social relief. Increased cost of living will result from the Minister's failure to deal effectively with the value of our currency. The increase in gas prices will be translated into higher transportation cost to the poor, elderly and the unemployed. The cost of prescription drugs will increase, or worse, may be unavailable to the sick and elderly.

Mr. Speaker, because of the relationship between the performance of the economy and the ability to adequately satisfy the social needs of our citizens, a PNM administration would have maintained a stable macro-economic environment including a stable currency, in particular, to sustain real growth in the economy led by strong export performance. We would have continued the reduction in the unemployment rates through increased construction activity, the development of the services sector, agriculture and small business. We would have promoted policies designed to increase the levels of savings and investment in Trinidad and Tobago, rather than remove the incentives for savings and investment. We would have reformed the system of contributory pensions, including the National Insurance Scheme to ensure that after many years of work, contributors are guaranteed satisfactory pension income during their retirement. We would have improved the national insurance benefits. We would have implemented a new system of delivering social services through greater utilization of non-governmental organizations. We would have provided communities with trained social workers. We would have continued programmes aimed at reducing substance abuse. We would have developed transitional arrangements to facilitate the re-entry of the formerly socially displaced into the main stream of society.

While the budget statement made passing reference to social services, it however failed to outline a definite strategy to reduce the growing incidence of poverty in Trinidad and Tobago. Such a strategy should have included mechanisms

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

for the economic rehabilitation of the unemployed, for the promotion of labour-intensive growth, to provide basic social services and to ensure a social safety net for the individual until broad-based growth is realized. Social welfare programmes must also be designed to provide more rehabilitative services to the poor, to assist individuals in gaining new skills that are marketable, to raise self-esteem and to facilitate learning important coping skills. These strategies would have assisted in the preparation of individuals for the re-entry into the labour market.

I now turn to the issue of housing and once again the deception of the UNC/NAR coalition which, it is evident, after more than one year in office has not yet formulated a policy on housing and settlement. One wonders if this has been done deliberately to encourage squatting in certain parts of Trinidad and Tobago. What would be the reason for this? Mr. Speaker, this is not strange to us on this side of the House.

The Member for St. Augustine, the Minister of Housing and Settlements stated in this honourable House that there is really no need for a housing ministry *per se*. We are, therefore, not surprised that there is no policy on housing and settlements. This said Member was fired by the Member for Tobago East when he served as Minister of Housing in the previous incarnation of this coalition. One can assume that it was due to his incompetence.

When the PNM demitted office in 1985, a strategy was in place for the construction of 5,000 housing units each year over the next 10 years. In place, was a \$30 million housing construction programme under the National Housing Authority. We commenced an accelerated housing construction programme designed to yield some 4,000 housing units by 1997 and we had a Squatter Containment Unit in the Squatter Regularization Section of the National Housing Authority.

The Minister of Housing and Settlements failed to recognize this. The Minister of Finance, however, acknowledged the work that had been done by the PNM in Housing and Settlements and in his 1996 Budget presentation said that he would fast-track the accelerated housing construction programme which had been started by the PNM. The Minister of Housing and Settlements, however, after publicly stating that there was no need for a Ministry of Housing, immediately disbanded the Squatter Containment Unit and stopped the construction of 300 units at Aranguez, 112 units at Almond Drive in Morvant and elsewhere in the country. What the Minister of Housing and Settlements stopped, Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance is now partially restarting.

In the *Public Sector Investment Programme 1997*, at page 25 it has been stated that:

“The National Housing Authority will mount a programme of \$25.23 million in investments in 1997. The flats and town-houses sub-programme will continue with the construction of 112 apartments at Almond Drive estimated to cost a total of \$15 million.”

I must reiterate that the contract that had been awarded for the construction of these apartments and the sod-turning ceremony for the start of the construction took place prior to the general election of 1995. However, because of spite, vindictiveness and hate for poor people, the Minister of Housing and Settlements stopped that project. *[Desk thumping]* One hopes that this Minister of Housing and Settlements will make these units available to qualified applicants from the community and would not repeat their mistake with the John John Towers.

The Government disbanded the Squatter Containment Unit in 1996, however, we take note that provisions are now being made for the establishment of a squatter containment unit in the 1997 PSIP. The Minister does not appear to be even aware of that. Obviously the Government is confused. It disbanded the unit only to set up the same unit one year later.

In housing, like in other areas of governmental activity, this Government, after being in office for one year, has not done a single thing to improve the needs of the population apart from completing some projects that had been started by the PNM administration, nor has the Government worked towards the regularization of squatters in spite of the fact that it met legislation already drafted when it took office.

Mr. Speaker, it is our view that the Government is deliberately encouraging squatting since it reflects a rural/urban drift, alters the pattern of population settlement and alters the voting pattern in the country to the advantage of the ruling party. *[Desk thumping]*

As in housing, so in education—what evidence is there that could support this Government’s claim to be concerned with education? It certainly cannot be the appointment of the Member for Tabaquite to that important ministry. The story is told of a certain female magistrate in San Fernando who sentenced a man convicted of shooting with intent to do grievous bodily harm to listen to two speeches delivered by the Minister of Education. *[Laughter]* The report is that the man appealed on the ground that the sentence was unduly harsh and oppressive. *[Laughter]*

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

The development of education for the 21st Century demands a focus on the management and administration of the education system, transformation of the curriculum and a focus on developing the human resources in the sector. All these were detailed comprehensively in the 10-year education plan developed and adopted by the PNM Government in 1994.

11.00 a.m.

This Government's uncaring, wicked and callous approach to our nation's teachers is, perhaps, a clear indication of how this Government really views education. This budget has made no provisions for salary adjustments for teachers. Never before in our nation's history, has the level of morale in our teaching service been so low, and at a time when education and knowledge must be recognized as critical drivers for success in the new millenium. It is paradoxical that this Government which is led by someone who is on leave from a trade union, is presiding over one of the gloomiest periods of industrial relations in our public service. *[Desk thumping]* What can one say of a trade unionist who promotes a thousand dollar a plate dinner?

Let us recall that it was the hon. Prime Minister who stated, categorically, that his Government would settle the public service arrears in cash. "A debt is a debt and must be paid in cash." Mr. Speaker, do you remember that statement? I am sure you do. This budget, following on the tokenism of 1996, is strangely silent on the issue. There are instead, innuendoes and varied threats about job security to public servants. The Minister of Finance must, in his winding-up, provide some indication about how this Government intends to treat with these industrial relations issues in the public service. Our teachers and doctors provide core governmental services to society. It is immoral and destabilizing for any government to allow these industrial issues to be on the national agenda for such a long time.

Mr. Speaker, as the nation moves into the 21st Century, we need our teachers to provide an education that is relevant to the demands of the world. Modern technological methods demand this. We need our teachers to prepare our citizens for the knowledge-based service-type activities that would characterize the new millenium. We do not need them on the promenade, begging the Government to lend an ear to their pleas. *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. Speaker, while we appreciate the recent signing of the World Bank Loan which was negotiated by my administration, we believe that the provision of new plant and equipment would be mere white elephants unless the human resource

element is also addressed. Improved allocations for operational expenses is needed—the budget is curiously silent on this.

Mr. Speaker, the news that the Government has reviewed its obstinacy in respect of the National Library Complex is welcome. *[Desk thumping]* Obviously, this is as a consequence of the vociferous criticisms from this side and the national community. The Government has not been able to understand the philosophy of the complex other than that of job creation. The complex, as we envisioned it, was to be an integral part of the thrust into the 21st Century enabling the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to cope with a world in which information technology is critical. Moreover, it forms part of our overall vision of the development of the capital city which the Brian Lara Promenade so visibly epitomizes.

The National Library Complex is a critical component of the city centre project. We fear that the Minister's plan to increase the size of this complex and lease the additional space for commercial use, coupled with the decision of the Government to give to the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, the Old Fire Station Headquarters, which was also to be part of the city centre, may now seriously compromise the concept of the city centre which was so painstakingly adopted by my administration. I remind this Government that where there is no vision, a people perish. *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. Speaker, on the issue of sport, the PNM's 1995 *Manifesto* included the following as priorities:

1. The establishment of a secretariat for national sporting organizations and the establishment of a National Sport Management Commission. We saw the National Sport Management Commission focussing on projects such as a revised version of Village Olympics to include remuneration packages to participants.
2. The establishment of a national academy for sport, based on performance in the Village Olympics.
3. Payment for representation on national teams.

These approaches came out of a vision which recognized sport as an industry with significant prospects for employment generation. We regret that the Minister has failed to identify programmes for our young people to provide healthy and remunerative alternatives to the societal ills to which they are prone. This honourable House will note that the one idea mentioned is the Skills Development

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Programme which was introduced by my administration and is a direct result of my visit to Germany in 1993. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I turn now to the issue of food prices. You would recall that the hon. Minister in his first budget listed several food items which were targetted to be cheaper for consumers. You would also recall that within one month of the budget presentation there were price increases for several of these items such as flour, bread, rice and condensed milk, to name a few. Overall, food prices increased by an estimated 13 per cent in 1996. Consumers are faced once more with the prospect of rising prices as a result of the measures enunciated in the Minister's budget and the depreciating dollar.

For many years, Members on the other side have accused the PNM of not doing anything in the agricultural sector. The Member for Couva North in particular, has often spoken about the importance of this sector. Mr. Speaker, one may ask: What has this Government accomplished in this sector during its first year in office? The Government stated earlier this year that it had adopted the PNM's White Paper as its policy paper on agriculture. But what, other than lip-service has been accomplished, to date? What credence can we place on the Minister's stated initiatives for the sector in 1997? Already, the Islandwide Canefarmers' Association has expressed its alarm over the budget. The All Trinidad Sugar and General Workers' Trade Union has also expressed its concern about the impact of this budget. I take it that the name of that union is very familiar to the hon. Member for Couva North.

The increase in gasoline prices would certainly impact negatively on our fishermen throughout the country. They never paid car licence fees but are now being told that they have to pay higher fuel prices to offset the removal of car licence fees. The farmers in Aranguez, and elsewhere, are also very concerned, worried and depressed. No provision has been made for the construction of a wholesale market. Flooding, bad access roads, high cost of chemicals and equipment, insufficient technical support, lack of storage facilities, praedial larceny and so forth are just some of the problems that continue to affect farmers.

I turn now to culture. Mr. Speaker, as in other areas, the Government's proposals for the development of culture, clearly reflect the lack of any focus and directed policy. It indicates the shallowness of their concept of cultural development and is an insult to the artistes and the creative resources of our country.

11.10 a.m.

First, the lack of a cultural policy. This Government has been successful in allowing a year to pass; a year in which we had Carnival, Hosay, Divali, Tobago

Heritage Festival, the Steelband Music Festival, Pan Jazz, the Prime Minister's Best Village Trophy competition, Indian Arrival Day, and Emancipation Day celebrations, without any clear statement of their long-term plan for the development of our cultural industry, and the entire entertainment sector.

This sector has the potential to generate over \$250 million of annual earnings. In its *Medium Term Policy Framework*, the Government committed a total of three sentences to a purported statement of its cultural policy. The first sentence was a restatement of what everyone already knows; that the community is becoming aware of the importance of culture as an opportunity for income generation. That is statement number one on culture.

The second statement deals with one aspect of our culture, the steelpan. I will return to the shallowness of that proposal later. The third sentence, dealing with the establishment of a pan conservatory and performing arts centre, was lifted straight out of the PNM's 1995 manifesto. [*Desk thumping*] That, Mr. Speaker, is the sum total of the Government's policy on culture.

We in the PNM have always recognized the importance of ensuring adequate expressions for cultural voices. Not only for the psychological and emotional benefit to the players, but as a means of generating employment and sustainable development for the thousands of youths and others who gather in panyards, community centres, and art centres throughout Trinidad and Tobago. The PNM has a policy and a vision for culture and the arts. This Government has none. [*Desk thumping*]

Rather than a comprehensive policy, there are a few handouts that are clearly attempts to buy the support of the Afro-Trinidadian community. Take the Government's proposals for the steelpan. The Minister in his *1997 Budget Statement* at page 13 stated:

"We will enhance the status of the steelpan as a national treasure by expanding the existing two-year certificate course in music at the University of the West Indies for a full degree course in which the steelpan would be the chief musical instrument of instruction."

Let me first state that we support the purpose of increasing the musical literacy of our pannists. We recognize that it will expand the opportunities, but there are two points that must be made. First of all, the Government cannot plan to expand to a degree programme because that degree programme has actually already started. The Minister of Finance may not be aware. The programme has already started, they cannot plan for that. [*Desk thumping*]

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Secondly, a degree in music on its own will do little to help the grassroots panmen in the country. Is the Government telling us that panmen have been clamouring for such a degree? Clearly not. While a degree programme will now be an option for the secondary school graduate who may have a minimal level of musical literacy, the question remains about the employment creation, not only for the University of the West Indies graduates, but for the majority of panmen.

Surely it is not the proposed national steel orchestra. That idea has been bandied about and rejected by panmen. Such a national orchestra cannot be made up of more than 40 to 50 people at the most, so we are talking about creating employment for a pan fraternity that comprises over 50,000 pannists, by establishing a 50 person orchestra. Perhaps the Minister is planning to have the steel orchestra perform in the casinos that he wants to see established. [*Desk thumping*]

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, if this national steel orchestra is to be as the Minister stated, the cultural ambassadors, what is to be the effect on the hundreds of pannists for different bands who perform that very function year after year. Renegades, Despers, All Stars, Skiffle Bunch, Phase II, Invaders, Pannites, Panazz players, Exodus, and others have all been on tour in the past year. All of them.

What we will see happening is that if a foreign group requests a steelband to tour in its country, the national steel orchestra will have to go on the tour. If not, then what is the point of having a national steel orchestra? The proposed Carnival Institute, while beneficial to some, also fails to address the concerns of mas makers who seem to earn a living by travelling to carnivals throughout the world to sell their skills. It is here that the shallowness of the Government is evident. It is unable to develop one creative thought to harness the centres of production that are already in place in the panyards and has opted instead for populism.

Moreover, the Government seems to be unaware that culture and the arts encompass a sector that extends beyond the steelpan. The entertainment sector, in its broadest sense, includes the musical arts and the recording industry, all the different genres of music that are produced from the bowels of our people: Soca, chutney, rapso, parang; the performing and visual arts, carnival and other festivals. The entertainment industry is probably sorely disappointed that the Minister, while trying to amend the betting and gambling laws to promote casino tourism, has done nothing in response to claims to promote cultural tourism and attract tourists to our national and religious festivals.

The cries of recording artistes for some relief from the problems of piracy have not been addressed. The main thrust that will spawn the sector is in the marketing,

management and merchandizing of our cultural products. Yet, we have no mention of any incentive grants for marketing and promotion of cultural products and no specific programmes that could involve matching private sector funding to stimulate entrepreneurial activity within the panyards and cultural centres. That is the insult to the artistes.

Mr. Speaker, there are a number of other issues to which the budget gives rise which I would have liked to address but time does not allow it. These issues will be addressed by my colleagues during the course of the debate. So I conclude by indicating our belief that this budget evinced a pedestrian approach to be all things to all men. It is a crude attempt at populism. The Supermarkets Association lobbied for non-prescriptive drugs and they are promised it, but at the expense of the sick and elderly who will then have to pay more for prescriptive drugs.

The demonstrative effect of the paltry increase in old-age pension is then lost as it may prove insufficient to cover the increased cost of medication. The differential between gasoline and auto-diesel fuel is increased, thus providing a further incentive for conversion to diesel and we know that the diesel engine is one of the chief polluters in Trinidad and Tobago at this time. This is done at a time when the Minister is voicing his concern for the environment.

My caution, Mr. Speaker, is that differential may well be addressed in anticipated future price increases as we are aware that the Government is in receipt of advice to narrow the gap in price between diesel and gasoline. It has a report advising it of that. The Public Sector Investment Programme is planned at \$1,700 million, simply to signal a major thrust in public sector investment without any real intent of achieving the target. It cannot be achieved, Mr. Speaker.

Moreover, funding of that magnitude is premised in part on borrowing \$2,680.9 million and sale of Government assets of \$672.5 million. How much of the borrowing is to be provided by multilateral agencies and the quantum that is planned to be raised at the market remain closely guarded secrets. The Minister of Finance did not take us into his confidence, nor did he take the national community into his confidence. Simply, no information is provided about which of the same assets are to be sold off in 1997. Is it NP, or is it NGC?

11.20 a.m.

The reduction in tax rates, both at the individual and corporate levels, has been compromised. Instead, there is a shift back to the old order of reliance on deductions and high tax rates.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. MANNING]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Annual licensing of motor vehicles is to be removed, but the Minister is conspicuously silent on the alternative measures he intends to implement to ensure that, firstly, motor vehicles are insured; secondly, motor vehicles are roadworthy; and thirdly, an audit trail is maintained on all motor vehicles. He did not tell us how the authorities will know who owns which vehicle and, therefore, he may very well be stimulating a car theft market. It sounds good, but he has to do other things to get it working right. He did not stay long enough with us; he did not learn enough.

The budget provides no hope for the teachers, the public servant, nor for that matter, the 13-year old who is not placed in a secondary school. The palliative offered to the old-age pensioner would be eroded by increased prices occasioned, not only owing to the shift in non-prescriptive drugs but also as a function of the depreciation of the currency.

The Minister promised no new taxes but planned to increase taxation. The taxi driver pays more and the family man earning \$36,000 or more, with an unemployed wife and two children, pays more. In fact, most taxpayers will end up paying more. The Minister did not need to introduce new taxes. He simply achieved his goal of higher taxation by fiddling with the Tax Act.

The underlying themes which permeate this budget are deviousness, deceit, deception and an open invitation to money launderers, in spite of pious platitudes to bring back the old time days and the re-establishment of family values. But then, can the Minister tell us about family values? Who can enjoy the comfort of their homes, feel safe or walk the street without fear or anxiety with the present Government and its anti-morals, anti-religious stance? This Government now has the ignominy of legalizing the sale of alcohol on Sundays, of allowing shot-gun marriages and now legalizing casinos. I am afraid to ask, what next?

Let me, for the record, disassociate the People's National Movement from the development path on which this Government has embarked. [*Desk thumping*] Our vision for Trinidad and Tobago has been articulated in former PNM documents. This vision permits every citizen to a level of excellence, but allows us, as a nation, to compete with the best in the world; a level of excellence that affords each of us, as individuals, the pleasure of realizing our fullest potentials as men and women, spiritual, physical, mental and social; a people producing world-class goods and services, both for the domestic and external markets, thereby facilitating the requisite rewards which permit us all as a people to enjoy a good and rising standard of living.

The vision continues to include the creation of a society that is united through national consensus and where every sector of the society possesses the serious commitment to excel, be it in the panyard, the sports field, at the work place, or wherever the area of endeavour may be. In other words, enhancing and enriching the lives of every single citizen of every class, of every race, of every religion of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, permit me now to extend to you, Members of this honourable House and, through you, to the members of the national community, felicitations of the season, and notwithstanding what the budget may bring, a bright and prosperous 1997.

Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Trade and Industry and Minister of Consumer Affairs (Hon. Mervyn Assam): Mr. Speaker, I am extremely delighted to be given the opportunity to join in this debate on a Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ending December 31, 1997.

Before I start my contribution, I thank Almighty God for having seen us through the last year and for having guided us and making this year for the UNC/NAR Government, what I consider to be *annus mirabilis*—a wonderful year. [*Desk thumping*]

I also thank the Prime Minister for having demonstrated that kind of leadership during the past year which has kept us as a well-united and completely welded team in order to take the country forward over the last 12 months. [*Desk thumping*].

I thank the national community for having had the patience over the last several years when they were subjected to all types of deprivations and to have been assisted over the last year, during the administration of the UNC/NAR Government, in order that they can observe the difference and style of political management which this Government has brought to them.

I thank the constituents of St. Joseph whom I have the opportunity and the honour to represent, for the kindness they have shown me and the patience they have demonstrated from time to time when I have been unable to be present at some of their functions because of my other responsibilities. I have received many “Thank you” cards and I thank all those who have sent them, for some of the things I have been able to achieve during the past year.

If one were to use this parliamentary Chamber as a cricket field and use the analogy of cricket, I was severely disappointed. Having read the budget speech,

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. ASSAM]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

because I was absent when the hon. Minister of Finance delivered it—and I congratulate him on the presentation of such a very well thought-out budget—and having scored so many runs during that presentation, I was indeed disappointed and distressed this morning. As the Member for San Fernando East spoke, I wondered what John Arlett would have said in his commentary with respect to the bowling of the Member for San Fernando East, because his bowling was so inaccurate, so wild—short balls; no balls. [*Laughter*] The bowling was terrible. Therefore, it lent itself to all kinds of runs all around the wicket and onto the boundary, throughout the length and breadth of his speech.

11.30 a.m.

You know, it is unfortunate that the Member for San Fernando East engaged in all kinds of *ad hominem* statements trying to attack the character of the Minister of Finance. I thought that perhaps after one year, the Members on the other side would have grown up. The Member for Diego Martin East continues to behave like an imp and a jester, and supported, unfortunately, by Members close by, who I thought would have displayed some intelligence and decent behaviour in this Parliament this morning.

But what authority does the Member for San Fernando East have to get up and speak in this House? He is now known as “Patrick the Hatrick”. A man who claims to be a leader, who has been just recently revalidated, and as I said before, he needs to be recalibrated because he is totally off course. He comes here after losing three elections in the space of 13 or 14 months, and has the gall to talk about a vision, and his administration—the one that the Member for Diego Martin West wished to wrest from him, ably supported by the Member for Diego Martin East, and his other cruel cohorts.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for San Fernando East made so many inaccurate statements during his contribution, that I feel it is important for me to disabuse the minds of people. In the first instance, he stated that prescription drugs would increase and so forth, and he was Prime Minister for four years. He has been in this House for 25 years, although he did not deserve to be elected twice. In 1971, when he first came to this House, he came on a no-vote campaign. We all should know that, he was not elected by anybody, he came on a no-vote campaign. And in 1986, the then leader of the NAR and Prime Minister, showed mercy and not sacrifice—with a paltry 69 votes that were in serious question, because of the magnanimity of the NAR and its leadership they did not permit a recount of the votes. If there were a recount of those votes in 1986, he would not have led the PNM thereafter. So, in

effect, he was only elected three times in this House, although he has been here about 25 years or so.

Mr. Speaker, I would have thought that he would come here with accurate statements if he is going to try to persuade the national community, and continue to lead his party. How can he speak about an increase in the price of prescription drugs, when one of the very few items—

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I get the feeling that after the first speech of the morning, we are getting into restlessness. I get that feeling.

Dr. Mohammed: As a result of the first speech.

Mr. Speaker: In all seriousness, hon. Members, I appeal to you in this most important debate of the year, that we do our brothers and sisters the honour of listening, and having our say afterwards, please.

Hon. M. Assam: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You observed that during the hour and a quarter contribution of the Member for San Fernando East, notwithstanding the fact that he attempted to impugn my character, assisted by the Member for Diego Martin East, I remained silent. They do not have the decency to listen to people, but whenever you attack them, they begin to feel that they have the right not to be attacked.

I was speaking about prescription drugs. In his alarmist fashion, just as he has been doing like Catiline in the 1st Century B.C., going about the country attempting to inflame and to create disturbances among the national community, saying that this country is in crisis, when it is the PNM that is in crisis, he comes in the House again to inflame the national community, telling us that prescription drugs will go up, and old people will suffer, when he knows—and I hope he knows—that prescription drugs is on the Price Control List. He knows that but he says today, in his usual fashion of attempting to inflame the people, that prescription drugs will go up. Let me tell you about prices on the whole. He talked about prices having increased by 13 per cent in 1996—again, total inaccuracy.

This is a report by my professional officers in the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, a portfolio that I am responsible for, and this was done up to November 1996. Mr. Speaker, I came here prepared with facts and figures, up-to-date information, not out-dated information that the hon. Members opposite come here with.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. ASSAM]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

It states as follows:

Item	Decrease in Price (%)
Macaroni	1.71 per cent.
Spaghetti	1.03 per cent.
Processed Pigeon Peas	1.0 per cent.
Flour	0.4 per cent.
Evaporated milk	0.3 per cent.
Whole, live chicken	19.05 per cent.
Fresh butter	1.14 per cent.
Corned Beef, Triple J	4.3 per cent.
Libby Corned Beef	3.0 per cent.
Brunswick Sardines	2.3 per cent.
Banquet Sardines	3.14 per cent.
Fairhaven	1.96. per cent.
Tuna	1.8 per cent.
Powdered Milk, Dairy Dairy	2.8 per cent.
Kerrygold	2.7 per cent
Evaporated milk, Carnation	4.9 per cent.
Frico	3.0 per cent.

All of these are decreases in prices to November 30, 1996. [*Interruption*]

This is not true? I can submit this document. I can tender this as a document from the professional officers of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs. That is a fact, and I can go on reading more and more.

The kind of language that the Member for San Fernando East, a former Prime Minister, employs—lacking in dignity; inaccuracies and mistruths, calling people all sorts of names, and talking about vindictiveness, hate, spite and wickedness. Those are the epithets that this gentleman, who says he is a born-again Christian, used. This is the season of peace and goodwill, and Christianity; he calls himself a born-again Christian, and that is the language he employs against hon. Members in this honourable institution.

Mr. Speaker, he says that the budget hits everyone. Of course, it hits everyone in a very favourable way. The Member is quite right. The budget has a positive impact on everyone. The words “deceptive” and “dangerous” are part of the philosophy and the language of his party, which he practised for almost 40 years, while he was in power. He places so much emphasis on the exchange rate and attempts to suggest that it is unstable. What is an unstable exchange rate? His field is not economics, you know. It is not even geology, because he went to La Brea and put down a heavy industry estate there against the advice of the Member for Diego Martin East, who claims to be an expert in geology, with a PhD in that subject, and he comes today, trying to discuss economics, but he knows nothing about geophysics and geology. Is that not a shame, Mr. Speaker?

Let us return to the question about an exchange rate. In what way is the exchange rate of the TT dollar characterized as unstable? If he looks at all the currencies of the world—I have had the tremendous opportunity of being part of banking at one time, and I visited many stock exchanges, and I have been in the office of an arbitrage in Switzerland in Zurich, where he had 35 phones on his desk, and he was buying and selling money—every second of the day the currencies of the world fluctuate. The Dutch guilder; the Danish clonar; the Italian lira; the Japanese yen; the UK pound; the US dollar, they go up and down all the time, and sometimes they go up and remain there, and sometimes they go down and remain there. That is the nature of a floating currency. Maybe he does not even understand what he did in April 1993, I believe it was. He does not even know what his Government, to speak his words, what his administration did in April. The currency was floated, and that is the nature of a float.

11.40 a.m.

Mr. Manning: The Member is making too much noise.

Hon. M. Assam: I know that. The point is that it is noise with sense, but the Member makes senseless noise. *[Laughter]*

Mr. Speaker, if the Trinidad and Tobago dollar has moved from \$5.99 to \$6.05 to \$6.10 to \$6.23 back to \$6.15, it merely means that there is healthy trading of our currency and, therefore, the float is working. The PNM is talking about depreciation, devaluation and instability, but does one know the history of the PNM? When Dr. Eric Williams was Minister of Finance, the TT dollar was running away. He actually had to peg it at \$2.40 to the US dollar because it was running away. I was in the private sector, particularly the manufacturing sector, and from

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. ASSAM]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

day to day the TT dollar was moving; \$2.40, \$2.60, \$2.83, \$2.95 and then he eventually pegged it.

In fact, I was in San Fernando when he said that one cannot trust the PNM cabinet. I had to write it in my own hand and take it to the cabinet since one could not trust them because they leaked everything. Those were his actual words in addressing the San Fernando Chamber of Commerce after he pegged it. *[Interruption]* From \$2.40, the PNM again took it to \$3.65. *[Interruption]* The PNM took it to \$3.65. *[Interruption]* Not fluctuated between \$5.99, \$6.15, \$6.23, \$6.10 and \$6.12; from \$2.40 they took it to \$3.65. Does one know what they also did? They made the most serious error in any kind of currency arrangement, they had a two-tier arrangement. The most damaging thing to the TT dollar that ever took place was when the PNM pegged it at \$3.65, a two-tier. There was mas with the TT dollar. There was capital flight and all kind of finagling. *[Interruption]* That is okay, the Member does not matter. He does not count.

The TT dollar then went to \$4.25 and the two-tier was removed. The NAR took it to \$4.25, but look at what happened. The PNM took it to \$5.76, another quantum leap; a quantum leap from \$2.40 to \$3.60 and then from \$4.25 to \$5.65, another quantum leap. And they have the temerity to come into this House and attempt to fool the national community that this Government is in charge of an economy where the currency is unstable when in fact they have been finagling.

Mr. Speaker, when they were in office they had millions of dollars in foreign exchange and they squandered it. They had millions of dollars in all kinds of fund—agriculture fund, road fund, development fund, sports fund—and they squandered it. They bankrupt the country and today they talk about a government which is managing prudentially. I am amazed that they can stand—and that the national community would tolerate their standing—and make statements as those.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for San Fernando East made another error. Apparently he did not read the *Fiscal Measures 1997* on page 14, “Removal of Deductions or Allowances” which states that:

“The following deductions or allowances which were previously granted to resident individuals will be removed...”

It goes on to state that:

“It should be noted that the deduction in respect of payments made by companies to such charitable bodies, non-proprietary sporting clubs will continue to be allowed, the deduction must not exceed 15 per cent of the total income of the company as presently obtains.”

Yet he comes to this House and makes a statement, which is totally inaccurate, that this Government has removed this provision altogether and therefore, NGOs and other charitable bodies will suffer as a result. *[Interruption]* It is here. It is in the *Fiscal Measures 1997*. Does the Member not read? The Member cannot read? Is this also one of his errors? *[Interruption]* That is one of his defects, thank you.

Mr. Speaker, it amazes me that he would come to ask this House to tell him that it has not been removed when it is on page 14 of the *Fiscal Measures 1997* a document that was circulated to all hon. Members and he tries to fool the public by saying that this Government is uncaring, that we do not care about charities and, is therefore removing the provision so that companies cannot assist in their charitable—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker, the Member makes a big song and dance about the removal of the motor vehicle licence and that it would lead to all kinds of increases. I was looking at a programme on TV 6, about two mornings ago where Dr. Mahabir was analyzing the effect of this particular measure. I did not have an opportunity to write down all the facts and figures, but certainly, he made an analysis of several scenarios in which people have to pay \$200-plus to \$500-plus annual motor vehicle licence fee. In every case Dr. Mahabir—a lecturer in economics at the University of the West Indies—came up with an answer and conclusion that was in favour of the taxpayer. In other words, the removal of the motor vehicle licence fee is a boon to every taxpayer who owns a vehicle, and, as a consequence of which, it will not be necessary for taxis or people in public transportation to increase fares because it can be demonstrated that they can benefit as a result of the removal. That is what Dr. Mahabir said on television two mornings ago.

The Member for San Fernando East said that the reform of the tax system was introduced or undertaken by the PNM. Again, a total misrepresentation of the facts.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I am sorry to disturb the hon. Minister and I thank him for giving way, but I said that the tax reform system began in 1989, just for the purposes of the record.

Hon. M. Assam: Is the Member finished? He still said, and I quote him, that “tax reform was undertaken by the PNM”. Those are his words. The tax reform actually started with the NAR in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, what happened when the PNM came into office in 1991? They began to reverse because the NAR started a tax system that was placing emphasis on indirect taxation and gradual reduction of direct taxes by the introduction of

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. ASSAM]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

VAT. No sooner the PNM got into office, in their first year they immediately increased all the levels of income tax both individual and corporation tax. Yet, they have the gall to come today and say that we are reversing the trend when in fact, last year in the 1996 Budget this Government reduced the rate of income tax, corporation tax and the business levy, among many other taxes to the taxpayers of this country.

This year we have reduced the business levy to 0.33 per cent, and increased certain benefits to the business community, so that they can take advantage of certain kinds of allowances that in fact reduce their tax liabilities.

11.50 a.m.

In dealing with the personal income tax we have attempted to rationalize some of the situations. The complicated tax returns of six, seven or eight pages will inevitably be one or two pages so that everyone would be able to sit and make out his or her tax return without the aid of a consultant, and will not be in anyway cowed by not putting in a return as so many people are, and hence we do not get them into the tax net, or eventually they end up with penalties and interest payments; that is the intention. This Government is also committed to reducing taxes across the board for all and sundry. This is obviously contingent upon our revenue base, and as this improves in 1997, 1998 and 1999, there will be, commensurate reflection of a decline in tax rates by this Government.

The Member for San Fernando East said that old-age pension is a paltry \$420—which I think is quite unfortunate for him—but what did you do? Did his Government ever increase it by this volume when they were in office? We said that we would increase it to \$500 and after 13 months in office we have fulfilled part of that promise by moving it to \$420, and in the ensuing years hon. Members opposite will see the kinds of increases that people who unfortunately must receive old-age pension and other forms of social assistance, will get from this Government.

Even those people who think that the provision has been removed with respect to covenants and their charitable contributions, if one is really interested, sincere and meaningful in one's gestures to the needy and disadvantaged, a tax incentive or disincentive should not influence one's decision about charity. Whether there is an incentive or a disincentive he will be charitable. If you are caught in the net, give the 65 cents of the \$1.00, or the 72 cents of the \$1.00 as charity, and forget about the 28 or 35 cents tax, if you are serious about charity. Some people unfortunately are only enticed to certain things: when there is a carrot or alternatively, when there is a stick.

I do not want to go too much into this unfortunate mobster language that the Member for San Fernando East has introduced into this honourable House. Perhaps it is a reflection of some of the behaviour that he is accustomed to—I do not know—among his ranks. In what way can an introduction of a concept constitute mobsterism—if there is such a word? The Bill amending the Gaming Act would have to come to the Parliament, they will have their say and the opportunity to articulate any fears or concerns, although in large measure they will be hypocritical. This country was exposed to all forms of gambling by the PNM, who introduced a whole range of gambling and transformed Trinidad and Tobago into a legalize gambling society. Today he comes, and with hypocrisy frothing out of his mouth, the Member for San Fernando East says that we are going to transform this country into a mobster society.

The Bahamas, little St. Vincent, Barbados, Antigua, Puerto Rico and St. Lucia have casinos. It is not that we should mimic other people, but if in the determination of this Government it is felt that tourism has been neglected by the past administration—the PNM was in power for 30-odd years and totally neglected tourism—and we are now trying to give a fillip to the tourism industry, by offering different kinds of incentive, and developing certain kinds of policies that would attract investment into that area, they come here today with all kinds of hypocritical utterances trying to suggest that we are an immoral Government, and we are trying to make this into a mobster country. The Member for San Fernando East speaks about mobstering, it is this Government through a series of legislative measures in the last year that has tightened up on a lot of the money laundering, criminal and drug pushing activities in this country. We have been able to arrest a number of the large players in that particular area of criminal activity.

When this country had a licensing regime, the Member for San Fernando East as a minister was entitled to a licence to import a car and he imported a brand new Royal or Super Saloon at the time, and insured it for three months. What was the intention of insuring a car for three months?

Mr. Robinson: An astute businessman.

Hon. M. Assam: Not to make gain? You were allowed to import a car on a licence in order to perform your ministerial duties, and were given certain concessions. This minister imports a car and insures it for three months and then resells it at a profit. The car finds itself in the hands of someone who today is known as one of the big drug lords of the country. He has the temerity to come to this House and speak of money laundering. I feel saddened by this kind of

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. ASSAM]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

hypocrisy and betrayal of his leadership, and by the fact that he is aspiring to become Prime Minister again, and some people—in his Catilinarian walks around the country—might believe him.

He casts aspersions on my constituents. I represent the constituency of St. Joseph, and I would never come here and heap opprobrium on any constituent of the Members opposite; although the Members for Laventille East/Morvant and Port of Spain South have done it to certain women living in the Woodbrook area, repeatedly, much to our chagrin. Today he comes and attacks the integrity of my constituents in Bamboo which is part of the constituency of St. Joseph. Mr. Speaker, I ask the Member to apologize to the constituents of Bamboo because they are my constituents, and I feel very hurt that he has attacked their integrity, and that he has used the privilege of Parliament to do so. You coward! Go outside and do it. Go into Bamboo and do it and you would get the big bamboo if you go there.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the sitting of the House is suspended for lunch until 1.30 p.m.

12.00 noon: *Sitting suspended.*

1.32 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Hon. M. Assam: Mr. Speaker, when we took the lunch adjournment, I was excoriating the Member for San Fernando East for his veiled attack on my constituents in Bamboo—a part of the constituency of St. Joseph—whom I have the honour to represent.

At that time, I was attempting to disabuse the Member's mind of so many inaccuracies that he was attempting to foist upon this honourable House and, by extension, the national community. In terms of prices, I tried to explain to him that they have not been increased. In fact, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs had done a study—a sample of 26 supermarkets in 13 areas throughout the country. I was showing the Member how the prices have, in fact, declined in a number of areas, particularly food-stuff. I was also trying to tell him—if he did not know—that prescription drugs are under price control and the effect of which he was attempting to suggest would not take place. I was also telling him about Dr. Mahabir who was on the television recently analyzing the effect of the removal of motor vehicle licence fee and how that would have a positive effect on people. There would be savings in each of the categories whether one pays \$200, \$300, or \$400—there would be no need to pass on any additional costs to the users of

transport. In fact, this same lecturer, Dr. Dhanyshar Mahabir, senior lecturer, in a column in today's *Daily Express* headed: "UWI lecturer praises Budget" said that the Minister of Finance made sure that "...there is some kind of equity in the distribution of income in the entire society."

This is the same point that the Leader of the Opposition was making, that the new fiscal measures that the Minister of Finance sought to introduce into the 1997 Budget would create distortions and inequities—a contention that has been blown away by the erudite and trained senior economist at the University of the West Indies.

It is also equally instructive to read to this honourable House, some comments from a booklet that I am sure hon. Members received from various tax accountants and various firms. This one is from Price Waterhouse. It is interesting that they received comments from all the important business organizations and even individuals in the country, and they are recorded here. I would like to read into the records some of the comments from this document:

"The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce.

Budget 1997, can be best described as a strengthening of the safety net." Contrary to what the Leader of the Opposition was trying to argue and quite erroneously. The article went on to state:

"The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce would, first of all like to congratulate the Government on its management of the economy during 1996." *[Interruption]*

I know, the Chamber is a stooge. I understand that from the hon. Member for Diego Martin West. Those are the only words he has in his vocabulary to decry people. *[Interruption]*

"This is a most progressive and intelligent budget."

Mr. Speaker, this is another business organization:

"We support the concept of a 'total quality nation;".

adumbrated in the budget speech delivered by the Minister of Finance. It goes on:

"We applaud the initiative in respect to education and training..."

The Member for San Fernando East stood and told the nation that there is no provision for education and training but, whatever little this Government had for training, he visited Germany in 1993 to organize it, and at the same time organized a scholarship for one of his siblings.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. ASSAM]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Mr. Speaker, this side had done nothing. Everything that this Government has done, the Opposition initiated it. They “would have, should have and could have” as we heard this morning—my administration “would have done” so and so. All the time one heard it during the last year, very painfully being echoed around.

“We support the concept of a ‘total quality nation’. We applaud the initiative in respect to education and training, the attention to the aged and disabled...”

Something that the Member tried to pooh-pooh in his presentation, stating that it was a bit of crumbs that we were giving to the old-age pensioners. But here it is the Southern Chamber of Commerce were saying that they applaud the initiative and the attention given to the aged and disabled.

Infrastructural development, especially in rural areas, in support of agricultural policy. The Member said we have no agricultural policy but here is the Southern Chamber of Commerce, a business organization, saying they are in support of what we are doing.

The Member also spoke about the \$1.7 billion which, in their four years they had never ever attempted to introduce because they were not interested in development in this country. They were merely interested in spending money at the recurrent level and getting very little for it. Whatever little they spent on development, there were cost overruns and incomplete work at the end of the day, like the bridge in Maraval—that “white elephant” which the former Minister of Works and Transport built at a high cost to the taxpayer. Today, it is not being used and there is enormous traffic congestion taking place in that well built-up area. That is the kind of stewardship they had. Because this Government is interested in equitable balance, growth and development—it is placing emphasis on development throughout the entire society, whether it is urban or rural—one gets the criticism that \$1.7 billion should not be spent. That is the kind of pique that one gets from them.

The Southern Chamber of Commerce applauded the attention and focus on tourism given to Tobago, including the inclusion of the gaming laws. The Member asked whether we consulted the Tobago House of Assembly. They should be ashamed to ask that. They were so badly trounced, so badly routed, devastated, repelled and repulsed by the people of Tobago that the man who was on the television programme, the *Issues Live*, by the name of Mr. London, said that he was a leader, and he asked Mr. Christo who he was, and said he could not talk to him. This “leader” was routed and now he has to come crawling, eating humble pie to

be nominated as a councillor. Mr. Speaker, leaders are elected and not appointed. Always remember that. For Mr. London to stand and say he is a leader of Tobago, he must be a joker.

1.40 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: I think having regard to the utterance which was just made, it is necessary for the Chair to clear the air with respect to his own position. I think it ought to be understood, first of all, that the Speaker has absolutely no pretensions to leadership and when it goes into the record that the Speaker is being reminded that leaders are elected, not nominated, that certainly does not apply to me. So that I would prefer not to be drawn into any dialogue and any confusion.

Hon. M. Assam: Mr. Speaker, I am absolutely sure that my statements could not have been construed as referring to the Hon. Speaker's position, because I am fully aware that a Speaker could be either an elected Member of the House of Representatives or could be drawn from outside of the House. I am fully aware of the constitutional provision, so I do not understand why Members opposite have displayed such crass ignorance of the constitutional provisions. But this is what the people spoke on if the Member does not know. They spoke on it and they rejected him as they have rejected him in four successive elections.

The American Chamber (AMCHAM) says it is a well-presented budget which provides for four per cent growth in 1997. The Member knows he cannot read. He is attempting to question me on Latin and he does not even understand elementary Latin.

The Trinidad and Tobago Hotel Tourism Association says that in general the budget appears good and less burdensome than in the past. It goes on to comment on the positive effect that it would have on tourism.

The Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association says that they support all these initiatives committed to the realization of four per cent growth—strengthening of tax compliance, merging of VAT and the income tax administration; simplification of the personal income tax structure; an increased PSIP programme, that is the \$1.7 billion; and initiatives with regard to culture and steelband.

The Member for San Fernando East attempted to suggest that there was nothing with respect to culture, but he does not understand what culture is about. That is his short-coming always. He speaks about things that he does not understand. He should take a course in sociology to understand the true meaning of culture. But he is a geologist by profession and he should understand, when he

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. ASSAM]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

is speaking in this House, that he is talking to the large national community and he should talk sense.

He also spoke about the entertainment industry. I am happy to report that one of the Ministers responsible for TIDCO has undertaken a comprehensive study on the entertainment industry at my behest. They have reported and a company is about to be formed. In 1997 you will see the mobilization, commercialization and galvanization of all the talent and forces in the entertainment industry that will create employment, generate foreign exchange and begin to market Trinidad and Tobago—its culture, its music, entertainment—and the synergies of tourism and exports. That will be seen in 1997 and beyond, so the Member for San Fernando East is totally ignorant, again, of what he is talking about.

In the last budget, they thought they knew. They just demitted office—they all did not just demit office. They were beaten. They were thrown out of office. They should stop saying that they demitted office—demit is voluntary. They were thrown out so they had to leave. After they were removed from office they thought they knew a little and they talked a lot last year on the basis of memory of what they had in the few months before they left office, but not this year. They do not know what is going on, so they should wait to be educated and informed.

Concerning environmental initiatives, the Member for San Fernando East stated that we said nothing about the environment. I am also pleased to report that the Minister of Consumer Affairs is going to be hosting a conference in March 1997 to commemorate World Consumers' Rights Day as we did in 1996. The theme of our conference and symposium and a comprehensive project document have already been developed. The theme would be "Sustainable Consumption and the Environment."

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the Member for St. Joseph has expired.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Hon. M. Assam: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I also thank the Members for extending my speaking time, although I suspect that there was some ungraciousness on the other side, but I have grown accustomed to this ungraciousness. My mother used to say that if you were not brought up with couth and "broughtupsy", it would extend throughout your adult life and we are seeing a great manifestation of that in the Benches opposite.

Let me continue on what the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association had to say on this important budget statement. I have already spoken about the environmental initiative to which they referred—reduction in the business levy—and it was the PNM which brought in the business levy. It is this Government, in two successive budgets, which has reduced the business levy and, therefore, it has increased the amount available for businessmen to reinvest from their surplus or retained earnings as a result of the reduction, particularly for small business. This is a particularly good measure for small business and I hope that before long my colleague, the Minister of Finance, will have the necessary revenue capability to remove this provision once and for all. I hope so.

Employment incentive we fully support. When we assumed office, the unemployment rate was in the vicinity of 17.2 per cent. Today the unemployment rate is around 15.1 per cent and it is the commitment of this Government to continue to bring down that rate in order to bring about a situation where we have single-digit unemployment rate before the end of our term. We are doing that by pursuing several measures and this is one of them. We are giving a 200 per cent incentive for job creation as a tax credit. It was 150 per cent before and we are attempting an increase in this tax credit to ensure that jobs are created, particularly, in the non-oil sector. We are also trying to create more inward investment and before long, there would be a new bill being brought before the Parliament. We now have the Foreign Investment Act. Before long there would be the Investment Promotion Act (IPA), by which we would be giving special incentives to that area of the non-oil sector.

1.50 p.m.

If Members of this honourable House had read the industrial policy which I had the honour to lay in Parliament about two months ago, they would have seen a number of provisions for the creation of enterprise zones and other fiscal incentives in order to create employment, attract investors and generate jobs in Trinidad and Tobago, particularly in those areas which are lagging to bring about and fulfil the concept of integrated balance, growth and development. This is particularly for places such as Laventille, John John, Morvant, Mayaro, Guayaguayare, Naparima, Oropouche, Siparia, Toco and Matelot which the PNM neglected for about 30 years, to the extent that their first leader had said that Marac, the last village in Moruga, was behind the donkey's tail. That is the kind of respect they have for people. That was a place that did not have water, electricity and roads for over 30 years. Their first leader made that comment. We intend to correct that situation

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. ASSAM]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

and bring balanced growth and development to every citizen in Trinidad and Tobago. We feel that every citizen is entitled to the fruits of the land and to enjoy the national patrimony which is theirs.

The tenth point the TTMA made on this budget deals with provisions for low-income persons with regard to personal taxes and the increase in old-age pension. That is what the TTMA is saying contrary to what the Leader of the Opposition attempted to foist on this House. There were inaccurate and erroneous opinions and interpretations to mislead the national community. He continued to engage in inflammatory language, as I said, like Catiline, moving along the country attempting to create disorder and civil disturbance, saying that this country is in a state of crisis.

This country is beginning to see a new wave and era of prosperity and freedom that people can breathe again; people can feel satisfied and comfortable to live in Trinidad and Tobago, to be called citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and to make their contributions to national development. That is the kind of government there is in the UNC/NAR. I can move on and on, but there is no need to because all the comments are positive.

I was absolutely astounded to hear that the Leader of the Opposition is opposed to a national steel orchestra. It seems to me that if Trinidad and Tobago can develop a national steel orchestra, as some countries have developed a national symphony orchestra, it would be the manifestation of our souls, ethos, cultural values, musical talents and a sense of identity. That is what the Member for San Fernando East is against. If his opinion is that of the party, then this country is lost, and does not deserve that kind of politician and political party to deny us of the cultivation and establishment of a national steel orchestra.

He asked what would happen to the others and if they would starve. How will that preclude Desperadoes, Silver Stars, Carib Tokyo, Samaroo Jets and all the other bands from going abroad to different countries and enjoying all the various musical benefits which they have enjoyed in the past? How would the establishment or creation of a national steel orchestra preclude other artistes and steelbands from enjoying the benefits of their talents and, at the same time, earning a good living and creating jobs for their people? I cannot see how. The two things are not incompatible. I do not understand the logic, if there is any.

He went on to motor vehicles. Rules and regulations are spelt out in the *Fiscal Measures 1997* to deal with the new regulations pertaining to the importation of used cars. They deal with consumer protection in terms of warranties, garages and the Licensing Authority which would be responsible for making plates for motor

vehicles. They are carefully notated in the document. Yet, the Member for San Fernando East makes the most reckless and irresponsible statements about this Government's introduction of used cars into the country. It baffles me to hear a supposed leader make such a statement when it is all contained in three pages of this document. It is very clear to me that because we are opening up the car market for persons who hitherto could not afford a car, and it was out of their reach, the PNM is unhappy about that.

The PNM has always been against poor people because during its 35 years in office poor people have suffered in this country. Their standard of living has eroded and they have never been able to pull them up by their bootstrap. On the contrary, they have dragged them into the dust. They have destroyed the values, the foundation, the educational system, the agricultural system, the roads and everything in this country. Today, we are suffering from it. This Government has to take up the tab and produce water, electricity, drainage, roads and whatever is necessary to sustain life, and take us to the new level of economic development into the new millennium. It is an amazing indictment on those people, that they have been in power for 35 years and this country has not gone forward.

Mr. Speaker, I just had the great opportunity and privilege to visit Singapore for about six days.

Mr. Imbert: At what cost?

Hon. M. Assam: They are asking about cost. They should tell me the cost of the visit to Hong Kong. The Minister of Trade and Industry and Minister of Consumer affairs is still getting bills from Hong Kong. I just got a bill for \$500,000 and they have the brazen face to ask about cost. These people are not serious about cost. It was necessary cost to participate in this conference to the extent that there was a newspaper clipping on the first page of the *Business Times of Singapore*, the most influential paper in Singapore. It is not the yellow journalism which is found in certain countries of the world. The front page stated that Mervyn Assam, the Minister of Trade and Industry and Minister of Consumer Affairs from Trinidad and Tobago spoke for many. It was the only Third World country mentioned outside of Europe, Canada and the United States. Now they are asking about the cost of the trip. That is value. They should be proud to see Trinidad and Tobago on the front page of the *Business Times of Singapore*. This is one of the most progressive countries in the world.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. ASSAM]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

For 35 years they have been independent. They have created an economic miracle for themselves with education, training, housing, water and other infrastructure. That country is like Shangri-La. The island of Sentosa is like the Garden of Eden. It is an island of 275 square miles with the same multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural problems which we say are here. We have asphalt, oil and gas. They have no resources except their human resources. They had one of the most serious threats from communism which we never had. In 30 years that country has built foreign reserves of US \$59 billion which is being invested by the Government Investment Corporation all over the world, and yielding returns, increasing that US \$59 billion.

2.00 p.m.

That is management, that is leadership, that is stewardship, that is what is called people-centred development which this Government is now pursuing. The Member asked about cost, he should ask me about Hong Kong because the cost was Hong Kong flu for all who came back and made the Prime Minister at the time talk so much nonsense in his television address on May 6 that one thought he was suffering from some sort of delusion.

Mr. Speaker, I want you to understand that all of the fiscal measures that are contained in the 1997 Budget are a continuation of the 1996 Budget which produced extraordinary results. Unemployment dropped from 17.2 per cent to 15.1 per cent. Inflation dropped from 5.8 per cent to 3.2 per cent. We have had growth in the economy, and GDP was 3.2 per cent. Our reserves have gone to over \$600 million. We had surpluses in the capital account, and we had a surplus on our current account. Is that not fiscal management of the highest order? Can one fault a Government who, after one year in office, has produced such brilliant positive results? We have social peace and stability in this country, where everybody feels that he is part of the society and that the concept of a government of national unity is working for one and all including the Members opposite. Some of them do not even come to Parliament. They go about having employment consultancies all over the place, which almost reminds me of a Latin expression, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Member: Say it right this time.

Hon. M. Assam: I always say it right. *Ubi panis, ibi patria*, which means this is not your *patria* because your *panis* is outside. Your fatherland is where you are making your bread; that is the expression, that is what it means and many of them are making it outside, so how could they be loyal to the *patria* when their *panis* is outside?

Miss Nicholson: Call names.

Hon. M. Assam: No. I am not going to call names, but they are flying all over the place and cannot come to Parliament to do the people's business. That is the situation.

Mr. Speaker, I have just enumerated all the gains, the pluses and all the positives that have accrued as a result of the fiscal, economic and prudential management of this economy in the fiscal year 1996. We move into 1997 with a set of measures that are calculated to ensure and reinforce that we not only maintain, but we achieve even higher gains in 1997 and beyond.

We have taken care of the poor and the disadvantaged; we have increased old-age pensions; we have a safety net that has been increased; we have the National Social Development Council dedicated to the eradication of poverty; we have placed emphasis on culture, the environment, agriculture, the building of homes, settlements, infrastructure, highways, overpasses, drainage, and education. We are building 22 schools and repairing 32; polyclinics will be built and the supply of potable water will be increased substantially in the year 1997 and beyond. That is the kind of Government that is serving the people of this country and that is not all. This is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the kind of economic miracles that we intend to work before the end of our term, and I can assure you that as we move surefooted into the new millennium—because we will be here until 2000 and beyond—Trinidad and Tobago will see a Government serving a people who will be proud to be Trinidadians and Tobagonians and proud to make their contribution in whatever way they are called upon to make it because this is my land, this is your land, this is our land, and this land was made for you and me.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Colm Imbert (*Diego Martin East*): Mr. Speaker, listening to the Member for St. Joseph, I am reminded of a song originating from Jamaica by an artiste called Shaggy. The song is Mr. Bombastic—*[Laughter]* and it is symptomatic of the contempt that the UNC Government has for this Parliament when, immediately after the contribution of the Leader of the Opposition who raised many important and serious issues, that they sent in the court jester, the Tommy Joseph, the Sprangalang of the other side. *[Laughter]*

I do not know if he has another trip to go on but, Mr. Speaker, I wonder where the Member for St. Joseph was during the budget speech. He has now apologized to this Parliament for being unable to get sufficient coverage in the local newspapers.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. IMBERT]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

He spent hundreds of thousands of taxpayers dollars parading in Singapore at our expense.

Mr. Speaker, I am looking through the notes which I made when the Member was speaking and I wonder whether he is living in Trinidad and Tobago because the 35,000 persons in my constituency are of the view that food prices have gone up in 1996. [*Desk thumping*] I do not know to which country the Member belongs—he is always out of the country anyway—but for his information, food prices have gone up. There is no need to say anymore on that. There are thousands of people below the poverty line; the under-employed, and the under-class are all aware of that and will laugh at the assertions of the Member for St. Joseph.

He also was very trivial and trite in his approach to this vexed question of the removal of allowances and concessions for deeds of covenant. I was amazed at his suggestion that persons who wish to give contributions to charitable bodies instead of giving them a dollar should now give 65 cents. Is he saying that we should give them less? Is that what he is saying? Because the effect of his proposal is a 35 per cent reduction in the donations to charitable bodies. He has no idea of what he says.

2.10 p.m.

Let us look at what the churches are saying. Let us look at the *Trinidad Guardian* dated Tuesday, December 17, 1996. It says:

“Roman Catholic Archbishop, Anthony Pantin, has said the Minister of Finance, Brian Kuei Tung, has given no strong arguments for the legalising of casinos.

He said in a release yesterday the arguments put forward by Kuei Tung were ‘not at all convincing,’ and he has given ‘no facts to back them up.’

Said Pantin: ‘As everyone knows this is an issue on which many of our citizens feel very strongly and for many their views are based on their religious fate.’ (Sic)

Pantin suggested it would have been appropriate for Kuei Tung to consult the religious leaders of the country beforehand and ‘give us the opportunity to dialogue with him.’

On the removal of tax deductions for deeds of covenant, he said: ‘Again no convincing arguments have been put forward to show that this measure is necessary.’”

This is the Roman Catholic Archbishop speaking, not the Member for St. Joseph, who clearly does not live in this country.

“He said that would impact very seriously on the finances of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), many of whom are attached to religious groups.

He has asked that the Minister reconsider the two measures.”

The fact is, Mr. Speaker, there can be no argument that charitable bodies will suffer as a result of the removal of the allowance for deed of covenant contributions in this budget, unless the allowance is returned. To say simply that companies can still do it denies the fact that a large number of individuals, for religious and other reasons, contribute to charitable bodies through a deed of covenant. They are now telling individuals that they can incorporate themselves to take advantage of tax benefits. The Member for St. Joseph was simply “talking through his hat”. He had no idea of what he was speaking.

He quoted several sources praising the budget. As is normal, many of these persons jumped out too soon, before they analyzed the true effect of the budgetary measures. Since the budget, I have been in receipt of a number of memoranda. Major financial institutions involved in pension funds have been in contact with me. They are very saddened by the impact of the punitive and oppressive measures of the Minister of Finance.

I have before me a copy of a letter written to the Minister of Finance by one of the leading actuarial firms in Trinidad and Tobago. I shall read it into the records:

“Tax treatment of Pension Plan Contributions/Deferred Annuity Premiums

In your Budget speech you spoke of the need to ‘encourage the savings and investment effort’—I agree wholeheartedly. I was therefore surprised by your proposal to limit the aggregate deductions for mortgage interest, deferred annuity premiums and pensions and NIS contributions to a maximum of \$18,000. For many people with mortgages, this would effectively mean no tax relief at all on pension contributions and deferred annuity premiums. I believe that this would be a major retrograde step for the following reasons:

- (1) The level of retirement savings in the country will certainly decline, thus creating new generations of poor retirees in the future.”

When one thinks about that, look at the long-term effects of this oppressive budget. Persons will now have to make a choice as to whether they invest in a

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. IMBERT]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

property mortgage or whether they invest in a pension. For some persons already at the margin with their mortgage payments, they will have to abandon pension contributions. What does this mean? The level of national savings will decline. The pension funds will decline and we will create generations of people in the future who will have no income on their retirement. This is in reality the effect of the Minister's "kinder budget".

"(2) A large proportion of what retirement savings do remain will be invested overseas rather than locally ..."

This is a fact. A number of pension funds will go off-shore, thus putting further pressure on the exchange rate. This is not the bombastic Member for St. Joseph. This is an actuary. If the Minister can respond, I would be most happy to hear what he has to say.

"(3) Insurance companies will experience reduced income possibly threatening solvency.

(4) Pension plans will be restructured to eliminate the extra tax burden on employees and so the change will only be partially successful as an income raising measure.

I urge you to reconsider this proposal ..."

This is from one of the leading actuaries in the country. Obviously, they do not write to the Minister of Trade and Industry because clearly he is either not in the country or he would not be interested. Let us see what one of the major banking institutions, a trust company, has to say on this matter:

"...we need to consider the following:

"1. the impact on employers' approved Pension Plans where contribution is mandatory by members."

What happens if I am employed in a company and it is a requirement that I contribute to a pension plan? I also have a mortgage and am at the margin. What should I do? I have to contribute to my pension so I stop paying my mortgage. I lost my home. This is one of the effects of the bunching together of mortgage interest payments and annuity and pension payments and reducing the total amount.

The Government made a big "to do" about the charges in taxation, which I will deal with in a little more detail in a short while. They claimed that they had introduced a basic deductible allowance of \$20,000 and a further allowance of \$18,000 to cover mortgage interest, pensions and so forth. I will take myself as an example. I claim mortgage interest of \$20,000 per annum and I am not unusual.

Mortgage interest of \$20,000 per annum is on a mortgage of say, \$200,000 for a modest home. So the \$20,000 ceiling that existed previously is not unusual. A large proportion of mortgage payers are in that bracket.

As a Parliamentarian I am required by law to contribute to the parliamentary pension plan, six per cent of my income. So if I add my \$20,000 mortgage interest deduction and the six per cent pension, my deductions last year from my parliamentary income would have been \$24,000. The Minister of Finance has now chopped that to \$18,000 and I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that someone earning \$5,000 to \$6,000 per month is not an unusual person. I am simply taking myself as an example. There are a number of persons who earn \$5,000 a month and above and who have mortgages where they are paying \$1,700. They are at the margin of income qualification, paying 5 to 6 per cent of their income; they are paying \$400 per month in pension and all of them would have been adversely affected by this budget.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister and the UNC coalition continue to engage in sleight of hand. I heard the bombastic Member for St. Joseph read some release saying that this budget was for the elderly and so forth. I have looked very carefully at the Minister's budget address and the dishonesty of this Government is evident here. Let us look at what the Minister says about income tax. It is pure dishonesty. The budget statement refers to the following tax credits which are to be removed:

Personal Credit	\$600.00;
Spouse Credit	\$600.00;
Child Credit	\$100
Marginal Relief	\$1,200, and so forth.

The Minister rushed through his speech. When one goes into the fiscal measures, Mr. Speaker, what does one see? One sees that the further tax credit of \$600 granted to resident individuals who have attained the age of 60 years shall be removed. When one goes into the calculations, however, these are clearly for people under the age of 60 because no where in the calculations is the tax credit for senior citizens incorporated—sleight-of-hand, dishonesty, deception.

2.20 p.m.

They also assume that persons at that income level do not invest in credit unions because they have put a zero allocation. Who are the people who invest in credit unions, Mr. Speaker? The little people earning \$2,000, \$2,500 or \$3,000 per

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. IMBERT]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

month. These are the people who make up the back-bone of contributors to credit unions. Of course, in the dishonest calculations of the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism, he has left out all of that. He has shown an example where, only when one gets up to \$5,000 per month does one miraculously decide to invest in credit unions. The reality is that the vast majority of persons are going to be paying more tax in 1997 than they paid in 1996.

Let us go to the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism's 1996 Budget statement. Mr. Speaker, they feel they could fool everybody, but people could read. Page 17 states:

“Under the existing regime, where the individual's chargeable income is \$16,000 or less, no tax is payable and marginal relief is provided for persons with chargeable income between \$16,000 and \$20,000. I propose to increase the current exemption to \$20,000. What this means is that an individual with a chargeable income of \$20,000 or less will pay no tax.”

These were the words of the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism in 1996.

The Minister has, in effect, taken away all the credits and allowances and so forth which resulted in persons earning \$20,000 paying no tax and replaced it with a \$20,000 tax deductible allowance. It is six of one and half a dozen of the other. He has achieved absolutely nothing. On top of that, Mr. Speaker, he has abolished the two low tax bands of five and 15 per cent and replaced the top marginal rates with two bands of 28 per cent and 35 per cent. When people get their pay packets in January, 1997, they would bawl and all this talk about a fantastic budget and so forth—when senior citizens realize they can no longer claim a tax credit of \$600.00 they will bawl. Mr. Speaker, it is all dishonesty and a sleight-of-hand. It is trick and trickery of the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism.

Let me now deal with some of the issues that were raised in this Parliament in 1996. We told the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism, a chartered accountant, or so he claims, that his figures were bogus—funny money. He puffed his chest, got up from his chair and said, “I am a chartered accountant, you are a geologist, do not tell me about money, I will not tell you about rocks.” We told the minister that his VAT figures and the National Lottery figures were inflated. It is there is *Hansard*. He ranted and raved and said, “I am a chartered accountant, I do not make mistakes.”

Let us go to the figures on page 8, *Draft Estimates of Revenue, 1997: 1996* estimate of value added tax, \$1,768, billion. Mr. Speaker, we pointed out to the

goodly gentleman—that chartered accountant—that VAT collections had peaked in 1995, had levelled off, and to believe that he could collect an additional \$400 million in VAT in 1996 was fictitious and contrived and he was merely putting in figures to balance the figures. What is the reality, Mr. Speaker? Instead of a \$1.7 billion collection in VAT there was a \$1.4 billion collection. The actual figure projected was \$1.768 billion, the revised figure is \$1.421 billion, a shortfall of \$347 million. Mr. Speaker, he carried on and said he was a big chartered accountant.

Mr. Manning: “Do not tell me about figures, I will not tell you about rocks.”

Mr. C. Imbert: Exactly! Who have rocks in their heads now? *[Laughter]*

I move on to the National Lottery. The *Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure 1996*, page 100: 1996 estimate for on-line games—\$1.175 billion. In the *Revised Estimates, 1996*—\$965 million, a difference of \$210 million. This is the great accountant, he wants to tell us about rocks. Mr. Speaker, \$347 million less than what was estimated in VAT; \$210 million less than what was estimated in the National Lottery—funny money—over \$550 million. *[Desk thumping]* What saved him, Mr. Speaker? Oil price.

Let us look at from where the money came. The 1996 estimate of revenue from oil companies was \$1.437 billion, the actual revised estimate, \$1.891 billion, an increase of \$460 million. Mr. Speaker, because there were fortuitous events in the Middle East—outside of Trinidad and Tobago, over which the Minister of Finance has no control—the country received almost over \$500 million in windfall income from oil revenues. *[Interruption]* I am just looking at taxes on oil companies, I am not looking at other things.

Let us look at the excuse they gave in the *Review of the Economy*. We told the Minister of Finance that VAT collections would not meet his expectations. Mr. Speaker, when one is in school and one does not do one’s sums and homework right one has to give an excuse to the teacher, well here is the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism’s excuse to the teacher. On page 24 of the *Review of the Economy* it states:

“Notwithstanding the increase in amount of Value Added Tax collected, a shortfall is projected with respect to the original 1996 projection mainly due to non-compliance by the taxpayers.”

What utter nonsense! If one looks at the trends in VAT collections, anybody with a grain of sense would have seen that VAT had levelled off in 1995 and whether taxpayers complied or not, one could not have collected that revenue.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. IMBERT]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

What is going on in 1997? The Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism has gotten more sense. What is his projection for 1997? *[Interruption]* Oh, I beg your pardon, he has fudged it again. It is \$1.65 billion. Mr. Speaker, he collected \$1.4 billion in 1996, he is now going to collect \$1.65 billion in 1997. From where would this money come? *[Interruption]* VAT did not account for any in 1996.

I hope that when the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism—who, after all is a guest in this House because, he is not an elected Member—comes into this House and his bogus arithmetic is corrected—*[Interruption]*

2.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the Member who is on his legs is seeking protection from the Chair. He must be given a chance to make his contribution.

Mr. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, I hope the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism would show a little more humility when his bogus arithmetic is exposed on this and future occasions.

Let us return to the bombastic Member for St. Joseph. Leaders are elected, not appointed. What about the Minister of Public Administration and Information—a three-time loser at the polls? Is he insulting his own Minister of Public Administration and Information? Mr. Speaker, the man has no class. *[Desk thumping]* He just speaks out of turn. He goes through some documents that somebody handed him and talks about the reduction of business levy from 0.4 per cent to 0.33 per cent, and this is supposed to be a big deal. Is that a reduction, Member for St. Joseph? The Member has no training in arithmetic although he is a banker. Is that a reduction. of 0.07 per cent?

For the benefit of hon. Members opposite, a company with a turnover of \$100 million, the benefit is \$70,000 per annum; for a company with a turnover of \$10 million, the benefit is \$7,000 per annum, and for a company with a turnover of \$1 million, the benefit is \$700.00. That is a small business. A small business is a business in the vicinity of \$200,000 to \$300,000 that would benefit, maybe, \$400.00 from this reduction in business levy. It is an absolute absurdity. It is a trick. Companies with turnovers in excess of \$50 million, \$100million, \$200 million and \$300 million are going to benefit from any reduction in business levy—not the small man, who is getting a benefit of \$35.00 a month from this fantastic reduction in business levy.

Mr. Speaker, they speak with two faces and the Member for St. Joseph continues to expose himself. He came into this Parliament not prepared to speak;

he did no research; he did not study the budget; he just got up and spoke in his usual way—full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

He spoke of a new wave of prosperity and freedom. Well, the only prosperity and freedom that are going to take place in Trinidad and Tobago is the freedom of the boys to make plenty of money and increase their prosperity. That is the only freedom that is going to take place in Trinidad and Tobago—business associates and friends of the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism. Those boys would have freedom to “mash up the place”.

This is a budget that has been hijacked by the political investors in the UNC. The Government has been hijacked. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, if one looks through the budget, what is there? Nothing significant was done with regard to corporation tax to increase investment; nothing was done with income tax to help poor people, old people and charitable bodies; only punitive and oppressive measures. The legalizing of casino gambling is in there— [*Interruption*] “Pearl of the Americas.” Is “Pearl of the Americas” the name of it, Mr. Speaker? I remembered that proposal and it will come just now.

Mr. Speaker, I had a difficulty listening to the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism talking about family values, religious traditions and so forth. What has happened since the Minister of Finance was appointed by the Member for Couva North? Alcohol can now be sold on Sundays; we can have “quicky” marriages in three days and now the mafia and organized crimes are coming to Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, they could say what they want, the fact of the matter is, that the Government has been hijacked by the boys—Ish, Steve—and the girls. When we move on to alimony we would talk about that. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Speaker, the Member for St. Joseph, again, was carrying on about the progressive measures of this Government with regard to used cars and motor vehicles and so forth. We went at pains last year to tell them that they were making a mistake in legalizing the foreign-used market, that there were problems with car stealing, safety problems that would affect the used-car market in Trinidad and Tobago and so forth. They laughed; and ignored us. The Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism said we were paranoid; the Minister of Planning and Development said that was no big thing. What do I see in this budget? An apology, a recognition that we were correct. I have never seen such punitive measures.

The Minister makes a “gambage” about removing licence fees so one would not have to wait in lines anymore. Private vehicles now have to be inspected but I

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. IMBERT]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

guess I do not have to wait in a line for that. I will not be able to use my own number plate, I have to get it from the United States but I guess I do not have to wait in a line for that. There will be a registration sticker on my vehicle instead of a licence sticker but I guess I do not have to wait in a line for that or pay for it—deception, dishonesty, sleight-of-hand! When one adds the cost of new number plates, inspection of private vehicles, new registration stickers and the inconvenience, the bureaucracy that is going to be created would be 10 times worse than ever existed under the licence fee regime. [*Desk thumping*] People are going to hold their heads and bawl like 10 Tarzans when they find out.

Look at the effect on the small man. The owner of a two-car garage—the small man straightening and painting under a tree in Laventille, or in Frederick Settlement in Caroni—cannot be happy. Look at what the small man—the supporter of the UNC; the supporter of the PNM—has to do now, as stated in pages 9 and 10 of *Fiscal Measures 1997*:

“—all garages be registered and licensed annually and be VAT certified; a licence fee structure to be established based on the operating size of the business...the conditions for the granting of licences to be based on the following...”

Opening up further avenues for corruption. It continues:

“—skills level and human resource capability.”

Subjective.

“—physical infrastructure in terms of plant and equipment”

Subjective.

“—compliance with specific safety and operational standards”

Subjective.

“adequate property insurance coverage.”

Listen to this:

“—as a condition for the granting and renewal of licences, all garages will undergo an annual (possibly random) inspection, the first inspection to be undertaken by all the relevant authorities to determine suitability to undertake the work as specified in the licence...thereafter, the annual inspection will be undertaken by garage inspectors with the requisite knowledge of standards in all areas.”

Who is going to pay for all of this? The taxpayer. When the cost of motor vehicle repair skyrockets, the taxpayer will have to pay.

It goes on:

“—all garages will be required to keep strict and comprehensive records on work undertaken on vehicles, particularly those on which major structural repairs have been carried out;

all garages which are authorized to undertake major structural repairs on vehicles will be required to post a bond of a value not less than 20 per cent of the value of the business undertaken in the first year...this bond to be forfeited if there is breach of established standards...

a penalty system”

2:40 p.m.

They have gone from one extreme to the other. First, they open up the used car market for their friends and supporters; for people involved in illegal activities. We tell them that there are problems with this matter. We tell them to put the administrative systems in place first before doing this. They laughed at us. Now what are they doing? They are introducing a regime of bureaucracy and potential corruption that will shut down 90 per cent of the little garages in Trinidad and Tobago and put hundreds, maybe thousands of people out of work. That is what they are doing. Go ahead!

Mr. Speaker, whenever one is implementing measures, one has to balance the effect of the measures against inconvenience that these measures cause. They have unified the duty on spare parts and shells thereby increasing the rate of duty on spare parts; they are introducing punitive and oppressive systems for licensing garages, thereby increasing the cost of repairs; they have increased the price of gas and then they say no more taxes.

I remember the American President, George Bush, “read my lips”, “no real taxes”, he lost an election. Go ahead! He did not last because people do not like it when they are misled. He said no new taxes, went into office, raised taxes and lost the election. The Member has no idea of what he is talking. The bombastic Member for St. Joseph, jumping like a parrot to the Member for Caroni East. He does not think before he engages his mouth. *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. Assam: You are the parrot. In fact, I think you are a picoplat, not a parrot.

Mr. Imbert: This is not a people's budget. It is clear to me that this administration has no intention of calling elections in 1997 because when the backlash comes, they are going to be under severe pressure. There is nothing in here for people, Mr. Speaker. All there is in this budget is increased cost of transportation, increased cost of repairs, taking away of benefits for senior citizens, increased cost of living because the Minister glossed over this foreign exchange problem.

I remember the Member for Couva North jumping up and putting his usual "goat mouth" on the fiscal and monetary stability of this country, saying that the rate is not in danger. That it will appreciate, and then "Mr. Bombastic" jumps up about a week later saying that they were "taking measures" and will fix the rate and it will appreciate." What is the rate now? It is \$6.25.

The Minister of Finance, who admitted his failure, his incompetence, by pegging our dollar now at \$6.25, said in an apology for his inability to deal with the very serious foreign exchange crisis in this country, that the rate will fluctuate at current levels. Mr. Speaker, I have some knowledge of sales. The fact is, I know what floating means. Floating means "stay above water." I have never seen a floating rate that is only sinking. *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. M. Assam: It shows your ignorance of economics.

Mr. C. Imbert: They are not fooling anybody. The Member for St. Joseph talked about going to Geneva, or somewhere, and Singapore, and going in some currency market and a fellow with 25 phones, and the phones only ringing, "bram bram," and the trading in currencies. The difference between those countries and ours is that those rates depreciate and appreciate. The pound strengthens and it weakens; the dollar strengthens and it weakens; the Deutschemark strengthens and it weakens; the TT dollar weakens and it weakens under the UNC coalition. That is the difference. *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. Speaker, they talk all sorts of economic gibberish about increasing the reserve requirement, tightening liquidity, all sorts of foolishness. What happened to the rate? It keeps going down and investment is affected by increased interest rates. Interest rate going up, exchange rate going down. That is the monetary policy.

The point I made is that people have a habit in this country of jumping up too soon. All those businessmen are holding their heads and bawling now because they are the ones who invested annuities which were just chopped to pieces. The higher income payer, the businessman, he gets his tax shelter through pension payments

and annuities. The same ones who are jumping up and bawling “good budget” because they have not realized that their pockets have been attacked by the UNC coalition, they are jumping up too soon. The deception and deceit of the Minister of Finance. The guile of the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, as I go through this budget statement little clues come through. Page 2:

“As evidenced by the recent arrest and convictions of drug traffickers....”

Who are these people? Who are they?

“.... and the crackdown on criminal activity; we are delivering on our promise to get tough on crime.”

Little clues come through about the not so hidden agenda of the Minister of Finance.

“This has been possible in no small measure by the provision of equipment and increased manpower resources to the Police Service.”

Provision of equipment. Provision of Cherokee jeeps. That is what he is focusing on. Little clues come out at you.

Look at what he says about casino gambling, Mr. Speaker. What is he saying? He talks about casino gambling no longer being a luxury. It is now an amenity. Which country, Mr. Speaker? A necessity. Does he know the meaning of the word “necessity?” What is an amenity? The Minister of Finance is now telling us that we must have casinos in Trinidad and Tobago or else we will die. It is now an amenity. Little clues come through at you. It is a necessity for him and his friends. Tell him what amenity means.

He states on page 12 of the Budget Statement:

“..... we are targeting the higher end markets of Europe and North America in order to attract tourists who no longer regard casinos as an exotic facility of the past, but as an amenity. The more the market expects the amenity, the greater the response must be from the destinations. I am of the view that the inclusion of such gaming facilities will enhance the long-term competitiveness of Trinidad and Tobago as a tourist destination.”

The laundry of the Caribbean, that is what we will become. A Chinese laundry.
[Laughter]

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. IMBERT]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Mr. Speaker, I know these fellows, these honourable chambermen. The same individuals for years have been trying to get casino gambling introduced in Trinidad and Tobago, and all previous Governments, including the administration of the hon. Member for Tobago East had the decency and foresight to resist. No sooner than the political investors get their hands into the Government, they legalize casino gambling. That is their focus. I am not hearing anything from the Member for Tobago East.

2.50 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I kindly ask that you address the Chair.

Mr. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, some of the underground facilities referred to are, in fact, owned by the political investors of the United National Congress. Some of them have recently been opened. As a matter of fact, one of these clubs was recently opened by some of the very good friends of the Minister of Finance. It was no surprise to me, having learnt of this latest gaming club in our environment, I knew that casino gambling was coming in the budget. One has to look closely at what these people are doing.

Look at what has been done to the incentives in tourism. Now that his friends have got all their incentives; have got \$45 million in tax write-offs—himself to himself—

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. C. Imbert: I thank hon. Members, especially the Members opposite, for being so generous.

I listened with some curiosity to this statement made by the Minister of Finance at page 27 of the Budget statement, which states:

“Deductions for investment in approved hotel or tourism projects up to a maximum of twenty five per cent of the investment as contained in section 13A of the Income Tax Act.” will be removed.

“This incentive can be accommodated under the Venture Capital Regime.”

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

So that his friends, having benefited from \$45 million in tax credits, having got their way; and having satisfied themselves, he is now moving the incentive regime somewhere else. One has to look for the clues in this budget, Mr. Deputy Speaker. One has to understand what these honourable gentlemen are doing. They have hijacked the Government and everything is geared towards filling the pockets of the political investors in the United National Congress.

Even this honourable House that we are in, I understand there was a proposal to renovate this property. Who was going to get the contract? One of the boys was going to get the contract. It is only because the local contractors objected to the sole selective approach for the renovation of the Red House that now it has been opened up to proper competition.

So we are going to see in 1997, in this \$1.7 billion capital programme, more and more of the political investors benefiting from the fruits of the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism, a man who has the temerity to say that he sees nothing wrong in giving contracts to a UNC supporter if the tenders are the same. He was referring to a tender for Cherokee jeeps which was sole selective, where there was only one tender and saying that he sees nothing wrong in giving UNC people contracts if there are two tenders and two of them are equal. But he was referring to a sole selective contract. Quite improper!

This is the same Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism who came into this House in September, 1996, disclaiming all knowledge of the Cherokee jeep issue. It is in *Hansard*. When I challenged him, he got up, red in the face, stamped his feet in his usual way and said, "Mr. Speaker, the Member is making allegations of which he has no evidence. I challenge him to bring evidence," and so forth. What happens? The month after that, in October, his friends got the contract to supply Cherokee jeeps to the Government. Shameless! It is in *Hansard*. It is not just his boy friends, you know, his girl friend also. But the people are watching, as they rightly say. Mr. Deputy Speaker, do not laugh. [*Laughter*]

Let me go now to some other aspects of the budget presentation, to the Capital Programme. Let me say at the outset that if the Government can achieve this \$1.7 billion Public Sector Investment Programme, then that, at least, would be one good aspect of the 1997 budget. I looked at this budget and I called it the good, the bad and the ugly. I looked through to see where I could find the good, because there is a lot of bad and plenty ugly. This Public Sector Investment Programme is a bit ambitious. I see here that they intend to spend \$68 million on agricultural

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. IMBERT]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

access roads, continuing a programme that was well in train under the People's National Movement. I see that they are, unfortunately, going to delay the Drainage and Flood Control Programme for yet another year.

We had approached the World Bank in 1992/1993 to access some US \$80 million for a National Drainage Development Programme. In 1993, the World Bank agreed, in principle, and we spent the next two years developing the elements of the programme which involved the rehabilitation of water courses and major drainage systems throughout north, south and central Trinidad and we were at the point where we were ready to start final negotiations with the World Bank to access this US \$80 million.

Unfortunately, in 1996, we have lost the whole year; nothing has been done, and I see here now at page 19, that negotiations are expected to be completed by the second quarter of 1997, which really means that, again, nothing of any significance will be done to alleviate the drainage problems of the country in 1997. So that is two years down the drain. Why? Spite and vindictiveness.

Let us look at the Roads and Bridges Programme. You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one thing about this administration is its ability to fudge the truth. Imagine they sent this to me. [*Member raises newspaper*] "20 years overdue—The Ministry of Works and Transport's new headquarters to be located at the corner of Richmond and London Streets." This has to be the biggest joke in town. This is a project designed by the PNM, financed by the PNM, started by the PNM. We turned the sod for this construction in February, 1995. The building is almost finished. But listen to what they say, "20 years overdue..."

I have read this document and everything inside here is a product of the PNM in the 1992—1995 period. Every single thing in here, from the Highways Beautification Programme to the Ministry of Works and Transport's headquarters, to the Blackwater Channel, to the roads programme, was done by the PNM between 1992—1995.

3.00 p.m.

Now listen to the dishonesty, and Mr. Speaker, public servants should not write things just because Ministers tell them to do it. Listen to this at Page 20:

"A comprehensive National Highway Programme which has been developed over the past two years will take-off into full implementation in 1997..."

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that National Highway Programme, flows out of a comprehensive highway maintenance study done by the administration of the Member for Tobago East in 1990.

When I came into office I met the results of the comprehensive highway study. I was handed the final document from the consultants in 1992. And from 1992 to 1995, we selected the roads, did all of the designs, prepared all of the contract administration, and so forth. We accessed funding from the Inter-American Development Bank, ready to start in February 1996, and look at what I am seeing here: "A comprehensive National Highway Programme which has been developed over the past two years...". Not true! It is a blatant untruth, Mr. Speaker, as the Member for St. Joseph would say—a mistruth. He has created a new word, Mr. Speaker.

As I go through this development programme, I see here a recognition of the failure of the UNC to mobilize the construction sector in 1996. Abject failure! We had a National Health Building Programme ready to start in 1996—they did nothing; a National Drainage Programme ready to start in 1996, they did nothing; a Highway Development Programme, they did nothing; a Public Building Programme, they did nothing; a School Building Programme, they did nothing. And you see they have to cover it up with their dishonesty and deceit.

Look at what they have said in the budget of 1997 about the National Library. Absolute rubbish! Our review indicated that the initial capital cost of the project was \$161 million. Absolute nonsense! On the next page, Mr. Speaker, the minister admits that the size of the building was 180,000 square feet. Now, typical construction costs, for that type of building, run at about \$300.00 a square foot; 300 by 180,000 square feet. Who can do the arithmetic? \$54,000,000! Is the Minister telling me that construction costs over \$1,000 a square foot? Is that how he got his figure? And I can state from knowledge, Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Works and Transport's building came in, on tender, at \$268.00 a square foot, so this is an untruth or a mistruth.

It is simply a piece of dishonesty generated by the propagandist, by the "Gobbelites" on that side. You know in Nazi Germany they had a propaganda minister called, Joseph Gobbels, and if you were looking at something that was blue, Gobbels would tell you no, it was red. And if you tell him it was blue he hit you, whap! That is what went on under Hitler in Nazi Germany. So now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have the Minister of Finance coming here with bogus figures, telling us that a library, the capital cost of which would not have exceeded

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. IMBERT]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

\$75,000,000, is now going to cost \$161,000,000—just to justify the delay of the process.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will accept nothing from the Member for Oropouche, he is famous for bogus information. If he tells me to jump, I will sit down. If he tells me good morning, I will go to sleep.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the UNC coalition was subjected to so much pressure from the national community about the crime it committed against the students of Trinidad and Tobago when it unilaterally abandoned the National Library Project, and turned that project into a pumpkin patch—I understand they are now selling pumpkins in that big hole over there. They were subjected to so much pressure that they had to come back on their knees and accede to the construction of the National Library.

It is just like the John John Towers. The Member for St. Augustine would have to come back on his knees and apologize to the people of Sea Lots about the John John Towers. In the same way this is an apology to the national literary and reading community, a total apology. The apology is accepted.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I were to review 1996 and the performance of the Government, I would describe it as a failure of monumental proportions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is the Member finished speaking?

Mr. C. Imbert: No, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Anyway, if I were to describe 1996, the only word I would have for it is failure. The Minister comes into this House and talks about a capital programme, not admitting that his UNC coalition chopped the capital programme from \$1.4 billion in 1995 to just over \$900 million in 1996, took \$400 million out of the system, removed the engine for stimulus in the construction sector. That is what he did.

They can produce bogus statistics and figures to try and pretend that it is not so. But the reality is that he removed \$400 million from the capital programme in 1996. Recognizing what that has done to the economy, he is now coming back with a \$1.7 billion capital programme. Hindsight is always 20—20 vision. And without saying from where he is going to get the money.

But if one looks carefully, one will see that over \$1 billion is going to come from general revenue. So if in 1997 we have a short fall, it is here, \$1 billion from general revenue. If one looks at the sources of the public sector investment programme, they expect to raise \$1 billion in general revenues. They are not going to borrow at all, \$1 billion from general revenue.

What this means, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that when there is a short fall in revenue, the first thing that is going to get chopped is the capital development programme. Set up! The same way he set up the VAT, knowing that he would not collect it. Set up the Lottery collection, knowing that he will not collect it; He has now set up the 1997 capital programme, knowing that he will not achieve it; and trying to get praise in advance for what he will not do.

“He feel he smart”. The honourable gentleman “feel he smart”, he feel everybody stupid. He was in a previous government. He knows that whenever there is short fall in revenue, the first thing one goes after is the capital programme, because salaries and wages come first. He knows that, so it is just a contrived, mismatched, and hodge podge of bogus, higgledy-piggledy figures, that make no sense. They mean nothing.

In the same way that there was underperformance in the capital programme in 1996, there will be underperformance in 1997.

3.10 p.m.

Let us look at revenues in total.

The Minister of Finance has pegged his oil revenues on a price of US\$20. In 1996 he was the lucky beneficiary of \$500-odd millions in increased taxation from oil companies and that took care of the shortfall in the collection from VAT and on-line games. He has now pegged his 1997 oil price at US\$20. Let us presume that oil stays at US\$20 and does not exceed that figure, where is he going to get the extra “funny money” from to offset the obvious deficit in VAT and other “ratchiffee” elements of this budget? He would not have a safety net in 1997 unless Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait again, Kuwait invades Saddam Hussein or something like that.

In 1997 we are going to be in for a hard time. We already had a reduction in expenditure as the Minister did not spend all the money he had to spend in 1996. There was a \$400-million drop in planned expenditure, and one could have seen it in the economy in the first few months of the year, that they were holding back. They knew that their revenue projections were false so they had to hold back on expenditure because they could not plan for an oil increase.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, no such luck in 1997. It therefore lends credibility to the rumours that we have been hearing all over Trinidad and Tobago, that two other persons have been approached to handle the portfolios of Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism. The rumour is all over town. He knows that he is on his way

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. IMBERT]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

out. He has legalized casino gambling and achieved his objectives and is now on his way out. Mark my words, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the next budget debate we will address that issue. That is why we are saying that this is not a people's budget.

The Minister of Finance knows about the punitive measures in this budget. He knows about the backlash that is going to come. He has given himself a golden handshake in the form of casino gambling and he is on his way out to run his casino. [*Desk thumping*]. That is what is going on. He is going to run a casino. I wish him well. When the backlash comes from the pension funds, the mortgage portfolios and the poor elderly persons who now have to pay more for public transportation, food and basic drugs, he will no longer be in the Government and it is "all yuh to ketch".

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I cannot support this budget. It contains oppressive measures that are not in the interest of the long-term economic well-being of Trinidad and Tobago and I urge the Minister of Finance, before he leaves the UNC to go and open his casino, to look again at what he has done to pension funds. [*Interruption*] No, Al Capone, not Lucky Luciano. He should look again at what he has done to pension funds; people over the age of 60; mortgage interest; poor people; charitable bodies and forget all the "ole" talk because these are serious issues.

I urge him to reinstate the deed of covenant allowance for individuals. [*Desk thumping*] I urge him to reinstate the annuity and pension fund deductions. [*Desk thumping*] I urge him to return mortgage interest deductions to where they were before. [*Desk thumping*] He must understand that being the Minister of Finance is not a joke. It is not a temporary phenomenon; it is not a joy ride which a political investor could be in the Government and leave when he gets his way. It is not a joy ride. It can affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of little people in Trinidad and Tobago.

I urge him to re-examine what he has done to the credit unions and please replace this bandit budget with a document that has a more human face.

Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Ganga Singh): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I join the debate in support of the Appropriation Bill, and having regard to the contribution of my Friend, the Member for Diego Martin East, I get the distinct impression that if there is any re-incarnation of Gobbels, it is the Member for Diego Martin East. It is as if it is to focus attention and continuously sling mud with the

hope that some will stick, he went on to make personal attacks, *argumentum ad hominem* throughout his contribution and only in the last few minutes of his contribution he decided to focus on the contents of the budget.

The Leader of the Opposition, the Member for San Fernando East, in his contribution indicated that people without a vision perish. I agree with that adage and nowhere is that best enunciated than in his failure to deal with the issue of telecommunications. *[Interruption]* The budget speech—*[Interruption]* The Member steps but for four years TSTT was under his jurisdiction because as soon as Morris Marshall died the then Prime Minister took public utilities under his jurisdiction to the Prime Minister's office.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, at page 10 of the budget states that:

“A competitive and effective telecommunications sector is critical to the growth of a vibrant economy. We therefore must take a serious look at the telecommunications sector to determine what role TSTT will continue to play and what arrangements need to be made to facilitate a more open telecommunications policy.”

The economy of the future will be driven by information. It is indeed clear that the PNM is not a future political party. It is not a party interested in the future so they did nothing with telecommunications in the period when they were in office. It was the NAR regime that gave out the radio licences and it is left to us now to deal with the whole issue of opening up the telecommunications sector.

3.20 p.m.

It is clear, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that there is the need, in this age of information technology, to bring affordable and more widespread use of information and telecommunications technology, especially to serve the needs of the rural communities. There is the need for the creation of new knowledge-based industries. Not a word from the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for San Fernando East. There is the need to have telecommunication service providers come through the front door, and not use the advanced technologies to enter our markets unofficially through the back door as in the current situation. It is clear that we cannot isolate ourselves from modern telecommunication developments. It is imperative that we adopt the policies and programmes that would redound to the welfare and benefit of our country. There was not a word from the Member for Diego Martin East as to the fundamental reforms required in this sector. It is as if he were never in government. But then I can understand, they won the last elections, but even Kamal said it was rigged.

Mr. Imbert: Come on man.

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Hon. G. Singh: Mr. Speaker, we know that the Member for Diego Martin East had a conspiracy with the Member for Diego Martin West and others at the last PNM elections. It is about morality in public affairs, and it is in the budget. Today he has nothing to say with respect to that. We are dealing with the culture of those on the other side, the one that they perpetrated in the whole issue of infrastructure development in this country, and it is amazing that the Member for Diego Martin East, a former Minister of Works and Infrastructure, had nothing to say on the budget with respect to what was happening in the sector, but for the last five minutes of his contribution.

What was the culture we inherited in the utility sector? During the last budget debate, the Member for Diego Martin East spoke against the assembly of foreign-used cars in this country. He made all kinds of allegations for which he could not in any way provide the evidence required. It is indeed significant that the market provided the kind of arena where some 2,000 persons were able to benefit from the availability of these cheaper foreign-used vehicles. They are against everything that is indeed local, locally assembled and brought together. It has been the culture of the PNM, and those on the other side, that they are against the change process, so that they were not able, when they occupied office, to take fundamental decisions.

Look at the utility sector, and the Member for Diego Martin East, my good Friend, says nothing about the injection of significant capital into the water sector. The provision of water is not important to the people of this country. It has never been like that. Under the previous regime there were some five Ministers of Public Utilities playing see-saw with the ministry. We found inadequate maintenance there, and financial inefficiency throughout the whole sector. Today we are changing in a new direction, we are demonstrating in that sector that the customer is important, and a new approach to the whole utility sector. It is indeed the customer who is the focus of our intention. We are introducing reforms, and have demonstrated that we would place the customer at centre stage of the utility sector, in the provision and delivery of services.

The Member for Diego Martin East said that there is one good aspect of the budget, and that if we were to implement the Public Sector Investment Programme, then he would acknowledge that this is one good aspect of the budget; it is good that he can do this. The fact of the matter is that because of the internal reforms, and the change in focus of our ministries—I can speak knowledgeably on behalf of the Ministry of Public Utilities—we would be able to accomplish within the

projects established. There was a situation where the Water and Sewage Authority, when we inherited office, was charging people on the basis of the annual rateable value—illegally—under that regime, and they did nothing about it. T&TEC was billing retroactively—illegally—and nothing was done about it. We have put an end to all of that. We have brought transparency and accountability to the affairs of the Ministry of Public Utilities, and the agencies under our jurisdiction.

When we took office it was brought to our attention that there was a wells programme under the previous regime that was going to cost the taxpayers of this country some \$240 million. We have put an end to that, saving this country over \$200m. In matters with respect to the Post Office, we have embarked on a process of transforming that arena in every area, and would be bringing in private sector involvement in 1997.

For years the people of La Fillette complained of a lack of water—and my Friend from Arima would recognize that, when we went to La Fillette the people said that for 20 years they were promised. In 1997, under the Public Sector Investment Programme for the first time they would be getting pipe-borne water.

Dr. Lasse: You cannot go back to Cedros.

Hon. G. Singh: I can go back anywhere. Mr. Speaker, under the Public Sector Investment Programme, \$158 million will be allocated for projects in the water and sewerage sector. Water is important. In Tobago, the Scarborough Waste Water System to Mount Marie and Signall Hill would be extended at a cost of \$2.8 million. There is another major study to prepare and identify preliminary designs for the collection and treatment of waste water to the south-western part of the island to meet the needs of the area up to the year 2020. It will mean that not only will we beat you in the next THA election but also the next parliamentary election.

3.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to electricity, there is a current capacity to exist until the year 2002. We are already in the planning stages in order to deal with its future projections.

In terms of infrastructural development, a total change in culture is taking place. We have achieved tremendously in this sector since assuming office, but the most significant achievement has been the attempt to bring about a culture change.

The Member for San Fernando East asked me to explain, and I will read for him from a report prepared by the management of the Public Transport Service

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. G. SINGH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Corporation. The report talks of the culture perpetuated by the PNM. It states that over the years the Public Transport Service Corporation and staff have been allowed to develop a particular kind of culture. They still suffer from the dependency syndrome which developed out of huge subventions which were given to the corporation to fund its operations. There was never any critical review on the basis for such huge requests from the Public Transport Service Corporation. Further, there was no concern about the manner in which the funds were utilized once the cheques were received from the Treasury Department. No accountability, subventions, no management. Accounts were never prepared or audited on an annual basis. The time lag between the actual transaction and the audit left much room for the incidence of fraud and neglect.

Mr. Speaker, this Government has taken all these matters in hand. It will be demonstrating the role of the Public Transport Service Corporation as it seeks to reduce its costs and to provide a more efficient and reliable service. When we took up office there was an average of 34 to 40 buses. Now, there are over 70 to 80 buses rolling out from the compounds of the Corporation on a daily basis. It is only because of the change at the level of the directors. Currently, a management audit of the corporation is being undertaken. Since 1983, no audits were conducted. The Member can stick his tongue between his teeth but this cannot help his lack of vision. How could they have allowed that?

Throughout our presentation, we recognized that there was a need for us to change and there was a need for us to put the customer at the very forefront of the change in the utility sector. All our decisions are taken with the customer in mind. We view that as our approach of changing the way our democracy functions. There is a very simple principle that we have utilized. I commend it to those on the other side:

The quality of our democracy is not measured by the contentment of the affluent, but rather in how the political system regards those who lack access to the basic amenities.

As we straddle the old world with an old agenda, and the new world with a new agenda, we find ourselves in a situation where we have to provide basic amenities: water, electricity, telephone and roads to a significant proportion of our population. Yet, we are on the threshold of the future. And not a word from the Members on the other side during their contributions on the budget with respect to telecommunication, the role of infrastructure in improving the quality of life of our people. They lack vision and approach.

The Member for Diego Martin East mentioned the words, “punitive and oppressive.” The lack of demonstrating caring in the provision of these basic facilities is what was punitive and oppressive. I do not know how the Member for Diego Martin West could still sit next to the Member for San Fernando East. He does not have a sense of shame. He should have resigned after losing.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, one more time, I appeal to your better natures to help lift the standard of this debate. I say no more.

Hon. G. Singh: Mr. Speaker, under the Public Sector Investment Programme for 1997, there is need to allocate approximately \$158 million for projects in the water and sewerage sector including the Beetham Facilities Rehabilitation Project. For too long sewage has been placed on the back burner. Because of the “flush and forget” mentality of many Members, they are unaware of the role of this sector and that emphasis was not given with respect to what is happening in this sector. In this regard, in 1997 construction on the forcemain and pump station elements of the Beetham and cleaning and desludging of the lagoons will be completed.

This is important. Since the 1950s absolutely nothing was done in the sewerage sector. This is a basic part of the infrastructure and we have to bring it up to the fore.

Further, there has been significant water loss reduction through the upgrading of water distribution which was commenced in 1995. A number of smaller rural water supply projects will also be undertaken by WASA in 1997 in a drive by the authority to take water to areas which are not currently serviced.

We have to take the basic amenities to the people.

It is in this regard that the budget of 1997 points to job creation in the utility sector. It points to basic infrastructure development that will lead to job creation in the water sector, the sewerage sector, in public transportation, electricity generation and the transformation of the post office.

In that regard, I commend this budget.

Mr. Martin Joseph (*St. Ann's East*): Mr. Speaker, I am also pleased to participate in this 1997 budget debate. This Government has now brought to this honourable House its second budget debate. When it went to the electorate in 1995, seeking the mandate of the electorate, it placed four major issues before the country as they related to the 1995 general election. It talked about crime in the

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

society, the high incidence of same; it talked about poverty in the society; the state of the utilities and improvements in education.

This afternoon I will focus on the issue of poverty and what this Government has been able to achieve to date. It will be remiss if I did not say something on the state of the utilities. As far as I remember, it was the plank on which the Government fought the election.

3.40 p.m.

Listening to the Minister of Public Utilities, I am afraid that in the area of performance also, this UNC/NAR Government is very lacking, and perhaps the greatest indictment of that is that it is the first time in the history of this Parliament that we are drinking bottled water.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I simply want to indicate for the sake of the record, lest I be brought unwittingly into the debate, that I sent to every Member, a note indicating the experimental nature of the bottled water that is on the desk of every Member and that this will be done for the two days. And I am inviting comments from Members, as to whether this is something they want to continue or whether they wanted to get the ordinary water from the taps in the glasses. So that I just want to indicate that I consulted nobody in doing that. It is something that happens throughout the world and I thought that we could do likewise.

Mr. M. Joseph: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The question that I think we need to address is how this UNC/NAR Government performed to date on the issue of poverty and social issues in the society and what prospects there are for improvements in this regard based on the 1997 budget.

We recall that the strategy of the previous PNM Government during the period 1991—1995, was to build the economy and put it back on a growth path, recognizing that the first priority was to increase the size of the economic pie, and once that was happening, the ability to deal successfully with social issues would logically follow.

Mr. Speaker, it is an accepted fact, that the PNM's administration under the prime ministership of Patrick Manning, turned the economy around during its period in Government. The Prime Minister, the Hon. Basdeo Panday, speaking at the annual award ceremony of the South Trinidad Chamber of Industry and Commerce, said the economy performed well over the last two years when the PNM was in power. I recall in my contribution to the last debate, when I made that point, those on the other side took issue with it. The reason I am raising it again is

that the Prime Minister publicly acknowledged the performance of the PNM administration. I hope he pays attention to the contribution made by the Member for St. Joseph. Earlier this morning he gave the impression that nothing was done during the last PNM administration to put the economy back on the growth path. I am quoting the Prime Minister, the Hon. Basdeo Panday. He said:

“The local economy has responded positively to the Government’s policies registering real growth rates of 4.2 percent and 3.5 percent in 1994 and 1995 respectfully.”

The Prime Minister said the performance of the local economy over the two-year period was particularly impressive when one considered that it was achieved, although growth rates in areas like East Asia slowed considerably, over the same period. If one looks at the various economic indicators, it was quite clear that between 1991 and 1995, there was tremendous economic growth. The hon. Member for St. Joseph quoted some of those indicators.

I will put them on the record again, Mr. Speaker. Gross domestic product improved from \$22.558 billion in 1991 to \$30.792 billion in 1995. Non-oil GDP increased from \$16.269 billion to \$21.754 billion. The number of persons employed increased from 401,000 in 1991 to 429,150 in 1995; balance of trade increased from \$1.351 billion to \$2.547 billion; net foreign reserve position increased from US \$187.5 million to US \$562.3 million, and the gross national savings increased from 15.2 per cent to 17.2 per cent.

It was clear that the UNC/NAR coalition Government had an opportunity to build on the country’s economic success that the Manning’s PNM administration had left when it demitted office and, as a result, should have been in a position to focus on the social needs of society. Even when we found ourselves in an economic situation that did not allow us to do the things that we would have liked, and in spite of the economic circumstances in which we found ourselves in our first budget in 1992, we were able to do the following:

- (i) implement the award of the special tribunal of the Industrial Court.
- (ii) increase the payment to old age pensioners from \$315 to \$347 per month.

The Member for St. Joseph said we did nothing in the area of old-age pension during our period in office. We increased the payments to social assistance beneficiaries from \$92 per month to \$101 per month for adults, and from \$80 to \$88 per month for children. We provided over \$90 million for the Unemployment Relief Programme and we removed VAT from certain basic necessities, including books,

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

at a cost to the Treasury of \$80 million. This was during a time, as I indicated, when despite the economic circumstances in which the PNM administration found itself, we still were able to put measures in place to deal with the socially disadvantaged in the society.

Mr. Speaker, I said that this Government came into office on the platform of eradicating or treating with poverty in the society. I think it is necessary for us to take a quick review of the current state of the socially disadvantaged and poor in the society. Two current studies underscore the current plight of the poor in our society and I think it is instructive for us to pay some attention to the findings of those two basic studies.

The first was a survey of the living conditions conducted by the Department of Behavioural Science, University of the West Indies, and the findings of this study are very revealing and should cause us to be very much concerned because the results indicate what the people in the society are feeling and thinking. The survey results indicate that about half of Trinidad and Tobago's population think that their economic condition would worsen in the next 10 years and that poverty and civic well-being would be reduced. The preliminary report also indicates that about half the population—

3.50 p.m.

Miss Nicholson: I just want to have some clarity. Could the hon. representative for St. Ann's East tell me when that survey was done.

Mr. M. Joseph: The results of this survey were published in September, 1996.

Miss Nicholson: I did not ask when the results were published. I asked when the survey was done.

Mr. M. Joseph: The survey was conducted two months prior to the results. This is a survey on living conditions conducted by the Department of Behavioural Science. Later on, I would quote from a survey done by the Ministry of Social Development that piggybacked on a survey done in 1992.

The preliminary report also indicates that about half the population does not trust politicians. The report claims that there is a "significant worry over broken promises by politicians' about unethical political conduct, and about the helplessness of citizens in governmental affairs." In addition, they think that "luck and not personal effort, is to play a large part in the lives of the population." The survey results also indicated that the question about overall deprivation, or what was

referred to as a “misery index” of households, found that more than 60 per cent of household heads questioned had jobs but poverty still existed, mainly because of fluctuating job security, or large families aggravated by dilapidated living conditions.

According to the conductors of the survey, the preliminary data suggests that policy-makers should now seriously consider relative poverty and the upgrading of the basic needs. The editorial of the *Sunday Express* dated October 27, 1996 commenting on the survey results noted with concern that the picture of fatalism and helplessness among the population is alarming. The report said that 42 per cent of the population feels that they have little influence over their lives and 60 per cent believe that no matter what they do, luck and destiny would guide them.

I now refer to the second study which was conducted by the Ministry of Social Development called the *Determination and Measurement of Poverty in Trinidad and Tobago*. This was published in September, 1996. It is based on indications from the 1992 survey of living conditions for the period 1988—1992 which was done by the Inter-American Development Bank. I think that is the question that the Member for Tobago West had raised.

The results of the survey, a 1993 study by the Inter-American Development Bank for the period 1988—1992, found that 22.5 per cent of all households in Trinidad and Tobago lived below the poverty line. Another World Bank report on Trinidad and Tobago *Poverty and Unemployment in An Oil based Economy* which draws on data generated by the 1992 CSO survey of living conditions, provides similar estimates of the extent to which poverty continues to be a persistent problem in Trinidad and Tobago. That report estimated that 21.2 per cent of the population or about 265,000 persons live below the poverty line. It also indicated that 11 per cent of the population or 137,500 had consumption levels below the minimum amount required to purchase the nutritionally balanced low-cost food basket, and did not have income to spend on non-food items including shelter and clothing.

In September 1996, the Ministry of Social Development issued yet another report on poverty in Trinidad and Tobago that drew on the same survey of living conditions data generated in 1992, but which came up with findings which indicate a higher level of poverty than that reported by the World Bank. The ministry said it was prompted to undertake the study because of its concern about the effects which structural adjustment and stabilizing policies were having on various population groups. It was believed that the study would allow for the identification

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

and targetting of relief programmes for those affected most by the policies which were put in place, following what was called the “era of prosperity.”

This is instructive. Whereas in the World Bank’s report 21.2 per cent of the population was said to be living in poverty, the ministry’s data indicated 35.9 per cent of the population was living below the poverty line. The poverty line used by the ministry characterized households consisting of one person, expending \$623 monthly, or less, as poor, while for a household of eight, the poverty line was given as \$2,940. In some way, as the World Bank’s bottom line for one person was an income of \$2,420 per annum, the ministry used the more realistic figure of \$7,446 per annum. As a result, not surprisingly, the incidence of poverty increased tremendously.

There are some interesting findings coming out of this ministry’s study. The size and composition of households and families are significant factors which determine how populations cope with spells of poverty, and those instances of chronic poverty which have attended many households. Significant features of the composition of households found are that, there are no children in 36 per cent of the households; 18.6 per cent of the households have only one child; 19.0 per cent have two children; 13.0 have per cent have three children; 2.4 per cent have six children and more and 29 per cent have elderly persons.

According to the results, the highest incidence of poverty was found in the following areas:

Districts	Percentage of Poverty
San Juan/Laventille	12.7
Tunapuna/Piarco	9.7
Princes Town	9.0
Diego Martin	8.2
Chaguanas Borough	7.9
Siparia	7.7

4.00 p.m.

Several characteristics of the poor have been established. We said poor households tended to be among the larger ones, poverty by household size revealed the following comparative measures: single-person households, 11.8 per cent; two-person households, 10.7 per cent; six person households, 11.8 per cent; seven-

person households, 8.1 per cent and eight-person households, 12 per cent. Mr. Speaker, I place on record the statistics of these two studies because it is important to determine how—

Mr. Panday: The record of PNM's ineptitude.

Mr. M. Joseph: It is no record of PNM's ineptitude, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Member: What is it?

Mr. M. Joseph: I pose those statistics of the results of those findings on the record to look at it against the budget measures that were introduced in this Parliament, and to see to what extent they are likely to increase the level of poverty in the society, or to assist in alleviating or reducing that level. Certainly, the sum total of all the measures introduced in this Parliament during this budget debate will have the effect of increasing the number of poor persons in the society.

The study also indicated that there was a certain level of what is referred to as "chronic poor" and what it is seeing is an increase in the number of what is referred to as the "new poor" those persons who, as a result of the economic circumstances which they find themselves in today, are getting into the area of poor. I am suggesting that when we look at the measures, as I will do, one would expect that the 35 per cent of persons who have been identified as "poor" coming out of the ministry's 1996 study will increase tremendously as a result of some of the measures that have been introduced.

Mr. Speaker, if one looks at the budget statement and sees what are some of the measures the Government has articulated, which are designed to reduce poverty in the society, there are certain statements made. On page 2 there is a statement which says:

"We have also been deeply conscious of the fact that the ultimate objective of economic development is the enhancement of the quality of life of the population as a whole so that in the social services, we provided immediate relief to thousands of individuals through a wide range of programmes. More recently in October of this year, Government launched the National Social Development Council to coordinate and rationalise these programmes such that they would be more focused in the assistance provided to the less fortunate in our society."

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

On page 3 it says:

"My Government's vision for this country is people-oriented and achievable."

"Our major goals to take us into the future are centred on an appropriate industrial policy, social stabilisation and sustainable economic growth that would be shared by all our people."

"- improving the quality of social and health services to ensure an energetic and productive work force;"

On page 4 it says:

"The vision is for a balanced and equitable society where poverty and homelessness no longer exist, and where law and order is once more restored."

There are other statements. In fact, improving infrastructure services is the key to poverty alleviation both as an end, for example, in terms of providing improved access to basic water and sanitation services as well as a means to greater productivity and increased employment.

On page 9 it says:

"...Government will also ensure that the less fortunate and disadvantaged are not deprived of utility services."

On page 13 under Unemployment I quote:

"Mr. Speaker, unemployment is perhaps the most serious area of concern as it directly impacts on the level of poverty and social displacement in this country."

On page 14 it says:

"Accordingly, several short term employment programmes will be implemented, targeting in particular, the youth and female heads of households. Self-employment will be promoted also, through opportunities for training, improved access to finance, provision of grants to start up micro enterprises, and better access to markets."

All talk, Mr. Speaker.

Again on page 15 it says:

"In addition, in keeping with our objective to put people at the center of the development process and to foster a balanced and equitable society, government will ensure that:

"- all citizens, especially the less fortunate members of our society have access to basic amenities..."

- needy citizens will be provided with relief, particularly the vulnerable groups, such as the elderly."

These are some of the statements contained in this budget that attempt to deal with the poor, and persons who find themselves in an unfortunate circumstance.

Mr. Speaker, having looked at those statements what are the measures that have been introduced? What do they do in terms of assisting the poor? It is remiss of me to have forgotten this one, and that is the measure to increase the level of support to our senior citizens by raising the pension component of such payments from \$260.00 per month to \$349.85 per month. This, together with the food subsidy of \$70.15, will result in an increase in the overall payments to our old-age pensioners from \$356.15 per month to \$420.00 per month, an increase of \$63.85 which is still below the poverty line of \$625.00.

Mr. Speaker, outside all the statements, the only concrete effort is to increase the old-age pension by \$63.85. There is also a statement that says that they were going to increase the disability allowance but they did not know by how much. While I applaud the Government for the increase, we refer to it as minimum because the other measures which are introduced in this budget are going to negate that \$63.85, and not only that, but when the Members had occupied this side, they said when they came into office one of the measures in their first order of priority was to increase the quantum of old-age pension to \$500.00. I heard the Member for St. Joseph say that there are going to be ten more budgets to be presented in this House and that is going to be done over the course of time. By that time many people will be dead, especially the elderly, so the promise that was made has not been kept.

4.10 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the measures, especially the intention to increase gasoline prices, will have the result of increasing transportation costs across the board. Elderly people have to travel frequently, so that an increased cost in transportation will not only erode and immediately negatively impact on such an important part of their cost of living, but it will also increase all the other items that the elderly and disadvantaged have to purchase, because the increase in transportation cost will have a ripple effect on everything—medicine, food and so forth.

Mr. Speaker, the deed of covenant is being removed. The bulk of charitable and church organizations depend heavily on those deeds of covenant. These non-governmental organizations use that as a means of providing assistance to the

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

socially disadvantaged. When one takes away from them their ability to get moneys to assist the socially disadvantaged, one puts them in a disadvantageous position.

The question of the removal of the various tax credits will also result in greater hardships to large sections of the society. By removing the personal credit of \$600, spouse credit, the credit of \$600 for pensioners and the credit with respect to the purchase of credit union shares, the sum total of all those effects would bring about a larger degree of hardship on our senior citizens and the severely poor. As a result, some of these measures, especially the removal of the tax credits, run the risk of bringing into being a new number of poor persons. I find it hard to understand how the Government, in terms of all its statements on the setting up of a national council to eradicate poverty, and the coming into being of an action plan to deal with poverty, does not implement measures that will prevent people from becoming poor.

We have argued consistently that one way of dealing with the increase in poverty in the society is to make sure that one deals with the economics. If one deals with the economics, if one is able to provide jobs, then one does not have to worry about measures to assist the poor. There will be the core poor and one should treat with those persons until such time as they are able to move up the ladder—to borrow an expression from the Member for Tobago East in his presentation to this honourable House when he was making a statement to Parliament on Government's approach to eradicating poverty and building equity. To summarize his thinking, he said that in the past we have treated with poverty in a way that has not given us results and, as a consequence, there was the need to establish a ladder so that members of the society may find themselves at different rungs. The intention is to climb the rungs of the ladder until eventually they get out of their current situation.

When one looks at that, looks at the findings of the Ministry of Social Development, and then one listens to the budget measures, one asks oneself how can one believe what the Government is saying? What it is saying sounds good, but when one examines the measures one realizes that they will bring about hardship. There is an old saying that "Prevention is better than cure". Why do we not put measures in place to prevent people from getting into the ranks of the poor? Why should we wait until they become poor and then talk about putting measures in place?

Again, whenever I say this, the other side becomes upset. The PNM strategy to deal with the issue of poverty in the society was a well-thought-out one. The

strategy was to deal with the economics of the society—make sure that the economic circumstances are such that investors, whether foreign or local, can invest. The way out of poverty is job creation. Until such time as we can create an adequate number of jobs to deal with the people coming out of school and with some of the changes taking place in the society as it prepares to move into the future, as we move more into service industries, there will be frictional unemployment—unemployment between changes from industry to industry—and measures should be put in place to deal with that.

Mr. Speaker, I suggest that as we prepare for the 21st Century, perhaps our focus on social development needs to change. There are persons who, because of their circumstances, are likely to rely on the state for as long as they live. Mechanisms ought to be put in place to deal with them at two levels. At the first level, we should provide them with adequate financial wherewithal to be comfortable. Secondly, in terms of how services are provided, I maintain that we provide them with services in a humanizing way. These people do not feel comfortable with themselves because they need assistance. It is unfortunate that they have been productive all their lives, contributed to the development of this society, but have found themselves, because of circumstances, having a shortfall.

Do you know what is interesting? It is interesting that some of the economic commentators are saying that, given some of the measures that the Government is putting in place, in the future life would become difficult for pensioners when all of these allowances are removed. The Government is, in effect, making savings for the future difficult and as a result we would be going in circles. I am saying that perhaps we need to focus our attention on the chronic poor and provide assistance to them because they will need it for the rest of their lives.

With respect to the so-called new poor, it may be necessary to deal with them to provide certain short-term measures while that frictional unemployment takes place. In order for that to work, it means that the economy must have the capacity to absorb the persons who are out of work for a short period of time.

The challenge before us is enormous, but I maintain that we cannot deal with the challenge of the socially deprived and those persons who, for whatever reasons, cannot find jobs without treating with the economy.

4.20 p.m.

It is as a result of that, Mr. Speaker, that the whole question as to what these measures are going to do as they relate to the buoyancy and confidence in the

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

economy has to be raised—are they there or not? It does not seem, on the basis of some of the comments that we are getting from the first reaction to the budget, that this budget points this country into the economic direction that is necessary in order for us to deal with some of the issues facing us.

We are always accused of making comments without recommendations. I am saying that it is quite clear that some of the fiscal policies of this budget need to be revisited in terms of what the consequences of those policies are likely to have in terms of the economy as a whole and, by extension, how they would affect the disadvantaged.

I refer now to the question of the increase in the amounts of money provided, too, in terms of old-age pension and whether or not that could be increased in keeping with the promise to increase the amount. Mr. Speaker, remember the bottom line of the poverty line is \$623.00 per month. I will quote what the commentator, Mr. Dennis Pantin, an economist at the University of the West Indies, said in reviewing the budget in the *Express* dated Monday 16, December, 1996:

“Without a certain minimum basket of goods and services, human beings can only live nasty, brutish if not necessarily short, lives. A government therefore needs to be concerned that at least the basic necessities are available.

The best indicator of the underlying philosophy is in terms of how this 1997 Budget deals with the problem of poverty which constrains people’s ability to consume.

Only a month or so ago the UNC tabled with much fanfare a poverty study which claimed that one-third of the population was living below the poverty line.

Clearly, although things may be ‘hard’ all around, the neighbour’s... not to mention the sons, as well as parents, deserve a ‘piece’ of the ‘dumpling’.

Yet, the 1997 Budget only addresses this question directly by proposing to increase assistance to the elderly by \$64 a month.

Casual evidence suggests that the most significant problem facing the elderly poor is the ability to afford medical care or even to eat properly.

A humanistic, community-oriented Budget would have focused on increasing the provision of such medical assistance directly to the elderly poor.

The issue of poverty is undoubtedly complex and does not readily address itself to quick-fix solutions involving as it does questions of values, attitudes, confidence and opportunity.

At least, a Budget should improve on the last factor. Hopefully, the recently created Social Development Council may turn out to belie the historical tradition of such agencies and address the poverty question in all of its complexity.”

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member’s speaking time has expired.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. M. Joseph: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and Members on both sides for extending my speaking time.

Mr. Speaker, I refer now to the *Draft Estimates of Expenditure for 1997*, under the heading of the Ministry of Social Development. Interestingly enough, in 1995, the actual expenditure for the ministry was \$436,792,918, the estimate for 1996 was \$476,527,236 million, which was supposed to be an increase of \$39.75 million. However, the actual revised figure for 1996 was \$419,538,358 less \$17.254 million. Here again, the ministry was supposed to spend \$476 million but, in reality however, it only spent \$419 million, less \$17 million at a time when so much poverty existed in the society. I would be curious to find out what was responsible for the shortfall of the \$17.25 million in terms of the draft estimates.

In terms of the capital expenditure for 1995, one would recall it was not much, the actual expenditure for 1995 was \$1.7 million and the budgeted expenditure for 1996 was \$7.18 million. The actual amount spent was \$659.00, and when this was presented, we talked about the tremendous increase over what we had allocated in 1995.

Hon. Member: What year was that?

Mr. M. Joseph: This was 1996.

One would recall that in the Variation of Appropriation Bill that came to this Parliament we heard why the capital expenditure was not utilized in 1996. When the hon. Member for Oropouche spoke about the Variation of Appropriation Bill, he said that some ministries worked faster and better than other ministries and, as a

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

result, the Government was varying and so forth. When one saw some of the things that the ministry did not accomplish in terms of capital, one became concerned.

I see recurring in the *Medium Term Policy Statement* and the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, the modernization of St. Michael School for Boys, \$1.3 million—not completed; establishment of a probation hostel, \$1.2 million—not completed; establishment of a halfway house \$210,000.00—not completed; establishment of a Remand Home, \$630,000—not completed; a National Drug Abuse Demand Reduction Programme, Phase II, \$700,000—not completed.

It is against that background that I am concerned as to the statements being made by the Government and the action that this Government is taking as it relates to the question of poverty and the persons who find themselves in less fortunate circumstances.

4.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I maintain that the measures being put in place, at the end of the day, would bring about tremendous hardships on the same vulnerable group in the society that this Government came into office saying it was going to treat with, in the most expeditious way.

The Government took us to task with respect to what it considered to be the extent of poverty. The levels of poverty have increased since this administration came into office, and I am saying that the measures that are being introduced in this budget will continue to increase those levels by bringing into being a new set of poor people.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the sitting of the House is suspended for half an hour.

4.32 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.07 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. Speaker, when we adjourned for tea, I was making the point of the intentions of the Ministry of Social Development as indicated in the Public Sector Investment Programme for 1996 where it was outlined that, as I said, \$7 million was to have been used to support initiatives by the Ministry of Social Development, targeting the socially displaced and disabled.

The projects include establishment of a probation hostel; construction of a remand house for young unconvicted offenders; the establishment of a drop-in centre for the socially disabled; implementation of a national drug demand reduction programme and site acquisition designed refurbishment and equipment for a half-way house and further modernization of the St. Michael's School for Boys. I had indicated what had happened as far as those projects were concerned.

Now, when we look at the PSIP programme for 1997 at page 26, at item 111, it states, and I quote:

“In an attempt to stem the incidence of juvenile deviance and vagrancy and promote youth development, resources will be allocated for the Ministry of Social Development to provide social and community facilities. In this respect, a probation hostel to be constructed at Couva, a Remand Home at Aripo, a half-way House at Centeno and completion of the modernization of St. Michael's School for Boys will provide the environment to facilitate the rehabilitation process. The implementation of these projects will be undertaken by NIPDEC at an estimated cost of \$6.2 million. The wide-ranging approach by the Ministry will also embrace the establishment of a walk-in Assessment Centre for vagrants and a Drop-in Centre for children in Port of Spain for which \$0.5 million is provided.”

I am hoping, Mr. Speaker, that again as outlined in the PSIP for 1997, when we come to review the performance of the ministry that the plans that have been outlined here will be accomplished.

I want to turn to the *Medium Term Policy Framework 1996—1999* where again, certain projects were outlined, especially in the policy matrix for the medium term under the social services policies.

The intention was to provide family and children's services and there were a series of things identified. The construction of the St. Michael's Home; introduction of a foster care system; continuation of the remedial therapy programme for probationers; establishment of a night shelter for youths leaving institutions; provision of training, and so forth. To what extent, were some of these measures achieved? I hope that as the debate ensues, we will be hearing something about that.

Mr. Speaker, to underscore the point I was making earlier on about the statements made and the kinds of actions taken to support some of these statements, and the extent to which these actions will really result in the desired impact that is supposed to be achieved, permit me to read from the *Medium Term Policy Framework*, page 22, under Social Sector Policies.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

It says:

“A major imperative of Government is to protect the vulnerable and disadvantaged in the society and achieve an improved quality of life for all. In so doing Government will provide relief to needy citizens while simultaneously meeting their developmental needs and enhancing their ability to exert control over their own lives.”

In terms of poverty, it says:

“A major priority of Government will be treating with the problem of vagrancy and homelessness and the issue of poverty. A holistic plan has been formulated and is to be implemented over the medium term. Some of the proposed activities include: evaluation and assessment of homeless persons for referral to appropriate centres for rehabilitation; an integrated programme of detoxification, rehabilitation and community care for homeless substance abusers; and a programme for the mentally ill which will include assessment, rehabilitation and possible employment and placement.

In addition, accommodation and housing of the elderly and rehabilitated homeless persons; the establishment of a Social Displacement Fund to obtain financial support from corporate citizens. Further, the National Social Development Council (NSDC) has been given the mandate to develop and implement a Plan of Action for poverty eradication.”

So, Mr. Speaker, nice words, nice intentions, but to what extent are these intentions to be realized when the Government introduces measures which hinder the same people that are expected to assist in alleviating the plight of the poor, especially the NGOs, by putting mechanisms in place to make it more difficult for them to provide that assistance?

If one looks at the matrix, at page 47 one would see identified under the Social Sector Policies:

“Protect socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society—operationalise the National Social Development Council to formulate a plan for poverty eradication”

That is to be achieved in 1997. That is the target date.

“Implement Operational Plan re: Policy on Persons With Disabilities”

To be achieved between 1997—1999.

“Implement a holistic plan for addressing Social Displacement,”
and a host of other measures.

Mr. Speaker, I saw an article in the *Sunday Mirror* which is very disturbing, if any of it is true, and it deals with the whole question of the SHARE programme and how the SHARE programme is currently being implemented. That the director of the SHARE programme has been sent on leave and there are all kinds of allegations as they relate to the implementation.

I am not going to read this into the record. All I would hope is that the hon. Minister would indicate in his contribution what is happening with the SHARE programme, because the SHARE programme is an important programme as part of the whole basket of activities that the Ministry of Social Development is engaged in, and whether there is any truth to any of the allegations that are being made concerning the operation of the SHARE programme, and persons who are involved in the SHARE programme, and the other allegations raised in the article, Sunday, December, 15th 1996, *TnT Mirror*.

5.15 p.m.

I conclude this part of my contribution by underscoring a point that I have been making all the time. It is the first time that the Government of the day finds itself in a position since 1983, to assist the needy in the society. Whether we like it or not, since 1983 this country was forced to undergo certain kinds of changes because we are part of a global environment. It is the first time that our economy is healthy enough that the government of the day can do certain things. Those initiatives were started by the NAR administration; they were continued by the PNM administration and we now have a UNC/NAR administration.

I made the point earlier that the current Prime Minister praised the PNM administration of 1991—1995, for putting the economy back on an even keel. It would be most unfortunate if this Government does not now go back to what I refer to as some of its core functions, to help the poor, take care of social services, health, education, welfare, so that we can have a society in which people feel that there is a chance. [*Desk thumping*] I quoted some statistics earlier on. When 60 per cent of our population feel hopeless, that is something that we need to be concerned about. I am saying that this Government has an opportunity to do the thing right, if not, history will not treat it kindly.

Let me just turn to some aspects of the budget and how they affect my constituency, St. Ann's East. Let me, first of all, start off by complimenting the decision-makers for putting back in the capital programme the construction of the Santa Cruz Fire Station. It was supposed to have been there in 1996, but for some strange reason it was taken out. I note that it has been replaced and I hope that it

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

would be honoured. I would be monitoring it closely to see that the construction of the Santa Cruz Fire Station, as indicated on page 9 of the budget speech and page 39 of the draft estimates of the development programme, is honoured.

While I am complimenting in one breath, I think I must bring to the attention of the decision-makers that we have a problem. I notice that the Government spoke about its comprehensive drainage programme, but we have a problem in St. Ann's East with respect to the Santa Cruz River which is an important part of the entire drainage network of Trinidad. On October 3, 1993, we had a serious flood that took place in that area, destroying properties, and in some instances, forcing some residents to relocate. My understanding is that it is a 10-year cycle. On September 9, 1983, a similar flood occurred in the area devastating properties.

I am hoping that *[Interruption]* That is why I am bringing it to their attention, so that in terms of the planning, in terms of the drainage budget, that consideration be given to the Santa Cruz River, because I realize that Government has allocated a great amount of money to deal with flooding and drainage in the country. The former Member of Parliament for St. Ann's East, Mr. Wendell Mottley, had initiated action to deal with the dredging and surfacing of that river. My understanding is that it was estimated to cost about \$3 million. I am hoping that some attempts be made to look at that river.

There are some places in my constituency in which the agricultural access roads need to be addressed. There is the Baakal Access Road in Acono; there is the El Tucuche Access Road and there is the La Grind Access Road in Maracas Valley that need some attention.

Finally, I also represent people from the North Coast and the residents there are requesting some kind of coast guard facility in that area to assist them in a whole host of problems, not the least being some illicit drug activities that they believe occur in that particular part of the country. There is also concern with respect to some other activities sufferings and problems encountered by the constituents which I hope the coast guard facility in that particular part of the constituency will go a long way in alleviating.

In concluding my contribution, I have to join my colleague from Diego Martin East in indicating that I cannot agree with the measures that are introduced in this budget because I believe that at the end of the day all of us are going to be worse off as a result of the measures to be implemented. I have indicated that the Government has a unique opportunity at this time to ensure, given the kind of

economic conditions that it has inherited, that it addresses some of the social issues that are confronting the society and be true to its campaign promises of eradicating poverty, treating with crime, dealing with the utilities and also improving the educational opportunities in this country.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister of Social Development (Hon. Manohar Ramsaran): Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the budget presented by this Government for the fiscal year, 1997. First of all, I congratulate our Minister of Finance for an excellent presentation. I must add, that as I listened to the presentation of the Minister, I felt a deep sense of pride in the knowledge that I am part of a regime which has succeeded in bringing about so many achievements, both economically and socially, for the improvement of the quality of life of our people.

I was listening to the Member for St. Ann's East and enjoying his contribution, seeing that he was reading from our medium and short-term policies and also the budget statement, but he disappointed me at the end when he said he could not support it. But I also thank him very much for being one of my most ardent supporters. Even in the days on a cricket field I never had a supporter who followed everything I did as he is following what I am doing in my ministry.

This is what the present administration is all about, putting people at the centre of the development process, and again, the 1997 budget is indicative of this policy trend. The Minister of Finance outlined a number of policy objectives which are expected to impact positively on the welfare of the less fortunate among us. Government promised to ensure that all citizens, especially the less fortunate members of our society, have access to basic amenities, health facilities, shelter, potable water, electricity and other social services.

Needy citizens would be provided with relief, particularly the vulnerable groups such as the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

5.25 p.m

Mr. Speaker, to give effect to these, plans were announced for the improvement of a social infrastructure through acceleration of projects under the Government's PSIP for 1997, which is an estimated \$1.7 billion, more than double the amount allocated in 1996: allocations to the tune of \$102 million to provide shelter to lower income families through squatter regularization and infrastructure upgrade of squatter communities; technical assistance to shelter construction and apartment refurbishment and replacement; acceleration of the health sector reform programme;

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. RAMSARAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

initiation of action to ensure that the less fortunate and disadvantaged are not deprived of utility services.

Even more important, Mr. Speaker, are the plan's initiatives in respect of creation of the sustainable employment in the labour intensive sectors of the economy, such as agriculture, tourism and normal export manufacturing, and the implementation of several short-term employment programmes, targeting in particular, the youth, and female heads of households.

Self-employment will also be promoted through opportunities for training, improved access to finance, and provision of grants for start-up programmes. The development of human resource base, through skills training and development has also been given priority in 1997.

Mr. Speaker, it does not end here, for provision has also been made for the payment of a disability grant from January 1997, to approximately 2,000 persons with disabilities, and this by the end of 1997 would grow to about 5,000. The old-age pension has been increased by approximately 18 per cent to ensure that the elderly are able to maintain an adequate standard of living. The income tax burden has been substantially reduced for those in the lower income brackets thus providing more disposable income for improvement of living standards.

Mr. Speaker, there is a saying, "that a man who tries to promote himself by demoting others, cannot stay on top if he gets there." This Government has presented a very attractive budget for the population, but the Opposition, instead of commending us, is seeking to condemn the measures. No wonder they could not have stayed on top when they got there in 1991, they never had a vision.

Mr. Speaker, the Opposition has spoken about increased prices, increased cost of transportation and a myriad of perceived problems with which they attempted to hoodwink the population, but they cannot fool the population, not again. The hon. Minister of Finance also spoke about the reduction of the common external tariff. He spoke about the imposition of an increase on a litre of petrol, partially to compensate for the loss resulting from the abolishment of motor vehicles licence fees. This is a gross misrepresentation about this measure.

However, there are tremendous benefits in this budget for motorists, and if I am to name a few, the customs duty has been reduced on the following items:

- all motor vehicle parts, from 35 to 30 per cent;
- motor vehicle tyres, from 35 to 30 per cent;

filters, from 35 to 30 per cent;
spark plugs, 10 per cent;
vehicles with large engines, from 35 to 30 per cent;
CNG kits for motor vehicles from 35 to 25 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, these are only some of the benefits, and furthermore, for those who know, VAT is based on customs value plus duty, therefore the VAT will also be reduced in these items. I am saying here this evening, that motorists would benefit.

Mr. Speaker, my ministry is very interested in easing the financial burden of the less fortunate in the society. This Government is embracing every effort to ensure that everyone is fed, clothed, and sheltered. In response to this, the Government of national unity has maintained zero rate of customs duty and zero rate of VAT on basic food, such as onion, garlic, potatoes, and so forth. Is this not a caring Government?

The customs duty on clothing and certain types of shoes, has been reduced from 30 to 25 per cent. That is very happy news, especially for small traders. In addition, the customs duty on certain types of lumber and galvanize has been reduced from 20 to 15 per cent. Again, this Government is interested that the population is properly housed.

Mr. Speaker, I could go on and on, but suffice it to say that it irks me when the other side comes here and unjustly condemns and criticizes this Government for taking measures that would improve the quality of life in our country. A warning for the Member for Laventille East, it is better to imitate a successful man, than to envy him. That is why the other side should follow the steps of the Member for Couva North. Stop criticizing, be responsible, the world is looking. Do not be divisive. Respect national unity.

Mr. Speaker, I will now spend some time on outlining the specific actions which I propose to take at ministry level, to meet the needs of the people and, in particular, the most vulnerable segments of our society. The Ministry of Social Development has in the last year been gearing up—to use the Minister of Finance's words—to ensure that we are now in a position to move ahead with haste, in terms of our development projects.

In response to the Member for St. Ann's East, this year we had problems which we have overcome, and in 1997 the Ministry of Social Development, with the assistance of NIPDEC, will begin construction on the following:

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. RAMSARAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

1. A remand home for youthful offenders which will alleviate the unsatisfactory circumstances presently experienced by this group at the YTC, in terms of the inability to participate in programmes at the institution which could facilitate rehabilitation.

My ministry had a meeting this morning with NIPDEC, to ensure that we move forward.

2. A probation hostel in Couva which will serve as a temporary home for probationers in an environment conducive to rehabilitation.

Mr Speaker, just as an aside, when I sat here this morning, I thought I was listening to a tape from the other side.

3. Trade shops, a multi-purpose dining hall, and a basket ball court at the St. Michael's School for Boys.
4. Two half-way houses for male youths who are about to leave children's institutions.

Mr. Speaker, these are to start in January 1997. I will not go back into why it was not started, because I will be giving you blame on the other side.

In my last budget-related address, again to answer the Member for St. Ann's East, the restructuring of the social services delivery system was identified as an area to be given utmost priority. I am pleased to inform this honourable House that based on work undertaken by one of the consultants, pilot projects to test the new system have been established in 10 communities. This should take effect early in 1997. The consultancy is also expected to conclude in mid-1997, with a final report and full implementation of recommended measures should commence following Cabinet's approval.

Mr. Speaker, closely linked to this exercise was the institutional strengthening of the ministry's Research, Planning and Implementation Division. As a result, the division has been fully computerized and Cabinet would be approached early in 1997 for approval of additional staff to improve the efficiency of the division, in keeping with the consultant's report. This exercise has become critical, given the emphasis of the present administration in the ministry's portfolio and workload. As the arm of the ministry responsible for the development and implementation of policy and programmes for the myriad target groups, for which reserves are provided, the increase in the staffing of the research division would be given priority early in the new year.

NADAPP: During 1996, the Ministry of Social Development sought a national alcohol, drug abuse and prevention programme. This exercise commenced and would be completed early in 1997.

Social Welfare Division: Plans are also in train for increased staff and computerization of the Social Welfare Division, which administers the public assistance and old-age pension, to improve significantly the efficiency of the division in light of the new measures announced in the 1997 Budget.

Other divisions earmarked for strengthening in 1997 include the National Family Services Division, which has a critical role to play in fostering positive family values and in meeting the needs and tending the concerns of vulnerable children and a probation division which is responsible *inter alia*, for addressing the needs of youthful offenders.

5.35 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I now turn to action with respect to poverty alleviation. As the hon. Minister of Finance stated in his budget speech, 1997 signifies the beginning of the Decade for Eradication of Poverty and not the year of eradication of poverty as the Leader of the Opposition said.

In delivering the feature address two months ago at the launch of the National Social Development Council, and the Change Management Unit for Poverty Eradication Equity building, the hon. Prime Minister took up the challenge to eradicate poverty in Trinidad and Tobago within this decade. Such a task is indeed formidable but not impossible. As Minister of Social Development, I would be working closely with the Minister Extraordinaire and Minister of Tobago Affairs to ensure that the National Social Development Council and the Change Management Unit begin the eradication process in 1997 and, more importantly, fulfil the mandate to develop and implement a plan of action for poverty eradication.

Mr. Speaker, just to elaborate a little on the National Social Development Council—this is again in answer to the Member for St. Ann's East—on the holistic plan we have—

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, may I once more appeal to you. It is becoming difficult for the Hansard Reporters to faithfully record that which is officially being said. I ask that if you have to speak, could you please do so in gentler tones?

Hon. M. Ramsaran: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. RAMSARAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

This National Social Development Council intends to work with all the line ministers and ministries to attack poverty from all angles. That is why we feel that this council is very important and we placed much emphasis on it. The fact that the Member for Tobago East is the chairman speaks a lot for this council. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, in this regard the Ministry will also be working along with international organizations in its efforts to deal with the problem. One such initiative is the National Consultation Workshop proposed by ECLAC in collaboration with the Caribbean Development Bank, the United Nations Developmental Bank and other regional UN organizations to assist with the preparation of the country's national plan for poverty eradication based on a directional plan developed and approved at the Cabinet ministerial meeting on poverty eradication held here in October, 1996.

Mr. Speaker, notwithstanding these medium and long-term initiatives, I recognize that there is need for immediate action to address the concerns of the poor. As a consequence, specific ministry initiatives which would directly target the social indigent include:

- (a) expansion of the social and rehabilitative efforts and feeding programmes which target the new poor; that is those persons who become displaced through structural adjustment policies and who do not qualify for financial benefits from other welfare programmes; [*Interruption*]

I did not want to respond to the query by the Member for St. Ann's East, on that article, but I will. I received a telephone call concerning that article, as I did not read it myself, and from what I heard, that article is not really to be repeated. If one reads that article it is self-destructive. I continue:

- (b) Expansion and upgrade of the micro enterprise on training and development grant programmes which provide grants to recipients of public assistance and other needy persons for the establishment of micro enterprises to pursue training to enhance employability.
- (c) Implementation of a disability assistance grant for persons 40 years and over with disabilities who are unable to earn an income. As I said before, approximately, 5,000 persons are expected to benefit from this measure.

Mr. Speaker, the implementation of the increase in old-age pension grant to \$420 is expected to significantly ease the financial burdens of approximately 62,000 senior citizens who will benefit from this grant and whom we regard as an

important segment of our nation. This is the highest single increase in old-age pension in this country and not by \$8 and \$10 as was done before in 1992. [*Desk thumping*] We are also committed to submitting proposals for an additional increase in 1997 and beyond and as we move forward we want to increase pension on what we call a sliding scale.

In addition, the ministry meets the transportation needs of the elderly with assistance to 15,000 senior citizens and 6,000 public assistance recipients; this includes travelling in rural areas. We have a task force looking at this and 21,000 people will benefit from free public transportation.

Mr. Speaker, earlier this year a task force was appointed to implement a holistic plan which was developed by the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Health to address the problem of social displacement. This task force has been working assiduously to take action on these measures which are immediately implementable. Actions earmarked for 1997 include: refurbishment of the Riverside Plaza Assistance Centre and implementation of a voluntary removal from the streets programme. May I announce, Mr. Speaker, that the Minister of Health is expected to start the removal of all medically ill persons from the streets before Christmas. [*Desk thumping*] Also, implementation of a programme for the elderly homeless including provision of state-funded accommodation as was initiated by my Friend, the Member for St. Ann's East.

Mr. Speaker, as indicated by the hon. Minister of Finance, this administration's vision is for a balanced and equitable society where poverty and homelessness no longer exist and where law and order is once more restored. In this regard we recognize the need to engender a sense of community and re-establish family values within the society.

On this note, permit me, Mr. Speaker, to outline my ministry's proposed initiatives for 1997 in respect of crime prevention and family-life development. The Ministry of Social Development has placed special emphasis on the reduction of crime amongst youths. Among the action to be taken is the establishment of a probation hostel for young offenders, as previously mentioned. The Probation Division also conducts a remedial therapy programme geared towards rehabilitation of youthful offenders. This programme is carried out in seven areas throughout the country.

The ministry is hopeful that in 1997 an expansion of this programme can be achieved. Through the Custodian of Enemy Property Fund, a grant is provided to victims of domestic violence to establish micro enterprises or pursue training. This

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. RAMSARAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

programme will be continued and the ministry's Family Services and Probation Divisions will also continue to treat with the increasing number of domestic violence cases.

The ministry also proposes to implement several recommendations which emerged from a workshop on domestic violence conducted in 1995 and conceptualized by the various divisions for implementation in 1997.

5.45 p.m.

In 1997, the ministry proposed to provide assistance to an NGO to conduct family mediation training sessions, and to implement the community counselling programme. The ministry will continue its services of lectures to various groups and organizations on topics such as youth and crime, and domestic violence to contribute toward the overall implementation of policy measures to address the crime situation through its representation on the National Task Force on Crime.

In the area of drug prevention the ministry, through the National Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Programme will continue to provide information to the community with respect to drug abuse prevention and develop relevant programmes to address the situation. In particular, the following will be pursued:

Implementation of Phase II of the Demand Reduction Programme which includes several prevention strategies. The UNDCP and the European Union are providing financial assistance for this programme, and the recruitment of staff for its implementation has commenced.

Provision of technical assistance to public and private sector organizations to establish Employee Assistance Programmes.

Continued provision of grants to communities to establish drug abuse prevention projects.

Family life development and issues relating to children.

In the area of family life and children's issues the following measures are earmarked for implementation:

Development of a health and family life education programme in collaboration with the relevant ministries.

Provisions of support services to family such as day care services for the elderly.

Recommencement of the school for parents programme.

Establishment of a drop-in centre for street children.

Training programme for parent outreach facilitators.

Full establishment of a formal foster care system to enable placement of children to commence.

The establishment of a task force to monitor and survey child prostitution and pornography.

A number of critical measures which are also expected to impact positively on the welfare of the socially vulnerable include:

Actions to improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities such as the establishment of a disability affairs unit, and a national co-ordinating council for addressing disability issues, including the acquisition of information, and the cost of implementing the disability policy to enable final approval. The policy was approved in principle by Cabinet in the later part of this year.

Examination of the Social Security system to determine the feasibility of harmonization of national pension schemes.

The implementation of unemployment insurance, and the provision of support to families.

The development of a policy on national heroes.

Cabinet has appointed a committee to deal with the issue of national heroes, and it will decide as to who is a national hero, and how the state will assist that person. So far we have assisted the first ever medallist for Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Wilkes, and Ms. Beryl Mc Burnie. We are continuing to care for our national heroes. Sometimes it bothers me that this has been on the news and newspapers, but one would only hear the negatives.

If one is to examine the budget presented by the Minister of Finance, and at the same time consider the work programme of the Ministry of Social Development which I have just attempted to outline for the information of this honourable House, one would recognize, undoubtedly that this Government is one for the people. We recognize, that first and foremost the needs of the citizens must be met. In this regard I am committed to ensuring the implementation of all the measures that have been outlined above so as to fulfil the mission statement of the ministry, which is the provision of an efficient social delivery system that protects the vulnerable and disadvantaged and promotes a better quality of life for all citizens.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. M. RAMSARAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

I am fully aware that some of these measures would entail legislative reform and action. I propose in 1997, to conduct a review of the situation and take the relevant action. The task may seem an awesome one, but with the determination, help, the commitment of my dedicated staff and Cabinet and the help of Almighty God, I would undertake to achieve the aims and objectives in 1997 and onward.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

Mr. Manning: Let me hear Adesh, now.

Mr. Sudama: Do you want a tooth pulled out or what?

Mr. Roger Boynes (*Toco/Manzanilla*): I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for recognizing me. May it please this honourable House, I have been given the privilege to speak on the area of labour and co-operatives. I stand here ready, willing, and able to do so. My esteemed colleague, the Member for Tunapuna, who is a sportsman and represented this country at the highest level, will debate on the area of sports and youth affairs, and he will deal with the Member for Tobago West. Allow me to skip all the rhetoric from the Member concerned, and the noise of the Member for St. Joseph. Let me deal specifically with the real issue at hand, which is the budget, the monetary instrument which affects the lives of every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. We have to stop playing games in this House, Member for St. Joseph. We have to stop the noise making. This is an honourable chamber: let us deal with the issues at hand. Allow me to get into this budget.

When I looked at the draft estimates, and I remember the Member for Nariva on his last presentation in this honourable Chamber, during the 1996 Budget made mention that there were several problems of understaffing in the ministry. There were several problems with respect to equipment which they did not have, and nowhere in this budget have I seen any provisions for upgrading of the equipment that the Electrical Inspectorate has to use. If I may quote the hon. Minister as he gave his maiden speech, on the last occasion. I quote from page 346 of *Hansard* of January 15, 1996:

“It would seem to me that the last administration made a deliberate decision to down-grade what is supposed to be a crucial Ministry in the advancement of a developing country.”

Mr. Manning: It was quoted.

Mr. R. Boynes: The Minister further went on to say that the ministry was seen as toothless, of nuisance value, and lacking in political will. The Minister stated

emphatically that he inherited the ministry plagued by staff shortages. He said that—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, on both sides, I ask you please to be courteous to your brother Member so that others could hear his contribution.

Mr. R. Boynes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Minister made mention that in the Electrical Inspectorate, as I just mentioned a short while ago, there were 12 vacancies. Today, from my instructions and from research done at the said ministry—and the Minister would have his day in Parliament, perhaps, after I am finished—the understaffing after a year is still prevalent. We came under severe attack on the last occasion by the honourable gentlemen for this problem. He further stated that the type of equipment they need is such that they have to deal and test equipment that was built by using state-of-the-art technique. Their equipment is outdated. When I perused the budget presentation I did not see any provisions for the upgrading of this equipment.

5.55 p.m.

The Factory Inspectorate Division, which the Member for Nariva complained bitterly about, has the responsibility to investigate industrial accidents and to maintain occupational safety and health in the workplace. The Member complained of a shortage of staff. Today, investigations have revealed that there are three vacancies which are not filled after one year. What is the problem? I wish to inform the Minister, through you, Mr. Speaker—and the Minister must be mindful of this—there is a great need for the training of officers in that particular department. Moreover, my research has revealed that the same lack of political will that the Member for Nariva so bitterly complained about, I understand that there is a lack of such political will that exists in that particular ministry.

We are saying that the Minister should focus on the particular ministry and give that particular ministry the sort of never-say-die attitude so that he can be seen as the leader who takes his ministry forward. When the hon. Member mentioned the shortage of staff, I remember that on the last occasion I pointed out to this honourable House that the Co-operatives Department is in crying need of staffing. The commissioner, a very goodly gentleman, who works very hard in that particular department, alas, the problem he faces today is that of understaffing.

We are dealing with so many co-operatives and credit unions. Each credit union could be seen as a bank. When one is dealing with a situation like that one looks at how many courts there are all over the country that deal with disputes

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. BOYNES]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

emanating from these banks, there is only one Commissioner's Department and the few staff that the commissioner has to deal with the disputes.

In 1996, we heard all that the Minister was going to do in order to solve this understaffing problem yet, today, I see that the same problem still exists. I ask the hon. Member for Nariva to look at that particular problem and give the will and the direction that is so badly needed and required in that particular ministry.

I also recall that the Member for Nariva indicated that there was a backlog of unresolved certificates. From research done at that particular ministry, I understand that there is still a serious backlog of the certificates that is seriously affecting workers and employees who need to have their matters taken up by the Industrial Court. The Member also said that there is an urgent need for legal service to ensure the enforcing and the updating of relevant legislation.

I commend the Minister for treating with this particular problem. He did so one year ago by appointing an in-house attorney in that particular ministry. However, out of the 24 pieces of legislation, I am suggesting that there is a need to update and to amend several of these pieces of legislation which, once the amendment takes place, would greatly ensure that ministry is operated in an efficient and effective manner. From all reports I do not know how far those pieces of legislation have reached. On the last occasion, we would have thought that they would have been at least laid in Parliament.

The Member for Nariva also spoke about 1,200 cases left pending during his term. From all research at that particular ministry, the majority of those cases are still pending, after one year. The speed with which the Member said he would deal with them, I would have thought that the majority of those cases would have been dealt with by now.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

One of the most important departments is the Inspectorate Division where employers who breach the Minimum Wages Order are investigated. This department, which is in great need of the negotiating skills of the said attorney I mentioned a while ago, in order to plan strategies and engage in negotiating with potential breachers, from the inception has not had the opportunity to even speak with the said in-house attorney. How big can that particular ministry be that a particular department has not even had an audience with the particular in-house attorney? That department is really in need of consultation and negotiation with its in-house attorney.

The hon. Member promised to update the Industrial Relations Act, the Minimum Wages Act, the Workmen's Compensation Act and the Retrenchment

and Severance Benefit Act. Only talk! I want the Member to indicate to this House how far these Acts have reached. As regards the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act, the Minister promised to address the loopholes as pointed out by a Privy council judgment. He also promised to deal with the question of how employers who are faced with liquidation would be able to pay their employees severance benefits. To date, my research, has revealed that those loopholes have not been dealt with.

6.05 p.m.

The Security Agencies and Security Officers Bill—nothing. The Occupational Health and Safety Bill which he promised to bring to Parliament was not done, and it is instructive to note that the past administration held serious consultation on that particular piece of legislation and we had reached the part where Cabinet has approved same already, but up comes this Government and everything has to start all over again. The wheel has to be reinvented. I suppose it may come to this Parliament after four years.

The employment exchanges that the ministry has recently set up, I am suggesting that we do not play politics with that particular department because the employment of the people are for all and sundry, not for anyone of any political persuasion. Similarly, do not play politics with the Canadian Farm Programme. It is very instructive to note that at least when I mentioned about the understaffing problem, that the Public Relations Officer of that particular ministry, instead of looking to see how he could ensure that his ministry and the people therein forge ahead to be one of the best ministries in Trinidad and Tobago, he is up and down in the town of Sangre Grande, throwing Grand Fest, having steelband competition, fooling the people of Sangre Grande. He is telling the people that Despers and the others would be coming, while I listened to Despers playing abroad. Half of the entire town came out and three bands came out on the streets of Sangre Grande. The said Public Relations Officer also went to Sangre Grande and held a parang competition. That is what the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives Public Relations Officer did. He brought many Members from the other side and only 10 people came out to that parang competition. I am saying, let us focus on the correct thing.

While I was Chairman of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, we had what is called “Pan in the Grand”, and I forked out a total of \$145,000 from my pockets, from my company, to ensure that it was a success. The records are there.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. BOYNES]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

That is why when one's heart is in the right place, one would always get support from the people.

This budget, I emphasize, does not provide the climate for industrial peace and I wish to quote the hon. Member, when he stated in his last budget presentation that the aim is to defuse potential crisis and create the climate for industrial peace. That was the aim. After inheriting a rescheduled debt from the NAR administration, the PNM administration paid the two per cent reinstated by the Industrial Court. Strapped as we were for cash at that time, the last major payment on the foreign debt was December, 1995. We are looking at a situation where there has been a surplus because of the increase in the price of oil which we did not cater for in the last budget. We are looking at a situation where the foreign debt payments are not as strenuous as before, yet we cannot make any provision for our teachers, the employees of this Government. We refuse to make any concrete provisions whatsoever for the teachers.

I listened to my Friend, the Member for St. Joseph, who went to Singapore, had a grand time, listened to the people, observed the people, and he understands the importance of human resources. He understands the importance of the people focusing their energies in the right direction for the common good and development of this particular country. He understands that. The people who focus on the young minds, the young energies, the young bodies—rather than have them drinking a beer on a Friday, or smoking weed or cigarettes—are the teachers. They are the ones that shape the minds of the young people and they have so much energy. They are brilliant people and they have so much energy. They can take this country forward. Added to that is the amount of natural resources that we have, coupled with our energy. I am suggesting that we be serious. Let us not only focus on giving Ish and the boys \$100 million, but let us focus on giving the persons, the teachers who are responsible for shaping the minds and bodies of our energetic young people. In other words, rather than focusing on writing off the debt to Guyana, give the teachers something. They are the ones responsible for our young and our greatest resources in this particular country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism also reiterated in his budgetary presentation a phase-by-phase approach of the demonopolization of the National Petroleum Company. The first phase is to sell the gas stations to lessees. The UNC investors who spent approximately \$1 million into their campaign during the last general election, are the ones who would be the beneficiaries of purchasing these gas stations without having to deal or go through

any tendering procedure. The investors have proposed to set up a petroleum company and going straight to the refinery and distributing same without any safety or quality considerations. My concern is that over 3,000 jobs would be lost in this process—the pump attendants, people who are working on the trucks—and I am suggesting that we need to look at the situation. We cannot play at speculation with the state's assets. We cannot do that, even though Ish and the boys got what they wanted. I am saying that we should stop playing politics and give people the opportunity to speculate on our country's assets.

6.15 p.m.

I turn to the other segment of the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives. My concern and that of many persons in the country is about a process where a mass of people, either because of their race, beliefs or religious persuasions are calculatedly marginalized, and reduced to second-class citizens. I would get to the point in a short while.

In 1996, we celebrated 50 years of credit unionism in Trinidad and Tobago. In 1997, the world would celebrate the "International Year of Co-operatives." I am challenged to ask: Does the 1997 budget reflect Government's plans for credit unions and other co-operatives? It seems that the Government plans to disseminate the people's movement at a time when the rest of the world is preparing to celebrate its achievements. Who are the people targeted for such dissemination or disintegration? Who are the people this UNC/NAR Government plan to alienate through their draconian measures in the 1997 budget?

In referring to the beginnings of the credit union movement a comment was made in the *50th Anniversary Supplement* produced by the Co-operative Credit Union League of Trinidad and Tobago. It was mentioned that when in December, 1945, the ordinance legitimizing credit unions was passed, a considerable number of hitherto poor people were able to enter the formal markets for loans. Today, the majority of credit union members continue to be the working class, the same small man we meet in the public service and the teaching service. The plan is to break the credit union, the only social and economic buffer of the teachers and public servants. It is always good warfare to attack frontally, and simultaneously cut off supply lines. We are witnessing warfare against the working class.

Despite the promises to do so, this Government has failed to settle the debt with the teachers and public servants, as I mentioned a short while ago. Now the Government plans to introduce human resource units which would systematically

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. BOYNES]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

place many workers on the breadline. Once these public servants join the already swollen ranks of the unemployed, what would become of them? I ask that question. What plans does the Government propose to re-empower these individuals and allow them the dignity to continue to provide for themselves and their families?

In past times the credit union movement acted as this buffer. Over the past six years the Credit Union League has trained hundreds of citizens in the area of small business activities and management. Several credit unions have been trained to manage small business loan portfolios all geared to assist the less privileged members of our society. In 1995, the credit union movement provided low cost loans such as \$35.5 million in the area of education, \$14.9 million for health, \$99.1 million for housing and \$17.2 million towards the establishment of small businesses. Today, instead of the Government encouraging more high income earners to invest in credit unions, it implements a stranglehold on the movement. Firstly, the Government cuts off the tax credit which effectively discourages the high income earners, those who could afford to save from investing in credit unions; then it retains the legislation on the old co-operative society.

I would inform the Minister of Finance that during the period 1982—88, the first six years after the two incentive systems for saving credits were introduced in the credit union, it increased by about 135 per cent. What is the effect of removing the tax credit estimated by the hon. Minister? Should the movement be orchestrated to collapse? Can our society survive such a trauma? What have the leaders of the credit union movement done to deserve this? They just want to survive. In the aftermath of the 1996 budget the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism said that the movement should get its house in order. He suggested that unless the credit union movement improve its operations, they should not expect Government's support. I would address that particular situation.

The issue is not only the removal of the tax credit of \$625 from the credit union. I wish to focus on two aspects. One is the question of getting its house in order and the other is the appropriateness of the Government's action regarding the removal of the saving incentive of \$625, as he did in this budget. What has the Government done to assist the co-operative sector to put its house in order? That particular involvement should also come from the ministry if it is said to be a proactive one.

The Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives only put together a team to look at a plan for the co-operative sector. To date, nothing has been developed. The Government agreed to put \$3 million as part of the IADB agreement between the

league and the Government. I do not know if to date the Government has come forward with its \$3 million. What has the credit union movement done after being given the warning by the Minister of Finance, that unless and until it put its house in order, the Government would take away the \$625 tax credit? In response to that, has it done anything?

6.25 p.m.

Let me indicate to this honourable Chamber that the leadership of the sector got together within the month of January and developed a national strategic plan which outlines the steps to achieve greater accountability and provide better services to its members. Since then, the movement has established prudential standards of operations; both the Credit Union League and the Stabilisation Fund monitor credit unions to ensure they meet the prudential standards or provide technical assistance to bring them up to these standards.

In 1996 through a series of consultations, the credit union movement now has firm proposals for their revision and amendment of the Co-operative Societies Act of 1971; proposals which would bring into being the legislation which would strengthen the management and operations of credit unions, and which would further guarantee the safety and soundness of the credit union movement and its funds. These proposals, I understand, were forwarded to the hon. Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism and the sector is still awaiting his response to same. All these initiatives were done by the credit union movement with absolutely no help from the Government. They have put things in place to put their house in order.

In 1996, the Government, the Credit Union League and the IADB signed a fund which ensured that \$12 million will be pumped into the sector to strengthen all the pillars, its management and proper training of its members in the credit union movement, a project designed to further strengthen the credit union movement. Again, this whole project and agreement came about by the initiative of the Credit Union League.

Notwithstanding this, the movement did not sit down, the league conducted several training programmes to establish prudential standards, human resource management, personal financial planning and credit union marketing. It also worked with many credit unions in the development of reviewing their individual strategic plans. The stabilization fund which operates under the auspices of the league spearheaded initiatives to wind up non-performing credit unions and this exercise will be on-going until only the strong and efficient credit unions operate in Trinidad and Tobago.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. BOYNES]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Two credit unions, Grastaff and Hydro-Agri credit unions, are now merging to form a better and stronger credit union and many more mergers are expected to take place. The whole idea is to ensure that there are strong and capable credit unions in Trinidad and Tobago. The winding up of the Co-operative Development Bank is well on the way. As a matter of fact, parties are meeting tomorrow to discuss severance pay and so forth.

The league has encouraged several credit unions to change their by-laws which would enable them to operate in a more efficient and effective manner. Mr. Speaker, does this sound like a sleeping movement that is not serious about putting its house in order? I say, no. The credit union movement has done more than the Government would have expected, and this cannot be rewarded by an attempt to bury it. It is clear that the leadership and the whole sector have done nothing to incur the wrath of this Government.

It is important for one to understand what is taking place in this country. On the one hand, the Government, through its actions, is trying to bury the credit union sector and, on the other hand, it has improved the legitimacy of the formal financial sector at the expense of the informal sector. The first thing they did was to proclaim the Securities and Exchange Act and the Financial Institution Act very quickly and they are quickly working on the Mutual Funds Bill. This is in the formal sector so everything is nice and in place for it, while the non-formal sector which is guided by the Co-operative Societies Act of 1971, the Government has failed to amend an article of that Act and to even peruse the proposals forwarded to them by the sector, and lacked the courtesy to respond to the credit union movement. If one has to understand this whole movement, one has to understand what are some of the amendments the credit union sector is asking the Minister to consider, because one cannot simply take out the \$625 credit and leave the sector hanging, one has to be mindful that the first thing that should have been done was to amend the legislation and ensure that the field is really level and, thereafter, if one wishes to take out the \$625 credit, then one could have done so, but the proposals of the sector have not been considered to survive the taking out of that amount.

In the amendments, the sector is simply asking to amend the restriction on the interest income of 12 per cent, the restriction on the cost of funds of 8 per cent, the restriction on interim dividend. These are things which the formal sector can achieve. They cannot grant interim dividends and they have asked for it. It is also asking for the restriction on the membership. For instance, someone can have a

joint account in a bank but that is not permitted in the sector, so if a man and his wife have \$10,000 in the bank he can borrow accordingly, but a man has to have \$5,000 and his wife \$5,000 yet he cannot avail himself of the benefit of borrowing \$10,000 from the credit union.

The legislation is dealing with the formal sector to have legislation which deal with ensuring that there are fit and proper persons to serve on boards. We are asking for the legislation to be amended so that we would strengthen the boards of these various credit unions.

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

With respect to the dispute aspect which I have touched on earlier, the formal sector has access to the courts of Trinidad and Tobago and the informal sector only has access to the commissioner and with the lack of proper staffing at the commissioner's office—he is trying his best but there is need for the Minister to open the doors of the courts so that the credit union could have access to these courts.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

6.35 p.m.

Mr. R. Boynes: Mr. Speaker, I thank you and hon. Members very much for allowing me to continue for a further 30 minutes.

As I mentioned, there is need to amend the legislation as it deals with the informal sector of our country where the “small man” finds himself. There is a need to amend section 67 of the Co-operative Societies Act, 1961. That particular section deals with disputes as they relate to a credit union and its member. If a credit union has lent its member, say \$10,000, in order to get back that money, there is a long procedure because of the lack of staffing at the Co-operative Development Bank. The credit union suffers because it is not in a position to quickly retrieve its money. Many of the problems which the credit union faces are because of delinquency.

If the Minister had given effect to amendments in the legislation, at some time thereafter it would have been safe. If he then saw the need to withdraw the \$625, then so be it. Unless and until the Minister deals with the proposed amendments to

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. BOYNES]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

the legislation, the playing field will not be level. He has upgraded the playing field of the formal sector and dug a pit in the credit unions' field to bury them. I do not know if the Government has even come forward with the \$3 million. The hon. Minister of Finance would indicate this to us in his winding up.

The argument may not be so much the removal of the \$625, but rather the removal of the same without putting the requisite infrastructure in place to ensure the success of the sector. In short, to really have the playing field level, there is need to amend the legislation. This sector has approximately 250,000 persons and it is appropriately placed to facilitate the Government's thrust in developing the agricultural sector.

If I may digress for one moment, Mr. Speaker, the credit union sector is well placed to develop the country as a whole. There is a popular estate in the region of Toco/Manzanilla. I have been liaising with co-operatives throughout the region and it is one of the most profitable estates that we have. It is the jewel of Toco/Manzanilla. I have liaised with most of the co-operatives in that particular area and for the first time we have actually been in negotiations with a foreign company, which has expressed an interest in a joint venture with these co-operatives, to purchase the pride and joy of Sangre Grande and the environs. This will produce jobs for 450—500 persons. We are not sitting and waiting for Government to empower us. It is people empowering people. That is the essence and magic of the credit union movement; that credit unions can get involved and empower themselves, and we must be careful how we treat with them.

May I remind the Minister of Finance that the credit union sector in Trinidad and Tobago has about 250,000 persons. It leaves one to believe that he really does not intend to come back into government.

Is not the co-operative model a useful one in sustaining growth through empowerment of the people of Trinidad and Tobago? Is not the Member for St. Augustine's concept of sou-sou lands founded on the same principle? Should the effort not be to modify this model to suit our particular needs, which would aid our development? This was done by the mayor of a town in Germany in the year 1845.

Let me digress for another moment. The mayor in this German town formulated this co-operative concept which he used to build an entire town. If people wanted security, the business people invested and hired their own security. This particular co-operative model caused the people to empower themselves. They went into agriculture; they went into fishing. They went into every aspect and built the town

into one of the greatest in Germany, which gave rise to the credit union movement. So now we understand from where the model came. Instead of encouraging the “small man” to save, as the credit union has historically done, we are now encouraging the “small man” to spend all his moneys in casinos.

I then have to ask the Minister of Finance what he meant when he indicated to the credit union sector to get its house in order. What else is there to do? Does this mean to get out of the proverbial financial house? After analyzing this budget, it is no small man’s budget, it is a big business budget. Whilst there is no fee payable to license motor vehicles, with the increased cost of spare parts and gasoline, we are now asking the “small man” to walk. Rather than have the people at the centre, I believe that we have Ish and the boys at the centre.

Mr. Speaker, they are joking. They are playing games with the public of Trinidad and Tobago. I implore the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism before he deducts the \$625, as God and Jesus Christ is my Saviour, to put the necessary amendments to the legislation in place, otherwise history will be unkind to him.

Mr. Speaker, I wish you and Members of this honourable Chamber a merry Christmas. Let us all work together and do the right thing for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I thank you.

6.45 p.m.

The Minister of Labour and Co-operatives (Hon. Harry Partap): Mr. Speaker, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to participate in this debate on the bill to provide for the Service of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ending December 31, 1997.

Permit me as well, Mr. Speaker, to congratulate the Minister of Finance for the presentation of this budget, which, in the view of many, is reasonable, acceptable, people-oriented and focused. It is focused on a vision to get people working to strengthen the attack on poverty and to create an environment where people will be comfortable and happy.

This year had basically been a period of recouping and consolidating the image of the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives. That image, I want to point out, had been scuttled by Members opposite when they were on this side. *[Desk thumping]* It was scuttled through persistent and well-orchestrated emasculation of the

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. H. PARTAP]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

ministry. When I assumed duties there last November we began recouping and rebuilding a new image. During the past year we have been putting systems in place to restore some measure of respectability to the ministry. I have no doubt now that employees at the ministry feel certain that they would be able to use their training and competence in a manner that would benefit the country as a whole.

When the 1996 Budget was presented earlier this year the Member for Tunapuna was assigned as the “shadow” Minister of Labour and Co-operatives and he attempted to tackle the ministry. However, he was way out of his league and he made a mess of his contribution. He spoke of things that he knew not about. In this budget debate we see that the Leader of the Opposition has switched around his shadow Minister of Labour and Co-operatives and the person he has put, the Member for Toco/Manzanilla, is again out of his league. [*Desk thumping*]

The Member for Toco/Manzanilla is feeding this august Chamber with a number of inaccuracies. However, Mr. Speaker, if the Member had done what he had intended, he would never have been so inaccurate in his contribution. He had approached the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives for information on co-operatives and on labour legislation. We are an open Government. [*Desk thumping*] We have nothing to hide. If he had followed up his request, he would have gotten all the information that I would have had access to for my contribution here this evening, but he did not. He preferred to make the request, run and hide and then go to some lesser person and get half-baked information and he wants to appear as though he is smart. He is not smart and I warn the Leader of the Opposition that seat would be in trouble for the next election. [*Interruption*]

The Member for Toco/Manzanilla raised a number of questions relating to the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives. One of the major issues that he spoke about was the credit unions, however he did not mention the Co-operative Development Bank which is linked to them. I think it is my duty to tell this House and the rest of the country where the problem lies because I would not allow anybody from the Opposition to come here and bring inaccurate information to smear Members on this side.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, the Members opposite should be held criminally responsible for the horrendous losses incurred by thousands of poor people through the credit union. [*Interruption*] Of course they should apologize, that is what the Member for Toco/Manzanilla should have done this evening, he should have apologized to the small people—about whom the PNM says it cares—for the lack of action on their part for a number of years. They knew that the Co-operative

Development Bank was in trouble but they took no action to stop the haemorrhaging of funds from that bank.

Today, I do not want to say too much but just enough to signal to this population that the UNC/NAR Government is not responsible for that problem at the Co-operative Development Bank. There are thousands of poor people who may not get back their life savings which they have put into that bank. I repeat, each Member opposite should apologize to this nation. Now, go down on your knees and beg pardon. [*Desk thumping*]

When we came into office last November the Commissioner of Co-operatives closed the bank. We made all kinds of efforts to see if the people's moneys could have been saved. Today, I publicly congratulate the Commissioner of Co-operatives, who did a wonderful job, but the bank could not have been saved. The bank has now gone into liquidation and we are exploring all kinds of possibilities with the Minister of Finance to see what could be done. I cannot make any commitment at this stage. However, when the law is amended in relation to the co-operative societies and credit unions, we must make the people at the top responsible for the people's money.

I was taken aback because the Member for Toco/Manzanilla is a part of this. The losses at the Co-operative Development Bank were incurred by people who were at the top. They did all kinds of things. They gave unsecured loans. They made bad investments.

6.55 p.m.

Mr. Boynes: Could the hon. Member elaborate when he says that the Member for Toco/Manzanilla was a part of it? Does he mean that I was part of the bank with the directors at that time? What does he mean?

Mr. H. Partap: I will explain. The Member was part of the credit union aspect of it. I would not elaborate on that because there is another credit union that we are looking at very closely. There are many letters on my desk and also on the Commissioner's desk where people, in one of the major credit unions, cannot get their funds. People are begging for their funds and they cannot get them and the Member for Toco/Manzanilla is a part of that.

Mr. Boynes: Mr. Speaker, would the Minister care to give way, again? Would the Minister care to explain to this honourable Chamber exactly what is my role when he says, "is part of that"? What role is my company playing with respect to that particular credit union to which the Minister is referring?

Mr. H. Partap: Mr. Speaker, I think he may have to answer that himself because he knows the role his company is playing.

Mr. Breaux: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order! *[Interruption]* I am sorry.

Mr. Valley: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order!

Mr. Speaker: Just one second, please. Would the hon. Member for Diego Martin Central please sit.

[Mr. Valley took his seat]

There is a point of order which was raised by the Member for La Brea, do you care to deal with it?

Mr. H. Partap: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Could the Member please indicate the Standing Order which he is claiming was infringed? *[Interruption]*

Mr. Breaux: I am going to tell you now.

Mr. Speaker: One second, please! I am asking: Could the Member indicate the Standing Order which he is claiming to be infringed by the Member?

Mr. Breaux: Mr. Speaker, I was going to do just that. Standing Order 36(5).

Mr. Speaker: Okay, please sit. Standing Order 36(5) says:

“No Member should impute improper motives to any other Member of either Chamber.”

A short while ago, one Member, in his contribution, was talking about credit unions and saying that there was a problem in respect of which one Member was a part. That Member got up and asked the Member to give way—I was not involved—and he gave way. That Member asked to particularize and indicate the circumstances in which he was a problem. The Member, quite properly, indicated that he did not want to say too much about it, but indeed, it related to some other issue. At least that is my recollection of it. At that stage, the Member got up again, not on a point of order, but asking for further clarification and invited the Member to indicate whether his firm was, in any way, involved in it.

Quite frankly, where a Member tries to elicit certain information and particulars from one Member, how could one possibly suggest—*[Interruption]* No, I am on my legs, when I am through one could raise anything. My position is, having risen on Standing Order 36(5), one could have sought clarification on an issue. Quite

frankly, I do not think it is the type of matter in which both Members should get involved. Where one could have sought clarification, I rule that this particular Standing Order has not been infringed. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Valley: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: I am asking a question: Is the hon. Member for Diego Martin Central on a point of order?

Mr. Valley: Mr. Speaker, you have ruled without listening to our case.

Mr. Speaker: Please sit. For the avoidance of doubt and for the good order of this House, the Standing Orders provide that one could rise on a point of order. The Member for La Brea has risen on a point of order and, rightly or wrongly, I have ruled.

It is improper and against the Standing Orders for the Member for Diego Martin Central, I, having ruled on it, regardless of how he feels about it, without rising on a point of order, to raise another point of order indicating to me that I was wrong and that I ruled without it being heard. Please.

Mr. Valley: Mr. Speaker, I expect that in this House we would be guided—

Mr. Speaker: One second, please. The Member for Nariva is in the middle of his contribution. I have allowed an interruption on it for a point of order to be taken on which I have ruled. If another point of order would be raised I would hear you; if it is a question of addressing me or the gallery on something that is not a point of order, I would ask you, please, not to do it because the Standing Orders do not provide for your doing that. I ask you, please if it is a point of order, by all means raise it, if it is not, I would not accept it.

Mr. H. Partap: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just want to read into the records as well that in relation to the very credit union, the commissioner has appointed a special task force comprising representatives of the Credit Union League, the Stabilization Fund and other members of the movement to work with the board of that particular credit union so as to ensure its viability and sustainability. We hope that members of that credit union would not lose their funds.

Mr. Speaker, I want to acknowledge that steps had been taken by the Credit Union League to address the problem and to deal with the problems in the credit union movement. I want to point out that these steps were taken—the stable door was closed after the horse had bolted, that is, after so many credit unions had lost

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. H. PARTAP]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

money. There was no prudential management. That is the basis of it. In fact, in the same credit union of which I am speaking, the one that we got in a little argument about, there were people lending money in unsecured loans. Hundreds of thousands of dollars of poor people's money were being lent to businessmen without any collateral. Today, there are poor people who have their life savings in the credit union and cannot access the funds. We are saying, yes, the Credit Union League as well as the Co-operative Division had put things in place and we are now moving in a direction where we are trying to stabilize some of these credit unions.

7:05 p.m.

There is a big song and dance about the removal of the \$6.25, but nobody is saying what this UNC/NAR government is doing to strengthen credit unions. One cannot expect public funds to be poured into the credit unions to prop up a system where people at the top got everything. One would not get that from this side. We have been doing a lot of things to strengthen the institution. In fact, the institutional strengthening of the Credit Union League had been done through assistance from the IADB (Inter-American Development Bank) where the Government is committed to provide some level of matching funds. That is one way.

There is the impending revision of the Co-operative Societies Act to make it more relevant to the needs of the movement. There is also the strengthening of the Co-operative Department to allow for the development and supervision of credit unions. There is also the formulation of a policy for the co-operative sector, and a committee is currently meeting at the level of the ministry. We brought people from outside, and they are developing a policy that will try to inform the movement, the whole co-operative movement, which includes credit unions. [*Desk thumping*]

We are also seeking closer collaboration between the credit unions and the other co-operative societies in the sector. That was not done when they were on this side, but we are doing it now. One does not expect it to happen overnight. It will take some time. Mr. Speaker, we are also working closely with the league to achieve some of our objectives. Contrary to what the Member for Toco/Manzanilla said, we are working with the league, the credit unions, and the co-operative sector to make a strong movement.

The former regime did nothing to assist co-operatives and we are now doing what we can. We are working as quickly as possible because we see co-operatives as one of the means of solving unemployment. A lot of money has been generated in the credit union movement. Therefore, we want this money for the benefit of the people—not for a few people at the top and their friends. This is what we are doing.

The Member for Toco/Manzanilla—the shadow Minister of Labour and Co-operatives, I think he is—will make a very poor Minister of Labour and Co-operatives, I can tell you. He has raised the question of the Canadian Farm Programme. I want to admit to this House that I did nothing to interfere with that programme, which is a very sensitive one. In fact, if we are not careful in choosing the people we send up there, the farm workers, we can lose places on that programme. I did not interfere with the running of that programme for the past year, but I may do so in 1997.

Let me give you the figures. These figures reflect what they did, and I know the Member for Toco/Manzanilla, is coming with a subtle kind of mischief to say that this Government is just concentrating on picking people only from a particular area, but we got 888 people on the Canadian Farm Programme this year. I think it was about 15 or 16 more than last year, and they were selected on the basis of interviews. From that 888, only about 150 were new recruits. All the others were called back. The farmers had requested them and they had to go back. We sent them back.

We had 468 people from the South and I am telling you what I inherited. I inherited this, and I thought it was good. South, 468; North, 174; Central, 123; the East, 92; Tobago, 31. These are the figures for 1996. I do not know what conclusions one wants to draw from that, but one is free to draw whatever conclusion one wants. The Canadian Farm Programme is continuing and we are trying to get more jobs and also to see if we can expand it to other areas, like the United States and so forth. There are some workers in the Cayman Islands. We are doing a fairly good job in terms of sourcing jobs overseas and we hope that it will continue. We are working on that.

Mr. Speaker, I was a bit taken aback by the Member for Toco/Manzanilla when he said that this ministry lacked political will, whatever that means. But I have a feeling that he was simply mirroring what happened during his Government's term in office, because if I did one thing in the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives in 1996, it would have been 100 per cent more than what had been done by that Government. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Assam: That is a green heart.

Hon. H. Partap: What we did at the ministry says a lot about the staffing. It is quite true that we were not able to do anything this year about some of the matters

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. H. PARTAP]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

I mentioned and some of the staffing arrangements I met there. There is a reason for that. It is not because we did not want to do anything. The last government—their Government—had commissioned an audit of the ministry which was completed this year, and a final report was submitted. That report had suggested major restructuring of the ministry where we would concentrate on our core competencies. [*Desk thumping*]

We appointed a committee within the ministry, reviewed the recommendations, and had discussions with the consultants. These things take time. When we were through, the final report was put to Cabinet and accepted. This year we are going to restructure the ministry making it responsive to the needs of the country. We want to put some life back into the ministry and we are going to tackle all those things. I also want to tell you, that we cannot go putting people in the ministry like that. That is what they used to do. We do an audit, look at it, and then decide how we are going to do things.

Mr. Maharaj: That is the reason the Minister of Foreign Affairs left them and came here.

Hon. H. Partap: Mention was made of Occupational Health and Safety. The proposed OHS is going to absorb some of the activities at the Labour and Factory Inspectorate in the ministry. We plan to establish an agency to administer Occupational Health and Safety. This agency will be responsible to the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives. One cannot just go and hire people, one has to analyze the situation and know what one is doing. We know what we are doing. Give us a chance. [*Desk thumping*]

We are addressing the question of the staffing because we are restructuring the ministry and we are going to make it respond to the needs of the country. Mr. Speaker, I did not like the insinuation that came from the other side—especially from the Member for Toco/Manzanilla—in relation to what we do in the ministry. We have done many things this past year. Let me tell you what we have done.

7.15 p.m.

The Leader of the Opposition spoke this morning about the industrial climate being never at its gloomiest. That is not true. I do not know where he is living. The industrial relations in the country was never better than it is today. It is stable and peaceful. Do not worry about the small hiccups in the public service. We are attending to that. Their friend in TTUTA tried something, but we are dealing with it. The Minister has an option and we are doing other things. This is a government

that speaks to people. We consult and we dialogue. *[Desk thumping]* But remember, there is a process through which we must go and if some people do not want to go through that process, they would just have to feel. If a particular union does not want to follow the process, let the members march, but we are attending to it. We must go according to the law. They put the law there. We are just following through.

So the industrial climate is stable and peaceful. That did not come by chance, because when the Prime Minister appointed me as the Minister of Labour and Co-operatives, he told me that we have to deepen the tripartite process. That is what we are doing. During the past year we had non-crisis meetings with the major unionized companies in the oil industry. All the CEOs met with the head of the Oilfields Workers Trade Union. We wanted no advisers. The Minister of Trade and Industry and Minister of Consumer Affairs, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, together with myself, met with them and we held monthly meetings, where there was an exchange of views, a dialogue, so that anything that will seem to disturb the peace and tranquillity of the labour front, we dealt with it there. We are practising participatory democracy. We talk with people so they do not have to fight or march. Do you know what our Prime Minister said?

Hon. Member: They are criminals.

Hon. H. Partap: No. He said that we must get rid of the adversarial and confrontational approach to industrial relations. That is what we, on this side, are doing. That is why it is so peaceful. The Conciliation Unit of the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives has some very hardworking people. *[Desk thumping]* It is headed by a gentleman named Mr. Robert Linton.

Hon. Member: Do not call names.

Hon. H. Partap: All right, I would not call names. But he is a hardworking man. Do you know what they did on their own? They decided to have preventative conciliation, that is, before a dispute even reaches the ministry, there are bilateral talks between the union and employer. Before anything reaches the point of eruption, we enter and talk. It will be even more peaceful next year. No matter how they put up their people to create confusion, it would not work.

Hon. Member: You see, Collis did not have a tongue, he could not talk.

Hon. H. Partap: They could come into the ministry any time they want and we would settle the problem in the PNM. *[Laughter]*

Hon. Member: So that Rowley would not fight Manning!

Hon. H. Partap: Mr. Speaker, the Member for Toco/Manzanilla mentioned unresolved certificates. Again, if he had asked the ministry—we were willing to help—we would have given him the information. He would have known that the Conciliation Unit has significantly reduced their backlog of unresolved certificates. I admit that there are some more and we are hoping within the next three months or so in the new year we should have them all settled. We are aiming for one thing, which is to keep within the law in relation to issuing unresolved certificates. I think the law gives us two weeks, I believe it is, in which the certificates must be issued. We want to keep within that limit.

Unresolved certificates are very important because an aggrieved worker will not be able to access the Industrial Court unless this certificate is presented. It is sad to say, but this year I have signed unresolved certificates that were four years old. What was Collis doing?

Hon. Member: Do not call names.

Hon. H. Partap: What was the former Minister doing? I do not know. I understand that he did not have it too good with his Prime Minister.

So we hope to be able to fit within the stipulations of the law. At the Conciliation Unit we will be training people with the assistance of the ILO. We hope to implement in 1997, what we call, a staff development programme so that everybody will have access to training in that unit and elsewhere in the ministry. We hope this is going to take place in the new year.

Mr. Speaker, even though we are a member of the ILO, the last administration did not lift a finger to look at conventions adopted by the ILO in order to put them forward for ratification. We brought 11 conventions and recommendations to Parliament for noting. We appointed, as well, the ILO 144 Committee, headed by the former Industrial Court Judge Mr. Jim Adams—a very distinguished gentleman. He has already recommended one convention for ratification. I intend to take it to Cabinet. That is Convention 100—Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value. I will bring it before my Cabinet colleagues very shortly in the new year for consideration.

We have done a tremendous amount of work in the ministry. On this ILO tripartite 144 Committee are the Ministry of Social Development, the Personnel Department, as well as the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives. So it is functioning and we would be able to ratify some of these conventions once we

have the structure in place, and so forth. I do not know if we have to bring it to Parliament, but if needs be, we would bring it.

That same committee is currently looking at Convention 103—Maternity Protection; Convention 159—Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment and Convention 144—Merchant Shipping and, very shortly, I will bring them in as well. That committee is also looking at Convention 81—Labour Inspection in Industry and Commerce and Convention 122—Employment Policy. So we are well on the way in looking at these ILO conventions so that workers and employers will be protected in this country.

7.25 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, there is at the ministry, the National Employment Service. This is a unit which we inherited. It is also called the Employment Exchanges. There is one in Port of Spain, Chaguanas and San Fernando. We have put one in Point Fortin, and the Member for Toco/Manzanilla is talking about not making them political. He was talking to himself and to his side of the House, because they made it political. We will not make it political. We are making every effort to ensure that it is not political, and very soon we will open one in Arima, Rio Claro, and Sangre Grande.

We want to make the National Employment Service a proactive unit. It must be a proactive unit, sourcing employment for people. To do this, it has to be a credible unit. It must be something that the employers respect and have confidence in. We have very good people working there and we hope that we will convert it into that kind of system.

We are also going to introduce an element of directing applicants to craft and skills development. This is what we are going to do. So when people come there we will weigh and consider their skills and ability and then we will put them to learn skills because we will have, as the Minister of Education will tell you, the Skills Development Agency.

Mr. Speaker, we also hope to put in place a national human resource management information system, and we hope that will deal with the mismatch of skills, and existing unemployment problems in the country. We hope that this will be part of our ministry's new vision and outlook. We are currently working with the Ministry of Planning and Development in trying to put this in place. So we hope that will be done and that it will be a catalyst for meeting manpower needs in this country.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. H. PARTAP]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Mr. Speaker, for the first time the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives undertook implementation of a capital expenditure project, under the Public Sector Investment Programme in 1996. The Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives never got money from the other side, so we gave them money and you know what they did? They did Phase 1 of repairs to the Cipriani College of Labour and Co-operatives.

Incidentally, we are pursuing plans for the Cipriani College of Labour and Co-operatives, so we will get the land on which the college is situated. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources is currently working on that and very soon we will give them the land. Something they have been asking for, for the past three or four years and were never given.

They have also been asking to change the name of the college, because it now has an input into co-operative development. And so Cabinet changed the name this year. It is now called the Cipriani College of Labour and Co-operative Studies. We also want this college to have accreditation to some of the universities abroad and we are working with NIHERST to do that. They have been asking the other side to do that. Do not express surprise, because they were ignored over the years. We are putting some substance. There was a fire recently and we gave them money and they have been able to do some repairs to the building. We are in the process, sorry—

Mr. Speaker: Sorry to cut you off in full flight, but your speaking time has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Hon. M. Assam*]

Question put and agreed to.

Hon. H. Partap: Mr. Speaker, I thank you and the Members on this side, as well as those opposite, for extending my speaking time. I will try not to use all of it. Reference was made, Mr. Speaker, to the Minimum Wages Order, and something about the security guards and so forth. Let me just put that matter to rest now. The Minimum Wages Board was appointed and it is under the chairmanship of retired Industrial Court Judge, Mr. Francis Corbie. A big song and dance was made about the Minimum Wages Board by the Member for Toco/Manzanilla, but he did not realize that it was his government that did not appoint the board at that time.

Since 1993 there has been no Minimum Wages Board in this country. So we have done it, the board is now constituted, we have also given Mr. Corbie and the

board the responsibility to review the World Bank recommendation for a single economy minimum wage. That board has that responsibility. They also have the responsibility to come up with a minimum wage for the security guards as well. So we are dealing with that in relation to the Minimum Wages Board.

Mr. Speaker, the Occupational Health and Safety Bill as I said, had many false starts during a period of 21 years. The Member for Toco/Manzanilla made mention of it. The Bill had been out for public comment. The comments came in, they had been analyzed, and we got very favourable comments from the social partners and very soon—we have a time-table set by the Attorney General—we are going to have that Bill before this Parliament, so that it will protect workers and employers; something that they did not want to do.

Mention was made about a number of Acts to be revised and so forth. I want to assure the Member for Toco/Manzanilla that we do have a legislative agenda in the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives. In fact, we do have a legal counsel on board. Something that they refused to give the last Minister. We have a counsel now and we have a very competent man. We are going to use him very wisely in pursuit of the objectives in the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives.

The amendment to the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act is going to come before the Parliament next year. We are fine-tuning a position that is acceptable to the social partners—you kept the matter there for three years—and we are moving forward. We are getting many people coming in to assist us in presenting to this country the best alternative in relation to that matter.

We are also revising the Trade Union Act, the Workmen's Compensation Act, as well as the IRA and so forth. So, we are doing a number of things at the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives.

Before I close, Mr. Speaker, I and my ministry have been pleased with the co-operation we are getting from the social partners in connection with our tripartite focus. All the social partners are involved at all levels of the work of the ministry to ensure that what we present to the country is acceptable. We do not want to impose anything on people.

The social partners and the National Trade Union Centre realize that adversarial and confrontational approaches will not solve our problems, so they are making the paradigm shift, and we are encouraging them. So I thank them publicly for this type of co-operation. Let them know that they have a Minister of Labour and Co-operatives and a Government that will always be willing to listen to them.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. H. PARTAP]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Mr Speaker, I also join with the rest of the Members of the House to wish you a blessed Christmas and a prosperous New Year. Thank you, Sir.

7.35 p.m.

Mr. Barendra Sinanan (*San Fernando West*): Mr. Speaker, if we are honest with ourselves—when I say “ourselves” I mean my colleagues on this side as well as those opposite and the wider public—we would come to the conclusion that the 1997 budget is not receiving the rave reviews that the 1996 Budget did. Whilst my colleague and Friend, the hon. Member for St. Joseph, indicated in his contribution that there were some reviews which were favourable to the Government, I would like, for the purposes of the record, to indicate that that is not entirely correct.

Mr. Selby Wilson, a former Minister of Finance under the administration of the hon. Mr. Robinson, indicated that most benefits would not reach the needy. In today’s *Daily Express* TICFA said that the “Budget ignored problems in agriculture”. Dr. Tewarie said, “Policy changes too drastic” and my hon. Friend quoted Dr. Mahabir who praised the budget. The “Our Opinion” column of today’s *Daily Express* is headlined “Why put squeeze on charities?” We also have under “Commentary and Analysis”, “Gambling monster rears its head”. Then we have the head of Clico saying, “No incentives for savings”.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister indicated that we can honestly say that we got the economics right. Well, if he got the economics right it was possible because of the price of oil. As we all know, the price of oil is way beyond what the hon. Minister had budgeted. The question, however, is: If the economics is right why is the confidence wrong? I know Members opposite would not want to believe this, but the confidence is wrong simply because the dollar is depreciating.

I would quote from the Ernst & Young report on the 1997 Budget, under the caption “The TT dollar, how competitive is it?”

Mr. Maharaj: What page?

Mr. B. Sinanan: Page 3. It states that:

“A country has a competitiveness problem if the profitability of both its tradable and its non-tradable sectors is on the decline.

Based on IMF exchange rate figures adjusted for inflation and trade, Trinidad and Tobago appears to have one of the least competitive economies in the Caribbean/Latin American region. This fact is often masked by the strong performance of our petroleum related sectors. Serious attention must now be

directed to the issue of competitiveness particularly for our non-oil export sectors.”

There is a bit here on the exchange rate which states:

“...what determines a good exchange rate. There are three characteristics which should be present: alignment, flexibility and confidence.”

Mr. Speaker, it continues:

“Finally, and perhaps of paramount importance for any currency, is the confidence placed in it both by residents and by foreigners. Confidence is the first ingredient of a viable currency and, other things being equal, the more confidence that users of a currency place in it, the more desirable it is and the stronger it becomes.”

So, yes, perhaps the economics is right, but then something is wrong with confidence. Something is not squaring.

The hon. Minister spoke about US \$4 billion in capital investment coming into the country. While this is so, one must note that this is coming into the petroleum, oil and energy sector. We also need investments in the non-oil sector. That is where we will get employment. Four billion dollars in foreign capital is not spent in Trinidad and Tobago. It is spent in the countries where these foreign companies reside for the manufacture of plant and equipment. In Trinidad and Tobago we benefit from these investments by way of the sale of gas, construction employment, PAYE and so forth. We do not get the benefit of the moneys earned by these companies staying in Trinidad and Tobago. Moneys earned by foreign nationals do not reside in this country.

Mr. Speaker, if I may paraphrase the Minister he said that the ultimate objective of the economic development is the enhancement of the quality of life of the population as a whole. He talked about major goals to take us into the future being centred on an appropriate industrial policy, social stabilization and sustainable economic growth shared by all our people and that the vision is for a balanced and equitable society where poverty and homelessness no longer exist and where law and order is once more restored. He also spoke about engaging in a sense of community and restoring family life.

I agree with the Minister that these are very noble objectives, however, I am not convinced and, indeed, I dare say perhaps the population is not convinced that these objectives can be achieved by the measures introduced by the Minister in general or, indeed, by the Government in particular.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. SINANAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Mr. Speaker, in his presentation under the caption “Fiscal Policy” on page 5 of the budget speech, the Minister of Finance states that:

“We will further strengthen the tax administration and compliance, and encourage the savings and investment effort.”

We on this side have demonstrated today that the incentive for savings has really been taken away by this budget presentation. There is no incentive for savings whatsoever. He also said:

“We simply cannot continue to devote less than 10 per cent of our resources to the investment programme.

If we are to increase the share of resources devoted to investment then, we can either increase the level of government revenues, reduce the level of current expenditure or a combination of both...

We will restructure Government’s expenditure to direct a large share of resources to more urgent priority areas. This will entail a concerted effort to reduce the share in expenditure of wages and salaries and debt service payments.”

Is it that the hon. Minister is signalling that there will be a reduction in the public service? This is what his words imply, and perhaps the fear of the public service could very well materialize in the year 1997.

Mr. Speaker, under “Social and Economic Infrastructure” on page 7 of his presentation, the Minister said:

“The resources which Government will spend under the PSIP on capital works—including roads, highways, health centres, schools will more than double to some \$1.7 billion.”

Now, it has been demonstrated today that there is absolutely no way the Government will be able to spend \$1.7 billion.

Again, I wish to quote Mr. Selby Wilson who was the Minister of Finance under the administration of the National Alliance for Reconstruction. The *Daily Express* of December 14, 1996 states:

“He did express concern...about government being efficiently able to spend \$1.7 billion in a public sector investment programme.

“The Minister was silent about what he achieved in actual expenditure on the 1996 PSIP and if he could not achieve that, I don’t see how he could achieve \$1.7 billion.””

This is Mr. Selby Wilson. It is a little ambitious. Therefore, it is fair to say that although that figure is put into the budget it will not be achieved in 1997.

7.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, I would like, now, to go through certain aspects of the Minister's budget statement. Under transportation, he speaks of moneys being spent on the rehabilitation of significant sections of the country's main roads and highways. This is admirable, and I really wish that the country's main roads and highways are resurfaced and rehabilitated. We all suffer when we have to travel on the roads of this country because of the potholes, or whatever it is. He speaks about the Churchill Roosevelt Highway that famous bottle-neck at the intersection with the Butler Highway. We would all welcome any attempt to solve that problem. It is not only a loss of man hours that is occasioned by the congestion at that intersection, it is also a danger simply because I think people always break the traffic lights; it is a very dangerous intersection. Now, coupled with the opening of the Grand Bazaar that whole area is, indeed, a dangerous part of the national highway system; it is a death trap.

Whilst the Minister is spending money on the highways and rehabilitating the country's main roads, I ask him to pay attention to roads in the residential areas such as Palmiste, for example. As my hon. Friend from Siparia has indicated, the Minister of Works and Transport happens to live in Palmiste, he is a constituent of mine. I saw about my hon. Friend from Naparima last year and I hope to see that the roads in Palmiste where the Minister of Works and Transport resides, are also paved.

We have an increase in the price of gasoline and as such, we also have a tax on the sale of gasoline which goes towards the road improvement fund. I wish that the Government would not only report to Parliament on the use of that money but would also use most of it, and supplement that money to repair roads within residential areas, not only in San Fernando, but in all 36 constituents in this country. All those roads have been neglected over the years and they need to be rehabilitated. In each of these areas, and especially in my own constituency of San Fernando West, there are families that are normally two-car families. They pay road tax and it is a complaint by all of them that they do not get value for their money. I am appealing to the Government, particularly, the Minister of Works and Transport, to use that money to resurface and rehabilitate roads in private developments, not only in my own constituency but throughout the several constituencies in the country.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. SINANAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Reference was made to drainage. This last rainy season we have seen what damage floods have done, and the Minister is talking about alleviating flooding in Port of Spain and the Golden Grove and Piarco areas. All this is very good and I commend him. However, there are other areas that are prone to flooding. The Minister is proposing to spend \$101 million to alleviate flooding in five areas. I find this to be a lot of money to spend in this way.

In my own constituency of San Fernando West there is flooding in the Marabella, and Ciperio River area, which my hon. Friend from Naparima is known for solving partially. Attention must also be paid to flooding in these areas since they are below sea level. I remember in 1994 or 1995 the Government negotiated a loan to re-pave the Ciperio, Vistabella and Marabella Rivers. All that is now gone. Perhaps, next year we could have some difficulty in flooding in those areas. With respect to the Ciperio River which is dear to my good Friend from Naparima, I have indicated to the Minister that when the river was diverted part of it was dammed and there is a settling pond which breeds alligators and mosquitoes, and I am not sure if it is affecting my good Friend from Naparima, but I am hoping that as I have indicated this problem to the Minister of Works and Transport, he would take some measure to alleviate it.

With respect to housing, I would like the hon. Minister of Housing and Settlements in his contribution to indicate to this House how many houses were built by his Government in 1996 and how many service lots were developed. I note that the Minister of Finance has indicated that in housing he will be spending \$102 million. for apartment replacement and refurbishment. I have to come back to my own constituency in which there are several houses under the National Housing Development Programmes all of which are very old and very much in need of repair. I will urge the hon. Minister of Housing and Settlements to look at these National Housing Authority apartments, especially in areas like the Bronx, and Embacadere, Carlton Lane, Ramsaran Street, Jamadar Street, Roy Joseph Street. All these apartments have broken windows, and doors that are in need of painting, so that of this \$102 million I would request the Minister of Housing and Settlements to spend some in that area.

It was with pleasure and relief that we heard that the Government proposes to begin work on the National Library Complex and that the project is going to be enlarged. I also note that the old Fire Brigade Station is to be given to the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. I am not sure how the terms of the enlarged works that the Minister is contemplating at the National Libraries Complex, would affect the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, because it is all in one block, and perhaps when

studies are done, one may find that more space is needed and you may have to find an alternative site for the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. Nevertheless, I commend the Minister for at least trying to do something for the Trinidad Theatre Workshop and also for the Performing Arts Society at the Princes building grounds.

7.55 p.m.

Education: I am happy that the Minister of Education has acceded to my request. I think he is granting to the Naparima Girls' High School in San Fernando \$2 million to complete their building project. I also ask him to look into the construction of the San Fernando Girls' Anglican School. That school has been vacated because it is unfit for habitation. The walls are cracked and the foundation is giving way. The school is now housed at the Parish Hall and also at a building near the sea area, where the teachers and students complain about the lighting system which is affecting their eyes. I appeal to the Minister of Education not only to start its construction, but at least to complete the school in 1997.

Mr. Speaker, I note also in his presentation that money has been provided for the building of courts. Again, I wish that these buildings are, in fact, constructed. It is really not conducive to the dispensing of justice to go to some of these magistrate's courts in the outlying areas. They are really dilapidated and a danger to the public. I hope in the coming year these buildings would be repaired.

Perhaps, it may be a good opportunity for me to appeal to the Government to try to secure more attorneys in the Director of Public Prosecution's Department and the Solicitor General's Department, and to pay them a level of compensation that would really encourage them to stay there. It is no secret that many criminals in this country escape justice because the defense lawyers are perhaps, brighter and more experienced than those who are prosecuting in the Director of Public Prosecution's Department. Therefore, I am suggesting that the Government look at some package of remuneration that will attract quality attorneys to the department.

I am happy that the hon. Minister has provided for the building of a fire station in San Fernando. The main fire station is located at the Bye-pass in San Fernando.

Mr. Sudama: Are you looking to get San Fernando?

Mr. B. Sinanan: I will always win the San Fernando seat. I come now to my favourite utility, WASA. I have often complained to the hon. Minister of Public Utilities about the state of the supply of water, not only in my own constituency, but throughout the entire country. If there is one utility that really needs hands-on approach, it is WASA.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. SINANAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

I hope that the Minister would pay particular attention to the delivery of water. Water is something that the population cannot do without. Whilst we can do without electricity for some time, water is very important. When WASA digs up the road to fix a water leak, it must also repair the road. I hope the Minister would pay particular attention to WASA. Mr. Speaker, one must not look back. When one looks back, one loses the vision of what is in front. I am appealing to the Government to look forward.

The hon. Minister visited my constituency. There is a sewerage plant in Palmiste which he knows very well, and I hope that he would use some money from this year's budget provision to have that sewerage plant repaired.

Is the Government saying that its policy on tourism cannot succeed without the introduction of casinos? For the past year this Government has not demonstrated any thoughtfulness or ideas on securing the enhancement of the tourist industry. We heard of Tobago as being a place for eco-tourism. We heard of Matelot being an area for eco-tourism. I hope that the Minister does not spoil the skyline of Matelot with the placing of any sort of casinos out there. I can very well recall when the Government was in opposition that Members were ranting and raving about situations of conflict of interest. Whilst I am sure that the chairman of the Tourism Development Company is capable of doing a good job, the question remains: Is there a conflict of interest? As I said before, in the previous incarnation, when the Government was in opposition, its Members criticized and crucified the PNM government on any conflict of interest situation. Here is a perfect example of a conflict of interest situation.

When we see tourism as it pertains to Jamaica and Barbados, perhaps, the Government is not spending enough money in advertising Trinidad and Tobago, and moreso, Tobago. The tourist really does not come to Trinidad to stay that long. Tobago is the place where tourists go. It is disheartening to see tourists coming into Piarco and then hustling to catch a plane to go to Barbados. We cannot promote Tobago as a tourism destination with that situation. It has continued for too long. If we are serious about tourism, and especially tourism in Tobago, we have to promote and encourage foreign carriers, and even our local airline, BWIA, to encourage more direct flights into Tobago. I am happy that the Government has allocated \$300 million for the start of an airport complex. We all know that Piarco, as it now stands, is really hopeless in terms of an international airport.

Mr. Speaker, I would only hope that in the awarding of contracts for the building of that complex, it is very transparent and is not done through sole selective tendering.

Much has been said about the increase in social assistance by \$63.85. While we all welcome the increase to our old age pensioners, the question which one has to ask is: Would that not be whittled away by the increase in the price of petrol and the increase in the price of foodstuff?

8.05 p.m.

With respect to law and order, whilst the Government is spending money on providing mobility for the Police Service, attention must be paid to having policemen on the beat, especially at peak hours. In San Fernando, in Port of Spain, in all major towns we do not see a police presence. That is when they are really required, at the peak hours to direct and see about traffic and those who are breaking traffic lights, and so forth.

I am happy that the hon. Minister has provided some money for the improvement of the different Registries. We have the Land Registry downstairs this building, the Companies Registry on Frederick Street and the Intellectual Properties Registry somewhere else. I hope the Minister of Legal Affairs would put a plan in place to have all these Registries under one building. It is difficult to have the Registries spread all over the place. If one were to go down to the Land Registry—and I am sure the Minister of Legal Affairs has been down there—it is in a deplorable condition. It is very deplorable. There are rats, cockroaches, all sorts of things down there, and at the Companies Registry files cannot be located most of the time. Mr. Speaker, as you yourself would know, at the Land Registry, the books are in a deplorable condition. One cannot get files. The quality of paper used by attorneys perhaps needs to be addressed, to have them standardized, because all these deeds and records are bound in a book and during the passage of time, they become torn and worn out.

8.15 p.m.

While I am on this subject of the Registries, as I said, it would be perhaps the optimum position if all these Registries can be housed in one air-conditioned building. I also wish to address the hon. Attorney General, that he considers reducing the title period from 30 years as now obtains to 20 years, and also to remove the requirement of estate duty on deaths occurring before 1981. The law as it now stands, is that for deaths occurring after 1981, one does need to pay

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. SINANAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

estate duty on the deceased share, but certainly, prior to 1981 one is entitled to ask to see such an estate duty certificate. This has become a very cumbersome problem with respect to conveyances and perhaps the attorneys can introduce legislation soon to do away with the requirement of estate duty.

With respect to the environment, I am urging the Government to pay more attention to the environment as it affects state companies and also private companies. The biggest polluters of the environment are the state companies: Caroni Limited, Petrotrin—although I see Petrotrin has been making some contribution to improve on the environment. So I urge the Government to enforce the environment laws as they relate to state companies and also to foreign companies, especially in the Point Lisas area.

Much has been said about the fiscal measures. The hon. Minister spoke about increasing the employment allowance from 150 per cent to 200 per cent. Again referring to Mr. Selby Wilson on the Government's employment proposal, he pointed out that the employment allowance of 150 per cent has been on the books for a long time and it never worked. He questioned whether by increasing it to 200 per cent, whether in fact it would work. The consensus among accountants and businessmen is that this would not make much of a difference.

The Minister speaks of tax on gambling table: poker tables and roulette tables. When one looked at the taxes created by the pool operators, they avoided paying taxes for years. There was no mechanism in place to check the amount of money placed on bets at pool outlets. Government had to charge a flat fee. I think it was \$100,000 for licence to operate a racing pool. Again, who is going to check these private clubs and casinos to see how many pool tables and roulette tables there are? Somebody has to check that and I do not know who will check that. With respect to private clubs and casinos, I am appealing to the authorities not to permit them in residential areas. They are creating havoc in residential areas. There is one operating in my colleague's constituency, Morris Street, which was formerly a house of ill-repute and I understand now it is a gambling joint and the people in that area are complaining. So with respect to casinos and gambling clubs, one must make sure that they are not permitted to operate in residential areas.

With respect to the motor vehicle licence, there is a big song and dance that by removing the motor vehicle licence, the Government is facilitating motorists. This may be so, but they are also creating problems. That was the one time motorists had to make sure that insurances were paid. You could not renew your licence unless you had insurance and too often, there are motorists using the roads of this

country who do not have insurance. I am not sure of the benefit to be derived by not having car licences paid. The fact that Government has increased the price of gasoline really does not compensate for the removal of the licence fee.

In terms of the income tax aspect of the budget, where the Minister has reduced allowances to \$18,000 which must take care of annuities and mortgage interest, \$18,000 per annum does not really encourage people to save and I hope that the Minister will review that provision. Much has been said and I think the hon. Member for Diego Martin East had quoted a letter written to the Minister from Bacon Woodrow and De Souza, so I would not repeat that, but one must understand that when one reduces the annuity and the mortgage interest, and moreso the annuity, what one is really doing is reducing the annuity or the pension of those who will retire in a short while. In other words, the more money going into the fund, the bigger the pension would be. Now that Government has taken away that provision, or limit it together with the mortgage interest, the pension that would be enjoyed by pensioners in the course of time would be reduced. So I am appealing to the Minister to again look at that provision. By removing that or reducing it to \$18,000 one is not really encouraging savings. One is placing the entire insurance industry in jeopardy. Government is not encouraging savings although it indicated that it would wish to do so. I am urging the hon. Minister to again look at that.

Lastly, the question of deeds of covenant. Not only do the churches and different charitable organizations depend on deeds of covenant, but many poor people in this country benefit. Yes, deeds of covenant still remain for companies, but a whole host of dedicated and committed citizens make use of the deeds of covenants.

8.15 p.m.

It is a means whereby citizens can help by contributing to churches and charitable organizations. By taking away the tax benefit, that support to those organizations would be reduced. We all know about the good works which are done by these charitable organizations. The Minister has not indicated any abuse of the allowance provided for deeds of covenant. If he has removed that allowance because of abuse, he did not say that. Perhaps if that is the position, instead of putting a percentage allowance, he may consider putting a monetary allowance. In other words, allow deeds of covenant not exceeding a certain sum of money.

Many persons depend on moneys allocated through deeds of covenant. It is not only the Boy Scouts, Girl Guides or people who are fed by the coterie that benefit

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. SINANAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

from deeds of covenant, but also schools. When deeds of covenant are made to the denominational churches, some of that money is earmarked for schools. It is put for students whose parents are unable to provide for them. In this season of goodwill and cheer, I appeal to the Minister to look seriously at reinstating the provision for deeds of covenant. It is not much money. It is money which helps the entire country and the entire society benefits.

It is obvious that in 1997 and onwards, the Government would be called upon to perform. The Minister has based his revenue projections on an oil price of US \$20 per barrel. I do not know if that is correct. I hope for the sake of the country it is correct and that the price of oil would exceed US \$20. If it does not, as a country we would be in a lot of trouble. Last year he budgeted at US \$17.50 per barrel and the oil price was about US \$6 above that. He only mustered a surplus of \$239 million. If the oil price remains as budgeted at US \$20 or even less, then we would have serious problems. There is no reason to believe that the oil price would be US \$20 or even more.

With these few words, I appeal to the Minister to look at the provision with respect to annuities and deeds of covenant. I am hopeful that he would respond positively.

Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the sitting is suspended for dinner until 9.15 p.m.

8.20 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

9.18 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

The Minister of Education (Dr. The Hon. Adesh Nanan): Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the Appropriation Bill 1997. I listened to the contribution of the Member for Toco/Manzanilla and I remember this particular saying that empty vessels make the most noise. [*Desk thumping*] He spoke about \$145,000 from his pocket and I wonder if it is a slip of the tongue. The Member seems to be in emotional turmoil and one may ask: Is he on the fence or will he be joining his brother who is with us? [*Desk thumping*]

Once again, this Government of national unity has placed education at the top of its priority list. The recurrent expenditure budget is \$1.042 billion and the development programme for 1997 is \$163 million.

Mr. Speaker, I summarize that the Member for San Fernando West's mosaic contribution lamented the failure of the previous regime. He spoke on all aspects

which included the plans this Government has for the Uriah Butler Highway, the deplorable conditions of the roads in the residential areas in Palmiste, and flooding in his area. As the Member for Tabaquite, I would like to inform the hon. Member that there is also a serious flooding problem as well as bad roads in that area.

Mr. Speaker, the *raison d'être* of the Ministry of Education is to provide quality education to the nation's children, and it remains committed to quality education to its citizens and the development of a highly skilled and motivated human resource base. The sectoral policy of the ministry as enunciated in the *Medium Term Policy Framework 1977—1999* reflects this commitment.

The major policy areas highlighted, are the review and revision of the education system to ensure compliance with contemporary needs. In other words, there will be a paradigm shift in 1997. [*Laughter and desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. Members on that side should also have a paradigm shift in 1997.

The major policy areas highlighted include achieving and sustaining quality in schools; provision of access to educational opportunities; provision of student support services; the facilitation and implementation of training; and the improvement of the skills and marketability of individuals.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Education during the year 1996 had some outstanding achievements of which I would make brief mention. Cabinet's approval was received for the necessary hardware for the human resource package and the upgrading of personal computing capability of the ministry which is going to be computerized. There is to be delivery of hardware and software of geographic information systems, the total cost being \$0.2 million and this year there was an increase in the number of scholarships from 50 to 60 per cent.

9.25 p.m.

A new environmental science grouping was introduced at GCE 'A' level and two national scholarships are to be awarded in 1998. Based on the 1996 GCE 'A' level results, eight scholarships were awarded—I am sure that the hon. Member for Laventille East Morvant has this information.

Based on the National Examinations Council examination, 10 scholarships were awarded. In Additional National Scholarships, 15 awards were given; to a combination mix of two subjects, two awards were given; 33 scholarships were awarded in Further Additional National Scholarships. Ten scholarships were awarded at the University of the West Indies. Five scholarships were awarded to

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. THE HON. A. NANAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

pursue the B.A. degree in geography at the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica. Ten scholarships were awarded for the part-time practitioners' certificate in drama or theatre at the Creative Arts Centre, UWI, St. Augustine. Incentive awards were given to schools in the secondary schools system based on the results of the 14-Plus and CXC examinations. These are as follows:

395 cash incentive awards to junior secondary students;

140 cash incentive awards to students of the composite, senior secondary and secondary comprehensive schools;

32 cash incentive awards to the top performing student in each of the 32 subjects at the CXC (General Proficiency) Level;

Mr. Speaker, the following committees were appointed and established by Cabinet during 1996:

The National Advisory Committee to the Minister of Education;

The Standing Committee for the Selection of Textbooks for schools 1996—1998, to replace the sleeping standing committee.

The Trinidad and Tobago National Commission for UNESCO, for a period of four years.

The following committees were established by the hon. Minister:

The Implementation Committee for Distance Education

A committee to consider the feasibility of releasing Common Entrance scores

A committee on placement of Common Entrance students

A committee to consider the establishment of local school boards in secondary schools

A committee to look into student indiscipline.

The needy primary and secondary school students were supplied with textbooks in 1996. To initiate standardization, school textbooks used last year, that is 1995/96, will be used this year, that is 1996/97. There was an increase, on a request basis, in transportation for secondary school students.

We look at the School Nutrition Programme. There was a decrease in 1996 in the amount of imported food, by adjustment in the menu. There was an increase in the use of locally produced fruits in the School Nutrition Programme. Additional staff were employed to improve quality control, Mr. Speaker.

We look at the informal sector. There was the formal opening of six adult education centres in the following areas:

La Brea	Aranguez
Carapichaima	Jordan Hill
Arouca	Tabaquite.

Mr. Speaker, the members of the Implementation Committee for Distance Education were assigned to various mechanisms of distance learning with a view to implementation. This year there was the development of an 8-week distance education course in library skills, in collaboration with the Libraries Division. The computer laboratory and model office opened at the El Dorado Training Residential Centre. There was the commissioning of the Mobile Computer Bus to benefit students in outlying areas such as Mayaro.

As we look at the technical/vocational aspect, Mr. Speaker, we see that this year, 1996, the curricula for the Level I and II programmes, together with several craft and technician courses, have been developed. The approach to the retraining programme for displaced workers has been refined. *[Interruption]* He left it dormant.

On the topic of payment to Ministry of Education personnel, I would like to mention that the hon. Member for San Fernando East spoke about salary adjustment for teachers, but they seem to have short memories. This year, 1996, this Government of national unity implemented payment of \$24,820,215 to teachers. That is not all. The value of bond certificates issued to teachers during 1996 was \$66,491,500. The ministry has also paid bond certificates to the public service during 1996 of \$10,141,500.

We turn now to the improvement of the educational facilities. This has been a record of mismanagement. We look at the preschool. This year there was the completion and upgrading of the Morne Diablo Early Childhood Care and Education Centre. I invited the Member for La Brea, but he never came. There is the upgrading of three others and by the end of the year a total of nine centres will be upgraded.

We look at the construction of primary schools in 1996. There was the sod-turning ceremony for the Guayaguayare R. C. Primary School, and work is taking place on the site. The school is to be completed early 1997.

Mr. Speaker, I turn to the burning issue in the constituencies of Pointe-a-Pierre and Tabaquite. For four years they promised the people of those two constituencies, a

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. THE HON. A. NANAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

primary school—the Reform Presbyterian Primary School. *[Interruption]* I will come to the Carenage Government Primary in a while, have some patience. They suffered the people of Pointe-a-Pierre and Tabaquite, but under this Government of national unity, as we speak, infrastructural work is taking place on the Reform Presbyterian School. Although they deprived the children of Pointe-a-Pierre and Reform, this year from that same cramped area, still housed in that community centre, the child who came second in the island in the Common Entrance examination came from that school.

We go on to primary school construction. I had correspondence with the hon. Member for Arima and he is aware that the Arima Boys' Primary School will be finished, if not in December, then early 1997.

9.35 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the Patna/River Estate Government Primary School and the Success Laventille R.C. Primary School are expected to be finished later this year or early next year. I see the Member for Diego Martin Central is quite happy.

I return to the beacon for 1996 in the Ministry of Education; repairs to 94 primary schools at a cost of \$12 million and 72 secondary schools were repaired at a cost of \$13 million. *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. Member: Which schools?

Dr. The Hon. A. Nanan: I am hearing which schools. I made mention in this House, prior to this debate, of an entire list of schools.

I turn my attention now to training. This year in-service training of 56 Early Childhood Care and Education teachers is ongoing. We have been concentrating on infrastructural upliftment and improving the atmosphere for education. The special project is the Environmental Education. The key, Mr. Speaker, the UNESCO Associated Schools Caribbean Sea Project—four additional schools have applied to participate in the project bringing the total number of schools to 19.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: What is the name of the school?

Dr. The Hon. A. Nanan: The Global Learning and Observations Project is ongoing. Mr. Speaker, if the Member does not know about that project I would discuss that later. The Global Learning and Observations to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE Programme) is a project under this Government of national unity. In 1996, the programme was initiated to increase environmental awareness among students. The following schools have been selected to participate and this was based on a

survey of the weather stations in the particular schools. They include—and this is the geographical distribution, Mr. Speaker:

1. St. Stephen's College
2. Marabella Senior Comprehensive School
3. St. Augustine Girls' High School
4. Bishop Anstey High School
5. Bishop's High School, Tobago.

That is the highlight for 1996.

There is a critical issue in 1996 of which mention must be made . In 1996, there is a harmonizing of the Early Childhood Care and Education curricula. The two major contributors in this process were Servol and the School of Continuing Studies.

I now turn to the highlights for 1997. In order to support the professionalization of primary school principals and leading teachers, a part-time Bachelor of Education Programme will commence in September, 1997. This programme which will be conducted at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, is aimed at training 200 teachers annually over a five-year period.

Another issue is the textbook situation. In 1997, there will be emphasis on the provision of books and instructional materials. *[Interruption]* To this end, 60 international publishers have been invited to mount a book fair in mid-February. Principals will be invited to make selections from the items displayed, with a view to the procurement of selected books in 1997. The sum of \$15,000 has been allocated for the provision of textbooks for each primary school. The Division of School Supervision has the responsibility for identification of the 12 neediest schools in each education division which will benefit by receipt of textbooks in 1997. *[Interruption]* The sum of \$4,500 per school will be allocated to every primary school for procurement of instructional materials. A total of 100 schools per year commencing in 1997 will be provided with the instructional materials.

In 1997, 10 new Early Childhood Care and Education Centres will be built and equipped, and 10 existing ones will be refurbished. Additionally, at the primary level of education 21 projects will be executed under the construction of new schools, replacement of existing ones and refurbishment and extension of others.

In 1997, access to secondary education will be increased through the construction of Cunupia and Mason Hall Government Secondary Schools. There

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. THE HON. A. NANAN]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

would be the strengthening of school-based management. There will be reform and decentralization of the Ministry of Education in 1997 and onwards. The highlight, so to speak, Mr. Speaker, the construction of the Carenage Government Primary School in 1997. To the Member for San Fernando West, the construction of the San Fernando Girls' Anglican School.

I now conclude that the vision for the Ministry of Education staff is on the springboard. They are not "marking time" like they were with the previous administration. The staff is at the point of resonance and we are going to plunge head-on into 1997. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, could you give us the courtesy of listening and allow the Hansard Reporters to get something other than the asides?

Thank you.

Dr. The Hon. A. Nanan: Mr. Speaker, we are not working in isolation and I must make that observation here. There is co-operation with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour and Co-operatives and the Ministry of National Security, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, I take this opportunity to wish you and all Members of this honourable House a merry Christmas and a very bright and prosperous 1997.

Mr. Fitzgerald Hinds (*Laventille East/Morvant*): Mr. Speaker, I am grateful for this opportunity to participate in this budget debate for 1997. In preparation, we on this side recognizing the seriousness of a budget debate and praying and hoping in our hearts that we would not have seen the fiasco, the tragedy that ensued last year, we prepared, as parliamentarians should, and as PNM parliamentarians always do, thoroughly for this debate.

As a consequence of that which I have seen from the time I had the honour of joining this strong PNM team, I feel a deep sense of disappointment at the calibre—if I can say that—of the contributions that have been feebly coming from Members on that side. I think the best example of a feeble contribution was the one that we just had and have grown to expect from the Member for Tabaquite.

I must say—and this is no personal attack on anyone, I am not given to personal attacks, Mr. Speaker, but it must be placed on the record—that when an individual is honoured to be appointed as the Minister of Education he must, at least, demonstrate a certain level of capacity, a capacity that the Member for Tabaquite has time and time again demonstrated that he is incapable of ever attaining.

9.45 p.m.

He made a rather short contribution and it is fortuitous that at 9.45 p.m. we do not have any students with us. He butchered the English Language; he demeaned the language and said “marking time” instead of “marching time”. Mr. Speaker, I must express my concerns about the appointment of he, who, is regarded as Caligula’s horse, but it is better that he be the Minister of Education than to be a teacher in that system, otherwise woe be unto the children of this nation.

Mr. Speaker, I recalled last year when I came to this House, that as soon as the Minister assumed office, a debacle took place at that ministry where two permanent secretaries were involved. I said then, that it was evident from his contribution at that time, that they did not have the assistance of the technocrats and the people at the ministry who could assist them. It seems as though the situation persists and he had to rely on no other than a five-year-old primary school student to prepare his contribution for this evening.

Mr. Assam: Are you disparaging the five year old?

Mr. F. Hinds: Not at all. Let me place firmly on the record that I am not disparaging any five-year-old student. In fact, I am saying that the quality of the contribution is well-suited to that of a five year old. That is all I am saying.

In conclusion on that point, I hope that he would write on a piece of paper, draw a few hearts, colour them with various crayons and say, “thank you” to which ever student assisted him.

The Minister of Finance—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I have a sneaking suspicion that we are losing track of the real purpose for being here. We have to be charitable and if even we feel that we could perform in a particular area better than another person, I honestly do not think it is absolutely necessary to embark upon personal insulting attacks on each other *[Interruption]* Hon. Members, I am on my legs and I would appreciate if I am heard in silence.

I honestly do not think that this Parliament is going to be renowned for its quality of contributions if we concentrate too much on attacking persons in terms of their competence and the like. I honestly think—I say this with the greatest deference—that it is possible to disagree with policies and the like without trying to suggest that somebody is a “goon” or absolutely inane, stupid. Let us assume that everybody who comes here, particularly people who are professionals, have a certain competence.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. SPEAKER]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Let us be inclined to charity and I simply suggest that in future—yes, anybody could say that somebody is an idiot—on both sides we try to deal with ideas. It is said that small minds discuss people, ordinary minds discuss events, and great minds discuss ideas. [*Desk thumping*] Far be it from me to try to limit anybody in their contributions, but some experienced parliamentarians would know, and those who are not so experienced would know. For the record, I do not think that it is the best thing for one to be reading that another person has said that a five year old—I think that we can do better than that. I offer that, simply, by way of guidance.

Mr. Bereaux: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for La Brea, you have not spoken as yet, but you would get an opportunity. It is the opportunity of the Member for Laventille East/Morvant and I just simply made a contribution. What I have thrown out is not for general discussion. The Member for Laventille East/Morvant was speaking and I intervened because we were assuming a certain proportion, but whatever you want to say, if you hold your file you could say it when you get to speak.

Mr. F. Hinds: Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism in his budget presentation expressed the hope that Trinidad and Tobago would achieve a competitive edge by creating a highly trained and skilled workforce.

Mr. Speaker, we are—as is well-known to all—on the verge of entry into the new millennium. Whatever one may think, it saddens me to note that the Minister of Education, in a short contribution, did not in any way even allude to that, or demonstrate any awareness of that reality. He spoke at length about the very—if you like—micro improvements, proposals and plans that are taking place within his ministry, but he completely ignored the larger picture. He did say that the ministry would computerize its operations rather soon and money has been allocated for that purpose.

9.55 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, we on this side recognize that we have to prepare the children of this nation, the future of this nation in a rather special way for the demands of the 21st Century. That requires radical changes, and most of those changes were made known to the national community and indeed this Parliament, in a document, one that the Minister seems totally unaware of and an education policy paper otherwise

known as the National Task Force on Education Report—a white paper on education that was to take care of our educational needs from 1994 to the year 2003.

Mr. Speaker, that document laid the foundation for the kinds of changes, the kinds of developments that we must look forward to and expect and implement in Trinidad and Tobago if we are seriously pursuing dreams of being, as we call it, a world class nation, or as the Minister of Finance preferred to refer to his vision for Trinidad and Tobago, as a total quality nation, whatever that means.

Mr. M. Assam: We do not dream, boy. That is for old men. Young men see visions, old men dream dreams.

Mrs. C. Robinson-Regis: And you all do neither. *[Laughter]*

Mr. F. Hinds: This task force chaired by one Mr. Pelham, did a significant amount of work and spelt out in the greatest detail the kinds of changes that we would expect, as I indicated, in terms of education for Trinidad and Tobago, so that we will prepare our citizens for the demands that lie ahead.

Even if you propose to reject all of the recommendations, all of the practices, all of the suggestions outlined in that white paper, one would expect to hear, by way of an alternative, some expose' of what this coalition Government's policy on education would be. He appears to totally disregard the terms of the white paper, and spent no time, neither he nor his Minister of Finance, telling us about any policy in education, if another one exists.

No right-minded citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, and indeed, no forward-thinking citizen of Trinidad and Tobago would agree that the educational system that we practise, that we approach, at this moment, is adequate to meet the needs for the even immediate future. Technology, as is common knowledge now, has revolutionized the world, and an educational system in a developing country such as ours, must recognize this. Certainly the days of training people for the traditional professions, the ones that we have all become rather familiar with, those days are clearly long gone.

Mr. Speaker, while the Minister of Finance spoke about a total quality nation, he did not put forward any proposal whatsoever in terms of education for achieving that laudable objective. Absolutely none! A budget statement is effectively a policy document, and it provides an opportunity for its presenter to direct and to redirect, to shape and to reshape the course that the society or the country is proposed to adopt.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. HINDS]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Government's role—as I suspect, is well known—*inter alia*, is to create the institutional and economic environment which enables citizens to lead healthy, productive and prosperous lives. Mr. Speaker, Government ought to provide political leadership. It ought to spell out its vision for the society. I have in my possession a document, in fact, a book written, spelling out—another developing country, Malaysia in particular—their vision for the year as it is called “Vision 20/20.”

Mr. T. Sudama: What about Hong Kong? Do you have any document for Hong Kong?

Mr. F. Hinds: We have many documents from Hong Kong. A Government ought to say where the nation is heading, and it ought to spell out its vision in particular for education. Yet, the Member for Tabaquite and the Minister of Finance were notably silent on those issues. But, that does not surprise us. We have already demonstrated our understanding of the philosophy of the budget presentation. It has nothing to do with the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Is there a philosophy? I think not.

It is what we on this side refer to as a bandit charter and I say that without apology. It has nothing at all to do with the people of Trinidad and Tobago other than to hurt them. Mr. Speaker, it creates an environment for the wheeler dealer friends and families of certain persons, and education, important as it is, fell at the wayside. The Minister of Education and Member for Tabaquite, spoke about the Government's plan to spend money on repairs in a number of schools around the country and, more importantly, he indicated that in 1997 the Government plans to construct the school that we have heard about in Carenage. After a prime ministerial promise, from the Member for Couva North, I am happy to learn that eventually, the school would be constructed in 1997.

I want to take this opportunity to ask the Minister of Education and Member for Tabaquite, a few simple questions. He promised faithfully—and I am now hearing from the Member for Oropuche and the Member for Tobago West, that they keep their promises—that he would conduct an investigation into the allegations of corruption that took place or that surrounded the results of the last Common Entrance Examination. He promised faithfully, and I ask him again: Was it at all investigated? If it was, what were his findings?

10.05 p.m.

Mr. A. Nanan: Mr. Speaker, the question the Member for Laventille East/Morvant asked is on the Order Paper and a reply would be given in Parliament.

Mr. F. Hinds: I am happy to hear that. I also ask the Member for Tabaquite: What has he done about the vociferous criticisms on the whole question of school placement following the last examination? These are the kinds of questions that the nation—*anxious parents, teachers and students alike*—wants answered.

I was happy to hear the Member for Tabaquite tell this honourable House that he has put in place an implementation committee to facilitate the question of distance learning. Judging from the way he conducts his affairs—and this is not to disparage him—I repeat, sometimes I feel it is safer to keep as safe a distance from him as is quite possible. But at any rate, we welcome the question of distance learning since I am sure it would enhance the capacity of at least some of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Member for Tabaquite, in his contribution, again raised that term that we have not heard for a very long time, about this Government of national unity. I do not know what is the purpose or intention of this Government, but people across the nation are becoming sick and tired. Every time one listens to the radio or turn on the television, one hears these vague and insincere chants about unity. I want to make the Government understand that while it presents itself through the television, radio programmes and on the print media, while it appears to be everywhere in every corner, omniscience is not necessarily the companion of omnipotence.

Hon. Member: Omnipotence? You mean omnipresence.

Mr. F. Hinds: That is what I mean, omnipotence.

We heard much about the question of alienation before this Government came into power and it is noteworthy that since this Government came into power, I have not heard the word, alienation, used again.

Mr. Sudama: It is no longer there.

Mr. F. Hinds: The Member for Oropouche says it is no longer necessary.

The teachers of this nation are at the moment—if I would re-introduce the word in its pure and uncorrupted form—alienated. As was indicated by the Member for San Fernando East in his contribution earlier today, never in the history of this country has the moral of teachers been at the level that it is now. This is particularly serious, because when the Member for Tabaquite, as Minister of Education, and the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism come to the Parliament and speak about total quality nation and all of the good things they

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. HINDS]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

hope to achieve for the nation and the fact that the nation's citizens should be prepared for the 21st Century, the question is: How do you propose to communicate information to the nation's children in schools, whether it is early childhood care, primary schools, secondary schools, when the purveyors of this education, the teachers, are a demoralized and alienated bunch?

The teachers of this nation listened with keen interest to hear what the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism would say on the question of resolving their concerns. I am reminded, quite correctly, that what they heard some months ago is the Prime Minister, the Member for Couva North, calling them criminals. Some of them were in the public gallery; many were in front of their television sets, sitting by their radios, waiting to hear what the Government was willing or able to say about the vex question of the problems that they, as teachers, are experiencing in the system, but not a drum was heard.

It is even reported by the teachers that they feel they are being singled out and victimized. There are many teachers in my constituency, some of whom have asked me to bring this matter to the attention of the Parliament in this debate. They want to know what is their position. When will they receive that which is due to them? When will they be treated with the respect and the dignity that they deserve as professionals, as the purveyors of education in our society? They are aware of their roles and they are being disrespected up and down the country by this UNC/NAR coalition.

I do not understand how this Government expects to achieve its objective of having a highly trained citizenry if it has to rely on teachers who are demoralized and utterly dissatisfied with the way it is conducting its affairs. Teachers must be well-paid. Teachers must be well-trained. That is a matter to which I shall return shortly. Teachers must, as well, have the resources to do their work.

It has become obvious to every parent, to everyone who cares to look, that many of the teachers in our educational system are now becoming professional fund-raisers. This is as a consequence of the inability to provide the schools with the operational costs that they would need. It is quite proper and nothing is wrong with schools on their own initiative raising funds to do the various things that they ought to do, but that has to be kept at a level which does not go beyond that which is reasonable in the circumstances.

The Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism outlined in his budget proposals that \$156 million will be spent in the area of education. For the unwary, for the uninitiated, for people who are not immediately aware of the trickery of this

Government, its penchant for misleading people, its dodginess, its slipperiness and its guile, \$156 million to be spent on education sounds particularly good, but the fact of the matter is—I am being bombarded with asides from the Member for St. Joseph, but I am strong enough; I am PNM enough to deal with him and to deal with it and I shall continue unperturbed by those asides—when the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism spoke about \$156 million, what he did not tell the nation, very simply, is that the money is to be spent on capital projects and not to be spent on operational costs or expenditure and, as such, the problem of the teachers and schools having to so arduously and aggressively pursue fund-raisers is not going to be resolved. The balance between that as a healthy objective and going over the line where they spend more time and energy raising funds than getting on with the business of teaching, is not going to be resolved. That is the situation.

10.15 p.m.

So that the \$156 million referred to is to be spent on construction and repairs. Good yes, but it does not answer the questions that are yet unanswered, Mr. Speaker. As usual this Government has mastered the art of public relations. Every little thing it does, it “Scribes and Pharisees” over it. They run on the mountain top and shout what little they have done.

Mr. Speaker, the last PNM administration, was under the guiding hand of the Member for San Fernando East, the then Prime Minister, ably assisted by a competent and experienced Mr. Augustus Ramkersingh, Minister of Education, as he then was, and I wish to pay respectful tribute to both these men. They outlined a vision for Trinidad and Tobago and, in particular, a vision for the education of the nation's children. What a sharp contrast we are dealing with today, Mr. Speaker. No vision, and they did not even care to take a few moments in the budget presentation to even pretend to have one.

Mr. Speaker, what do we expect? As the Member for Laventille East/Morvant, I walk the streets of my constituency and others, and the question of poverty comes readily to mind. It is a question that bears in on education as well, because when people are poor and unable to meet their basic living needs—I am told that poverty, in the context of Trinidad and Tobago, is defined as a situation where the income for that family or the individual, is about \$625.00 per month.

Mr. Speaker, there are many households, as has been made quite clear in this House today, that have incomes that are of that amount, and less. And there are

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. HINDS]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

children of those households who are expected to go to school and, therefore, the question of poverty, quite naturally, affects education in the society.

Vagrancy, Mr. Speaker, is another very serious matter that demands the Government's attention. I have listened today, to the Member for Chaguanas, under whose portfolio that kind of issue would fall. He said precious little on the question, which is disappointing indeed. Only recently, I, like many other citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, had the displeasure of seeing a photograph of a man with a rotting hand being taken away to the hospital. Earlier this year, I had the displeasure of seeing, in the area of Besson Street, yet another young citizen whose foot was actually rotting. Mr. Speaker, I pray that there will be no small talk and platitudes about this serious question, and that the Government, though it failed to say much about what it proposes to do in this area, would act swiftly to relieve the condition of some of these unfortunate people.

Mr. Speaker, the question is: Who is most affected? How are they affected by these social evils? We are all, as parliamentarians, fully aware that we are seeing in our society today, an almost total attack on family life—an almost total breakdown of the institution of the family; drugs proliferating even in schools. As a private practitioner, quite recently, I had to deal with two young men who were found with drugs in school.

Mr. Speaker, these are serious issues and notwithstanding any lighter moments that we share in this Parliament, we are here to address these serious matters. I hope that the Government in all of its sayings, and better still, in all its doings, would address these questions, because there are many people in our society today who indicate, quite clearly, that there was a time when they woke up in the morning and felt a sense of hope. They felt that, at least, in the near future things would probably get better. But more and more, Mr. Speaker, the sounds are different. People are now beginning to live almost without hope.

This Government must understand that its responsibility is not simply to go around the country and mislead the electorate, and make promises about paying public servants in cash, or tell lies and half-truths in order to win their support. The responsibility of Government continues long past that. I want to remind this Government—since it acts as if it is sometimes blissfully unaware—that the responsibility of the Government is to address these questions in a rather apolitical way, and deal with these questions, because life is becoming increasingly difficult for many citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, on the question of education to which I directed most of my attention, I have been hearing from some sections of this community a call that Hindi be taught as a subject in some schools. I think that is a laudable objective indeed. I applaud it, I think it is a very good idea. I am convinced in my mind that when people are culturally rooted, they are more steady in mind, and as thus better able to receive the information that the purveyors of education, the teachers of the nation—who are being mishandled at the moment—offer them.

Mr. Speaker, it may be as well, that the Minister of Education, if he has the opportunity, should seriously consider putting in the curriculum some element of Afrocentric learning which would treat with the question of low self-esteem. It would cause many sections of the community to become stronger in themselves, to understand themselves and their history a whole lot better, and they, too, would make a more solid contribution to Trinidad and Tobago as they develop.

Many people across the country are yearning to see this kind of development and we must be bold. We must step out and see what we could do in this area. Mr. Speaker, as I make my suggestion, I do not want to be drawn into any cross-talk with the Member for St. Joseph. I say in the spirit—

10.25 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members would note that this is not how it is supposed to be. I would really have to insist that if Members cannot do it on their own volition, I would have to insist that Members address each other through me. The only way that one could do that is if the other person who is speaking gives way or sits down. Believe you me, I am trying to make sure that we behave like adults.

Mr. F. Hinds: I am entirely grateful to you, Mr. Speaker. In fact, I do not envy the burden that you must bear in trying to keep control over the Member for St. Joseph.

Mr. Speaker, as I was trying to make clear, my recommendation is designed to perhaps ensure that every section of the community grows and develops in such a manner that it can make a solid contribution to a peaceful, healthy, happy and prosperous Trinidad and Tobago.

While I am on my feet, as the representative for Laventille East/Morvant, I must place on the record the fact that I have observed, and in fact was invited to a sod-turning ceremony for the Almond Drive Housing Project which would yield 112 housing units, if I recall accurately. Interestingly enough, I had attended a sod-turning ceremony before in 1995, however, I was invited recently to another

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. HINDS]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

ceremony. Unfortunately, I could not be there, though I welcomed the invitation. I am happy to see that the people of Laventille East/Morvant would be the beneficiaries of another set of houses that would at least bring some small relief to those who obviously need it.

I am advised by the Minister of Housing and Settlements that there was a savings as he reviewed the project. That, too, is good news. I hope that the quality of the unit remained constant, or at least more or less so, and that one was not being penny wise and dollar foolish—to use language that is more akin to the world of engineering, so that the integrity of the structure is something of which we would eventually continue to be rather proud.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. F. Hinds: Mr. Speaker, I am entirely grateful to the Members of this House and to you for the extension of time.

We have already heard reference made to the Library Complex today, and I am constrained to touch on that issue yet again. I have noted in the one year that I had the good fortune of sitting in this House and observing the activities of the Government close up, that it has the rather uncanny and unusual ability to resile from positions that it strongly takes. Whenever it discovers that it is an awkward and unpopular position it quickly and sheepishly resiles and justifies it by saying that “we are a listening government”.

What is quite clear to me is that in the first place they did not listen. They went ahead and operated unilaterally and whimsically in most cases, and when they arrived at an unsound position—a foolish position—and people caused them to become aware of that, they resile and say that they are listening.

In respect of the National Library Complex, I am pleased to note that it continues apace. I have addressed most of my contribution to the question of education and, of course, and indeed, the National Library Complex is central to that whole effort. I noted and am in total agreement with the suggestion made by the Member for San Fernando East in his very lucid contribution this morning when he indicated that the philosophy behind the National Library Complex was not merely about creating more jobs in the construction industry. Yes, of course it

would have created jobs, but it went way beyond that. That facility, as we have made it clear time and time again in this House, was designed to take an integral place, as a part of the whole education thrust of this nation as we move towards the 21st Century. It was going to be totally computerized, internet and all, and people who could not otherwise afford the facility of a personal computer could have gone there, and, under instructions, learn and develop the skill which is so necessary in today's world. So, yes, I applaud the Government except that it is, of course, reactionary.

I hope that the Government, having listened to the contributions from this side in this debate, would take seriously what we have said. I hope that it would listen to the voices coming to it from outside of this Parliament. The Member for San Fernando West, quite correctly, brought to the attention of the Member for St. Joseph a number of articles, voices and expressions of persons who did not think so kindly about that mobster's charter.

At any rate, Mr. Speaker, having taken into account all the expressions of concern that would come from this side, and from voices outside of this Parliament, I hope that the Government would be sensible enough to resile and recoil from some of the positions it has taken. It has heard our views on casino gambling and the tax credit with respect to credit unions that is now gone with the wind. It has heard our views on many of the other measures that we have expressed concerns about and I hope that it would be sensible enough to take these suggestions on board.

Mr. Speaker, until that is done I am constrained to agree with the Members on this side that, as the representative for Laventille East/Morvant, I cannot readily support the measures as proposed in the budget, those about which we expressed concern. *[Interruption]*

Miss Nicholson: Say that.

Mr. F. Hinds: I said that.

Miss Nicholson: Your grammar is a bit weak.

Mr. F. Hinds: Please forgive me.

With these few words, I thank the Members of this honourable House for the opportunity to have addressed it in this debate. Mr. Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I did not join my colleagues in wishing you and your family, and indeed other Members of this House, a rather happy Christmas and a prosperous 1997, if that is possible in the context of Trinidad and Tobago today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

10.35 p.m.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources (Dr. The Hon. Reeza Mohammed): Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the Appropriation Bill 1997, as presented to this honourable House, by the hon. Minister of Finance on December 12, 1996. During my contribution I would most certainly be charitable to the Member for Laventille East/Morvant. I am just asking one little favour and that is, in the future if he should see someone rotting, please immediately call the Minister of Health, so he can act immediately upon it.

In his contribution earlier today, the Leader of the Opposition and Member for San Fernando East, raised some questions about the contribution of the agricultural sector to the economy and I quote:

“What has this Government accomplished in this sector during its first year in office?”

I shall respond to the concerns expressed by both the Member for St Ann’s East as well as the Member for San Fernando East, by demonstrating the positive impact of the agricultural sector, by way of this Government’s achievements, in 1996, on poverty and social deprivations.

In my first address to this honourable House, as part of my contribution during the 1996 budget debate, I articulated my Government's and my Ministry's vision for agriculture in 1996 and beyond. As I indicated then, and this position is still very valid, this Government considers agriculture, including forestry and fisheries, as one of the major pillars of national economic development. It was pointed out, that the shared vision for the domestic agricultural sector was one of strategic importance to the overall growth and development of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. The strategic importance of agriculture is equally important to social peace, the alleviation of poverty, and stability, because of its intrinsic link to rural communities and their development.

The aim of this Government was, and still is, to make the agricultural sector inclusive of forestry and fisheries, vibrant, vigorous and competitive, capable of generating profitable enterprises, able to attract investment, both foreign and local, characterized by improved domestic production and productivity, thereby providing for enhanced and sustained incomes and, by extension, the reduction and consequent alleviation of poverty and its contribution to the national food security effort. These goals and objectives were to be achieved within a policy framework which emphasizes and demands, that due consideration be given to the sustainability

of the nation's natural resource base and eco system, and to ensure continuity of productive activities into perpetuity. This vision is consistent with the primary goal of this Government of national unity which seeks to build a diversified economy, maximizing our natural resource endowment and our human resource potential to their fullest.

In the interest of time and conciseness, I would not attempt to detail the many areas of programme activities undertaken by my ministry during the year 1996. However, there are some major and important programme areas which I would like to bring to the attention of this honourable House and, by extension, the national community. Let me report to this honourable House, that my ministry was able to achieve 85 per cent of its planned targets for 1996. The main reason for the 15 per cent shortfall was due in part, to the weather which affected our infrastructural development programme.

Mr. Valley: We want you to debate not read a speech.

Dr. The Hon. R. Mohammed: You will have your turn. The agricultural sector experienced negative growth of 10.6 per cent in 1994. In 1996 however, the sector is expected to grow by 7 per cent over 1995, contributing \$608.2 million to the gross domestic product, when compared to \$568.4 million in 1995. Domestic agriculture in 1996 increased by 6.2 per cent, contributing \$319.9 million to the gross domestic product over 1995 which attained a figure of \$301.1 million. The major contributors to the increases recorded in the domestic agriculture sector, were rice 43.3 per cent, and livestock 21.4 per cent. With respect to rice, domestic production increased to 245 per cent from \$1.8 million kilograms in 1995 to \$6.5 million kilograms in 1996. Export earnings in sugar increased to \$254.4 million or 9.13 per cent over 1995. Domestic production of raw sugar declined marginally, just 1.8 per cent, from 113,600 tonnes in 1995 to 111,600 tonnes in 1996, notwithstanding an increase in cane harvested, that is, 1.4m. tonnes. This decline was mainly due to an unusually dry season, as well as the froghopper pest infestation which impacted negatively on the quality of canes harvested. Notwithstanding this decline in targeted sugar production, that is 125,000 tonnes, all our contractual obligations to the export market were met. In fact, exports of raw sugar totalled 72,000 tonnes, which reflected the highest levels of sugar exports since 1979. As a result, the industry took full advantage of its quota requirements, in addition to supplying reallocated quotas from other regional producers who were unable to meet their quotas.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. THE HON. R. MOHAMMED]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

The production of refined sugar during January to August 1996 increased by 10 per cent, to 29,800 tonnes from 27,100 tonnes, during the same period in 1995. It is expected that domestic production of refined sugar will total 42, 000 tonnes for 1996. This entire production is expected to be consumed by the domestic market.

The major focus of the ministry's work programme for 1996, in answering the question raised by the Member for San Fernando East, was in the areas of infrastructural development; institutional strengthening, trade and price policy reform; revitalization of Caroni (1975) Limited, including the reunification of TICFA; the formulation and development of a food and nutrition policy including the school nutrition programme; restructuring and refinancing of the Agricultural Development Bank, the reduction and control of the Hibiscus Mealy Bug, in which we have achieved an 80 per cent success rate in 10 short months, and the removal of illegal occupants from the Nariva Swamp.

If we were to turn to infrastructural development, the efforts at infrastructural development for the agriculture sector need special mention, since the paucity of infrastructure in the sector continues to impact negatively on the farming community. My ministry in collaboration with the Ministry of Works and Transport, and the International Development Bank, has rehabilitated over 91 kilometres of access roads, 36 roads in all, throughout various parts of Trinidad and Tobago, over the last year and a half. It is estimated, that over 2,600 farmers benefited directly from the programme so far.

10.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, an important component of the Access Roads and Bridges Programme is maintenance. The Access Roads and Maintenance Programme, which falls under this ministry's purview, is intended to provide effective maintenance to the access roads which have been rehabilitated. In the past, this component had been totally neglected, so that many of these roads are presently in a state of disrepair. My ministry intends to reverse these intolerable trends. In 1996, over 185 kilometres of roads, including verges and structures, were maintained and some 238 additional farmers benefited from this exercise.

I hope the Member for San Fernando East is listening, because I intend to answer the question about drainage and irrigation which he raised earlier. Another critical area of the infrastructure development programme is the drainage and irrigation component, which is a subset of the overall water management programme. In the south region, work in the Oropouche area consisted of river embankment enhancement, desilting and widening of rivers, repairs to broken and non-functional

sluice gates and the commissioning of one pump in the Blackwater Channel. Some 810 hectares of abandoned lands are expected to be reintroduced into crop production with 300 farmers benefiting from this exercise. In the north region, approximately 2.5 kilometres of perimeter cut channels and four kilometres of secondary drains in the Plum Mitan area were completed. Eight non-functional sluice gates were repaired, and three pumps in Block 'A' of the Nariva Swamp were commissioned, bringing an additional 210 hectares into production.

The question of water management has been afforded very high priority in the ministry's 1996 work programme, given the severe losses in incomes which farmers incurred over the years. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, in collaboration with the Ministry of Works and Transport, has been streamlining the many drainage and flood-control projects presently being undertaken with a view to bringing relief to the farming community.

A recent report of a technical team established in the ministry recorded several areas and locations for co-operation. A major project proposal was completed with a new initiative to determine the extent of water availability and possible management systems; the design of storage structures, irrigation and drainage systems, and miscellaneous civil works. It is expected that with the addition of an integrated river basin planner from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, who will be attached to the ministry's Land and Water Development Division—construction will commence early in 1997.

Land distribution: My ministry's land distribution development programme targeted, for 1996, 660 hectares of land for development and distribution. Over 165 farmers benefited from this exercise.

In Phillip Trace, Moruga, perimeter surveys of 105 hectares have been completed. At Harriot Trace, Rooks Estate and El Guanapo, 618 hectares comprising 405 plots were also completed. It is expected that 350 farmers will benefit from these efforts.

An agricultural state land information system for Trinidad and Tobago is presently being developed within the framework of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources. This land information system is intended to enhance the present database on agricultural state lands in the country and, by extension, to improve the management capabilities of the ministry in respect of its state lands portfolio. Data on some 3,000 parcels of agricultural state lands have already been captured and stored in the state lands information system. It is planned, that

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. THE HON. R. MOHAMMED]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

another 4,000 parcels would be completed by the end of this year. A project document has been completed for the expansion of this programme to include Tobago.

In support of this information system, a survey control network has already been developed. This network will provide a national survey of horizontal and vertical control points to the Geographical Positioning System (GPS), which will eventually link the cadastral maps to the national grid. Once this is completed—and this is about 95 per cent completed—the ministry, through its Lands and Surveys Division, will possess state-of-the-art technology in managing the state lands portfolio. This has long been overdue.

On the question of marketing—which is another area of the ministry's infrastructural development programme for 1996—was that of marketing infrastructure. My ministry has recognized the many deficiencies associated with NAMDEVCO which is a major agricultural marketing agency, and the farmer's wholesale market at Debe/Penal, which was constructed some time ago, and is grossly underutilized.

This Government of national unity has moved very rapidly, in the first instance, to relocate NAMDEVCO from the Aranguez Plaza, where high rental fees were being incurred, to the farmers' wholesale market at Debe/Penal. It is felt, that the administration and management of the market would be greatly enhanced and savings on rent for NAMDEVCO would, no doubt, accrue as a result of this decision.

Secondly, NAMDEVCO is now being restructured to effectively satisfy its mandate to adequately meet the needs of the farming community which it serves. In the context of the farmer, the Debe/Penal farmers' wholesale market is now being re-organized as to allow for a more user-friendly structure and environment.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to say a few words on the Hibiscus Mealy Bug. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources has developed and effectively implemented a comprehensive plan for the control and containment of the Hibiscus Mealy Bug in Trinidad and Tobago. The success rate of this programme so far has been estimated at about 80 per cent. Approximately \$5 million was spent in propagating the biological control agents, *Anagirus Kamili* which is the wasp, *Cryptolaemus* and the *Scymnus* lady bird beetles, for use in the ministry's integrated pest management programme.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is no doubt about the potential damage and loss to the domestic agricultural sector which can be incurred as a result of this pest. It can be quite considerable, and my ministry is leaving no stone unturned to arrest this threat.

Systematic releases of the biological control agents have been undertaken in approximately 155 locations throughout the country and surveys to measure their effectiveness have been positive. In an effort at controlling and containing this pest, over 500 farmers were provided with training in the identification and systematic control of the Hibiscus Mealy Bug.

Technical support and assistance are also being provided by the UNC/NAR Government to the governments of Jamaica, Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Kitts and Nevis, Barbados and Belize. Trinidad and Tobago has developed the expertise in dealing with this pest with the assistance of CARDI and the Food and Agricultural Organization.

The government of India has provided an expert for a period of 10 months to this country. The integrated pest management programme developed by CARDI and the ministry will continue unabated over the next three years.

Fisheries: Mr. Deputy Speaker, our efforts aimed at improving opportunities for local fishermen were strengthened during 1996. Several workshops and training programmes for nationals, as well as regional participants from Caricom member-states, were undertaken.

The CFTC conducted 51 courses which involved 603 participants from Antigua, Barbuda, Belize, Jamaica, St. Kitts/Nevis, Montserrat, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Dominica, Guyana, Barbados and, of course, Trinidad and Tobago.

10.55 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the Fisheries Division programme of work also focused on the provision of infrastructural support to the fishing community. The landing beach at Othaheite was provided with a fishing centre whereby approximately 130 fisherfolks benefitted. The incentives programme for the Fisheries sub-sector in 1996 provided for taxes and duties exemption for the fishing community on engines, marine accessories, new vehicles and fishing vessels totalling \$1.2 million. Subsidies on vehicles and fishing vessels totalled \$85,000 and rebate on gas purchases for fishing vessels totalled well over \$0.3 million in 1996.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. THE HON. R. MOHAMMED]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would now like to pass on to the 1997 work programme and its allocations for the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, and to say that the ministry's work programme for 1997 would seek to vigorously continue and complete the work started in 1996. My ministry has developed a three and one-half-year operational plan extending from mid-1996 to the end of December, 1999, which is intended to guide the development of the sector into the 21st Century. As was the case for 1996, the programme areas for 1997 will seek to improve on the work undertaken in 1996. However, greater emphasis will be made, especially in the areas of infrastructural development, under which falls the access roads rehabilitation/maintenance; water management system, including increased drainage and irrigation; and market infrastructure. In the area of marketing infrastructure, 12 rural retail markets will be built and commissioned in 1997.

To this end, \$1 million will be expended. It is intended that farmers and the rural communities will be consulted in the siting of these markets. The restructuring of the Debe/Penal wholesale market and NAMDEVCO will be completed. My Government has allocated \$540,000 in order to make this facility more user-friendly and worthwhile for use by the farmers and the general public at large.

Under Institutional Strengthening, the Ministry and its related para-statal agencies must play a critical supporting role, if the sector is to be transformed to meet the challenges of the emerging global economy in the 21st Century. Emphasis will therefore continue on the restructuring and refinancing of the ADB to provide the necessary support to the agro-industrial and farming community. The sum of \$10.2 million has been allocated from the IDB loan funds to ensure that farmers and agro-processors have adequate financial resources for new investments.

Furthermore, the Youth Agricultural Credit and Training Programme which is financed by MECU 5 in grant funds from the CEC, will be commenced in 1997. The sum of \$8.4 million will be allocated for the provision of credit and technical assistance to young farmers in non-traditional activities. The human resources, as well as the management information and accounting systems of the ministry will be restructured as part of the Agricultural Sector Reform Programme in 1997. This Government has allocated \$6 million in support of this programme. Additionally, the ministry's information systems have been allocated \$2 million for its upgrade and improvement. Under the agreement, US \$9 million will be utilized from loan funds from the IDB to provide technical assistance to the ministry in land use policy and administration and the analyses of the sector's performance. Caroni (1975)

Limited will also be assisted with its rationalization programme, as well as the private sector. These resources will also provide for training in agricultural policy planning, agri-business management and the administration of land information systems.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, for 1997, \$5.1 million has been allocated for the continuation of Hibiscus Mealy-Bug Programme. Four multiplication centres have been established and the work of these centres will focus on the accelerated multiplication of the biological pest control agents. These centres will be strategically located throughout the country.

The Livestock Development Programme for 1997 has been allocated \$2 million. This programme includes improvements to the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory; the enhancement of the artificial breeding services; the establishment of a Livestock Products Board, and the development of a corn and sorghum project for improvements to domestic livestock feed supplies.

Under Land Administration Distribution, the importance of this programme area cannot be overstated. Efforts in these areas will be accelerated. It is expected that over 845 hectares will be surveyed for distribution in 1997. The management of the agricultural state lands programme will be targeted for improvement, including the Lands and Surveys Division of the ministry. The surveys and sub-division of state lands for distribution to farmers have been allocated \$5 million. The establishment of new agricultural settlements, an additional \$5 million. For the improvement of the administration of state lands \$660,000 has been allocated, and the acquisition of sites for development has been allocated \$10 million. The Land Tenure Rationalization Programme has been allocated \$7.2 million which will be funded through the Investment Sector Reform Programme loan from the IDB.

I would like to touch briefly on Caroni (1975) Limited since the hon. Member for San Fernando East raised certain concerns in his contribution this morning, and to say that in 1997, the Capital Expenditure Programme for Caroni (1975) Limited which commenced in 1994 will be continued. The sum of \$45.5 million has been allocated for this effort. This programme is intended to further enhance the efficiency of operations at Caroni (1975) Limited with respect to the upgrading of the sugar refinery and field operations. These efforts are part of the Tripartite Agreement of 1992 which committed the Government to recapitalize the company totalling \$138.2 million. So far, \$70 million has been expended mainly on purchase of equipment, machinery and vehicles, aimed at improving productivity and promoting the sugar industry's viability.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. THE HON. R. MOHAMMED]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Mr. Deputy Speaker, another important initiative in revitalizing the domestic sugar industry is the effort aimed at uniting the three factions of TICFA. The successful implementation of the new cane payment system and the achievement of economic viability within the domestic sugar industry, is dependent on having one unified cane farmers' organization. Every effort will be made to assist cane farmers in achieving this objective.

In conclusion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I reiterate that this Government of national unity is convinced of the potential of the agricultural sector to provide increasing employment opportunities; enhanced foreign exchange earnings and savings through strategic reductions in the nation's food import bill; and increase food security. However, the goals and objectives can only be accomplished, if there is the will and commitment of all the stakeholders—the Government, the farming community, the agro-processors and the wider national community and consumers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, my Government and my ministry have already, in our short term in office, signalled our commitment and has shown the will to transform the domestic agricultural sector to be vibrant, vigorous, competitive and profitable for all.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

11.05 p.m.

Mrs. Eulalie James (*Laventille West*): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise to make my contribution to this 1997 Budget, but before doing so, I cannot help but comment on a statement made by the Member for Nariva, when he said that the climate is stable.

When the Member for Nariva said that the climate is stable, I said to myself, probably I live in another part of the world and he lives here. As far as I know, quite a lot is taking place in the industrial climate in this country. I cannot understand how he could make such a statement. I hope that the Government understands what is going on. There have been two successful marches by the teachers and yet the climate is stable.

I rise to speak on the area of culture. The Minister of Community Development, Culture and Women's Affairs in her contribution to the Appropriation Bill 1996, described in detail the state of problems which she met in the ministry. She outlined the wishes of the ministry. She said that they wanted to look at; they wanted to have; they wanted to focus and they wanted to enlist. We in the PNM want to know what has the ministry achieved within the last year, but more so, what she genuinely intends to do in the ensuing year.

This Government has made no clear policy statement on culture. The UNC Manifesto 1995 was limited to four and a half lines on culture. The NAR Manifesto was not circulated, and certainly, any contribution on culture may have enhanced this coalition Government's policy on culture. *[Interruption]* Do not get so worked up Member for Caroni East. In this multicultural, multiracial, multifaceted and plural society of ours with an abundance of cultural events celebrated annually, one would have expected this coalition Government to outline a package of innovative measures and policies to promote culture in Trinidad and Tobago and internationally. Surely, the fact that the *Medium Term Policy 1997—1999*, as outlined by this Government, has been limited to three sentences is a clear indication of ignorance, a lack of ideas, creativity, or a deliberate ploy to use culture as a political football.

As I mention football, what comes to my mind is the greatest event in Trinidad and Tobago's football for this year. The offer and acceptance of the sale of the John John Towers to "Mr. Football Extraordinaire". That is in passing. The Government's action with regard to these towers would speak for itself.

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Speaker, when the PNM Government built structures in communities, they were built with careful forethought and planning which brings me to the issue of community centres. Of course, I am certain it was the great Dr. Eric Eustace Williams because he was the true Father of this Nation. *[Desk thumping]* He brought Trinidad and Tobago to the place it was. He founded the People's National Movement. More than that, he is the one who went throughout this country and promoted community centres. It was not the UNC/NAR. Since 1992, under the PNM Government, 86 community centres were refurbished; 22 new centres were constructed and five more were designated for completion in 1996.

My question is: How many of these centres which have been completed have been handed over to the respective communities? The PNM has always advocated that the community centre is designed to play an integral role in the nurturing and development of skills in culture and the arts, whilst at the same time fostering a sense of self-worth in the community. I would remind the Government that the centre for performing arts which it intends to construct was the brainchild of the People's National Movement. It is stated in the *Medium Policy Framework 1997—1999* that, in 1997, a pan conservatory would be established and the construction of the performing arts theatre would commence. I looked at the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme, 1997* and I saw provisions for the construction

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MRS. JAMES]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

of the performing arts theatre. What is happening with the pan conservatory? Does the Government intend to build it in 1997?

Any policy statement on culture ought to take into consideration a support structure for our cultural festivals. This structure must be both financial and technical. In the PNM Manifesto 1995, the incentives were responsible for the increase in community festivals from 14 in 1993, to 53 in 1995. I make a public appeal to the Government to treat community festivals in a serious manner. While these community activities may be of little interest to the Members on that side, the people take them very seriously. In addition, the Government must show respect for the cultural artistes, particularly the calypsonians who, by their creativity, have developed a great deal of support and respect.

I make this point against the background of the treatment meted out by this Government to Cro Cro, the National Calypso Monarch, at one such festival—the opening of the Folk Fair must never be forgotten.

11.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, in addition, participation in international festivals was also supported by financial and technical assistance under the PNM Government. It is our hope that the quality of participation in international events will surpass those attending the tenure of the PNM Government and, in particular, the Carifesta celebrations.

The largest single festival in Trinidad and Tobago is carnival, but from the Government's handling of this event in 1996, it became the biggest cultural fiasco of the year. The Government speaks of great plans for carnival but money is not all, and we in the PNM await the proper development mechanisms for a successful carnival in 1997 and beyond.

Mr. Speaker, as we all know, there is no carnival without the steelband and so I turn to the issue of the steelpan, and I laud the Government's proposal for it. I represent the steelband, I hear Tokyo in my left ear, I hear Renegades in my right ear, I see Despers before me and I look down and across the length of Trinidad and Tobago to each and every steel orchestra in this land. I feel proud to see where the art form has reached. Anything to uplift the lives of panmen and upgrade the steelorchestra and the culture in general is welcomed by me and the People's National Movement. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hart: Yes man. Sat Maharaj say pan is wine and jam.

Mrs. E. James: However, Mr. Speaker, I take objection to the divisive and the deceptive nature of this Government. [*Desk thumping*] You may recall that soon after the Spiritual Baptist holiday was granted, they stealthily announced Indian Arrival Day as a holiday. It was the PNM that first acknowledged Arrival Day in celebration of the event.

Mr. Speaker, what this Government is doing is dividing the country into ethnic boundaries. [*Desk thumping*] Today it is something for pan, tomorrow it is a chutney museum [*Interruption*]. They could say race as much as they like, it is not race and they are the ones who are preaching race. It is not what is done, but it is how it is done, and how things are done by this Government leaves suspicion to its intention.

The function of the Government in its budget speech is to outline its financial programme for the country. One would have expected a wide-ranging package on culture, so in line with the proclamation of national unity, we should be talking in terms of a school for musicians where persons wishing to study at degree level, be it pan, tassa, or cuatro may attend and elevate themselves.

Mr. Maharaj: Why did the PNM not do it?

Mrs. E. James: You are in Government now, so you do it!

Mr. Speaker, I am having real problems with this Government's approach to the formation of a national steel orchestra. It is quite simple to stand in Parliament and spout that you will establish a national steel and cultural ambassador when the intention is truly to appease African voters.

As you will no doubt be aware, the greatest classics of yesteryear, the "bomb" tunes as played by the pan masters, for example, the 1812 Overture, Flight of the Bumble-bee and Poet and Peasants were played by men without formal musical education. Mr. Speaker, many of our current players started off without formal training and today are excellent pannists. I can name two excellent pannists—Dane Gulston and Clive Telemaque. These two masters of the art placed first and second respectively in the just recently concluded Scouting for Talent Competition 1996 and I have no doubt in my mind that had these two competitors participated on the world stage at locations in Las Vegas or at the Royal Albert Hall in London they would have placed no less than first and second.

Mr. Speaker, no one can be against a pannist or a group of pannists elevating themselves by acquiring a degree at any level, but we must be careful not to encourage the panmen to be paper chasers and in the process, lose the melodic originality of this sensational instrument.

Are we to infer that our—

Dr. Mohammed: Eddie wrote that speech for you.

Mrs. E. James: Don't be "farse", Member for Princes Town. You are out of place.

Hon. Member: She is right! She wrote it for herself.

Mrs. E. James: Mr. Speaker, they like to interrupt and I can answer, you know, but I think I will forget them for now. *[Interruption]* I will show you where you want to keep them, just now, hold on, I am coming.

Hon. Member: You are a black Chinese.

Mrs. E. James: Mr. Speaker, are we to infer that our present pan geniuses who have not been schooled in music, as well as those who may not wish to be formally trained or those who may not be able to afford such training, are to be excluded from the national orchestra?

11.25 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, is it the Government's intention that one should hold a UNC party card to be eligible for selection to the national steel orchestra? I do hope that the Government keeps its focus in the right direction, which should be the promotion and continued development of the steelpan and stop seeking to play politics with the issue. This ploy is not only ethnically divisive, but it is intended to divide the pan fraternity by creating strife and disunity.

We are dealing with thousands of panmen, each one a genius in his own right. How does the Government expect them to react when they find themselves not being able to gain a place on the national steel orchestra? I do not believe that this Government truly considered this issue. This policy amounts to nothing more than petty politics. It is unfortunate that Members on the other side have not taken the time to understand the culture of pan. The statement on page 13 of the hon. Minister's budget speech reflects this misunderstanding and lacks soul and, to use a musical term, bass.

The proposal for this national steelband would do nothing for the hundreds of pannists in Laventille and throughout Trinidad and Tobago. I suggest that the Government be cautious in dealing with the issue of a national steel orchestra. They should be very careful that nothing is done to divide panmen by creating "haves" and "have nots". I warn them that the repercussion of this Government's action in this regard can be disastrous.

With reference to the budget, I wish to speak a little on my constituency. As one interested in the education of youth, I am happy to see, in the development

programme, that the construction of the Beetham Estate Government School will start in 1997. I know that this measure will assist with much needed school places. I welcome, as well, the continuation of the Squatter Regularization Programme at Sougren Lands and the continuation of the flats at Ramdial Lands. However, this Government does not seem to understand that the business of creating jobs must be, first and foremost, in the plans and policies of a government and be clearly articulated in the budget. What we have witnessed recently is that this Government is only giving handouts in my constituency. It seems that while they continue to blame the PNM for the dependency syndrome, they intend to keep the people of Laventille dependent on the UNC handouts. It is an open secret that the UNC would like to gain a foothold in Laventille and has been fooling certain persons by giving them a mess of pottage.

My constituency is one in which there are hundreds of young people who need employment. The San Juan/Laventille region was asked to submit a budget to the tune of \$5 million, but the allocation in the 1997 Budget has been reduced to \$2 million. This has serious implications for the unemployed in Laventille. Under a caring PNM Government, when instances like these arose, we supplemented the shortfalls with the URP Programme or otherwise. Under the PNM, there were 38 URP Programmes in Laventille. Today, under the UNC/NAR, there has been 16. Laventille is not the same as County Caroni—

Mr. Speaker: I wish to indicate to hon. Members that the night is still young. There is still much time. You will all have an opportunity to speak and it will be greatly appreciated if you allow the Member to continue to make her contribution undisturbed.

Mrs. E. James: Mr. Speaker, I was saying that Laventille is not the same as County Caroni or Princes Town. Laventille has grown from an unplanned area to a densely populated suburban centre. There are no opportunities for agriculture, fishing or big business as in most other parts of Trinidad and Tobago. Because of its peculiar situation, this constituency must be given preferential treatment in any plans for development. The mere instituting of training programmes will not solve the unemployment or social problems in my constituency.

On another matter, I would like an assurance from the Minister of Housing and Settlements that the procedure used for the allocation of flats at the John John Towers will not be repeated in the allocation of the flats at Ramdial Lands. It is my wish that the residents of Laventille will have first option. I hope that from the allocation made to the Ministry of Works and Transport in the 1997 Budget,

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MRS. JAMES]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

moneys will be found to repair some roads in Laventille, with special reference to Laventille Road, St. Barb's Road and Trou Macaque Road. I have made repeated requests over the last year to have these roads repaired.

On a new note, the police post at St. Barb's, Laventille, was completed under the PNM Government several months ago but, to date, has not been commissioned. They ought to be concerned, especially in their quest to eliminate crime. I am requesting that urgent attention be paid to the commissioning of this facility.

The Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Women's Affairs criticized the PNM's concept of the relief centres. The minister had indicated that the PNM built the centres without any system or support programmes.

Mr. Speaker, this is far from the truth. The Laventille Relief Centre which is now known as Spree Simon Relief Centre is a haven for hundreds of unemployed. Not only does the centre feed people but it has successfully ran training courses in management, agro-processing and craft. This is as a result of the PNM's vision.

11.35 p.m.

From a layman's point of view, the budget as it is seen in the eyes of the small man is not a budget for the ordinary man in this society. The policies of this Government are already causing serious hardships on the population and the presentation of the 1997 Budget by the Minister does not promise any good news. Instead, the population is going to be faced with rising food prices, increased medical bills, increased transportation cost and no hope for employment. A few in this society would enjoy the benefits of this budget.

Before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, let me also join with others in wishing you and all the Members of this House a Merry Christmas and a bright and prosperous new year.

The Minister of Local Government (Hon. Dhanraj Singh): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the Member for Laventille West on her contribution, but I am sad to say that the only thing of substance was a judgment call in which she recognized the late Dr. Eric Williams as the true Father of the Nation. *[Desk thumping and laughter]* By extension, this clearly indicates that the Member for San Fernando East is the false father of the nation. *[Desk thumping and laughter]*

I am in total support of the fiscal measures outlined by the hon. Minister of Finance, pertaining to the Appropriation Bill, 1997. I also wish to share the sentiments of the previous speakers on the Government side and extend sincerest

congratulations to the hon. Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism for an excellent budget presentation for the fiscal year, 1997.

Two of the identifiable socio-economic themes which can be readily associated with the presentation of the 1997 Budget are:

1. The achievement of economic growth with balanced sustainable development.
2. The creation of a delicate balance between a social safety net and sustainable revenue flows.

The former is related to the programmes and initiatives, which are contained in the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme, 1997*, and the *Public Sector Investment Programme, 1997*. The latter is linked to measures to alleviate the burden of economic adjustment on the poor, needy and those at the lower income strata of the society, whilst at the same time maintaining a reasonable stream of revenue flows from affordable sources.

With respect to the achievement of economic growth and balanced sustainable development, our *Public Sector Investment Programme* totalling \$1.7 billion will go a long way in improving the existing physical infrastructure, thereby creating both temporary and permanent employment opportunities, and drastically reducing the level of unemployment. It will generate income, stimulate export and boost foreign exchange earnings.

In terms of the creation of a delicate balance between a social safety net and sustainable revenue flows; fiscal measures such as the increase in old-age pension, the exemption from tax on interest payments on bonds for those over 60, the 20,000 per annum basic deductible allowance for individual income taxpayer against the background of simplifying the income tax regime and the removal of certain deductible allowances, some of which appear to have been utilized to avoid or evade tax are instructive.

In the context of local government, fiscal year 1997 must be viewed against the background of fiscal year 1996. Existing policies had to be reviewed and certain institutional mechanisms, management systems and procedures had to be established in order to ensure efficiency, effectiveness and economy in the achievement of our announced goals and objectives.

We also had to ensure that appropriate legislative, institutional and administrative mechanisms were in place to hold local government election on its constitutionally due date. As you are aware, this Government respects and upholds the law and the

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. D. SINGH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Constitution, passionately. Local government election was held on June 24, 1996, when it was constitutionally due and we gained considerable ground in terms of our control of municipal councils.

Consequent upon the holding of the June, 1996 local election, municipal councils were properly constituted. Members were subsequently exposed to induction training, covering pertinent areas such as the legal framework, strategic planning and team-building under the sponsorship of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum.

This induction training course has improved the local government practitioners' understanding of local government, their role in the process and the basic requirements for prompt and effective delivery of quality services to burgesses.

The Tobago House of Assembly election was also held on its constitutionally due date, on December 9, 1996. The results of the election indicated that the electorate of Tobago has kept faith with our coalition partner, the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR). I take this opportunity to congratulate the NAR for its resounding victory.

Significantly, Mr. Speaker, although we kept a sharp eye on accountability for the management of resources at the disposal of municipal corporations and the achievement of value for money expended, active focus was given to the streamlining of the administrative process, approving outstanding legislation and establishing a planning framework for the successful implementation of our local government reform policy perspectives.

In the context of the foregoing, I am pleased and proud to highlight the following major achievements for fiscal year, 1996:

1. The proclamation and subsequent issuing of Presidential Orders for Parts III and V of the Municipal Corporations Act.
2. The approval of the assets and liabilities of municipal corporations which were geographically part of the former county councils and the preparation of appropriate legislation in conjunction with the office of the Attorney General for the vesting of rights, privileges and powers to such corporations.
3. The approval of market and abattoir, bye laws for municipal corporations which are currently being processed for presidential confirmation.
4. The approval of Municipal Corporations Standing Orders, which have been submitted for presidential approval in accordance with section 66 of the Municipal Corporations Act, 1990.

5. The publication of a policy paper on the Empowerment of Local Government Bodies for Greater Autonomy in Decentralization Process, which was approved by Cabinet.

11.45 p.m.

It is interesting to note that the Leader of the Opposition is also of the firm belief that the problem of local government movement is the issue of empowerment. It is also instructive to note that while the PNM was in power nothing was done to empower the various local government bodies with the necessary resources and tools so that they could effectively carry out their functions.

6. The establishment of the Soogrim Committee to make recommendations pertaining to, *inter alia*, the effective implementation of those parts of the Municipal Corporations Act, 1990, which were recently proclaimed. The committee's report was accepted by Cabinet, in principle, and the implementation of its recommendations are currently being pursued.
7. Obtained Cabinet's approval for an increase in the ceiling for the award of contracts by chief executive officers in regional corporations.
8. The undertaking of ensuring value for money expended.
9. Obtained Cabinet's approval for the resumption of job-site registration.
10. The establishment of a planning unit in the ministry. This unit has been mandated to deepen the decentralization process, improve the level of productivity and tighten the laws governing the local government authorities. Moreover, the unit would actively assist the corporations with their various strategic plans.
11. The successful undertaking of several clean-up campaigns throughout the country in accordance with our commitment towards environmental health, beautification and conservation.
12. The formulation of a seven-year development plan for the ministry.
13. The undertaking of engineering surveys to assess the quality of our social and physical infrastructure with a view to improving same.
14. The settlement of a long-standing debt to workers through the allocation of \$3.5 million to local government bodies to meet debts to daily-rated employees outstanding since 1992. In addition, an accounting exercise is

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. D. SINGH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

currently being undertaken to pay daily-rated workers some \$27 million representing arrears of COLA before December 31, 1996.

15. Averted industrial action by scavenging contractors through the signing of a one-year agreement for the period 1996—1997. Contract agreement in this context was outstanding since 1991.

The Member for Diego Martin Central was fully aware of the threats being made by the contractors to terminate their services the last day he was in office.

16. Located accommodation for the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation.
17. Provided \$7 million to the Port of Spain City Corporation to assist in meeting employees' severance benefits and arrears of wages.
18. General improvements in the quality, quantity and timeliness of services delivered by Municipal Corporations to burgesses/citizens.

Mr. Speaker, all corporation accounts have been brought up-to-date with the exception of Port of Spain and San Fernando. Attempts have been made to have these corporations bring their financial statements up-to-date. I wish to report that when we went into office several corporations had accounts outstanding since 1988 and under this Government at least 12 of these 14 corporations have now brought their accounts up-to-date. The assignment of qualified accountants to corporations will result in a timely processing of financial statements and increase accounting standard as well as put in place the mechanism for the collection of house rates.

Furthermore, progress has been made to have Public Health Inspectors posted at municipal corporations especially those whose public health inspectors capability has been sadly lacking since 1990 on the proclamation of the Municipal Corporations Act.

Mr. Speaker, an examination of these major achievements suggests that even though fiscal year 1996 was dubbed the year of understanding for the Government, it was a year of understanding of how to deliver and to establish the kind of mechanism to deliver more efficiently, effectively and economically. This broad understanding of how to deliver efficiently, effectively, and economically would be put to full use in fiscal year 1997 and I wish to reiterate here, the hon. Prime Minister's enunciated goal of fiscal year 1997 as a year of delivery.

A perusal of the budget provision for local government in fiscal 1997, clearly indicates that considerable emphasis has been placed on the development

programme sector. In this context, the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* for fiscal year 1997 allocate an overall increase of \$11 million which represents an increase of over 46 per cent over the 1996 revised estimate; that is to say, in 1996, revised estimates of \$23.8 million to \$34.8 million in 1997.

This would go a long way in meeting our programme of works as regards to local roads, bridges rehabilitation and improvement, rural electrification, drainage and irrigation, the development of recreational facilities, the laying of water mains, local building programme and the construction of markets and abattoirs which are just some of our main developmental focus. These programmes are expected to receive an added impetus with the post of qualified engineers in 1997, to the various municipal corporations. Cabinet has recently approved the names of these engineers which would be posted to these village corporations. We would be actively pursuing our public market redesigning and improvement programme.

You would recall that the refurbished central market was recently recommissioned under the purview of the Port of Spain City Corporation. At this time the refurbishing of the Tunapuna market is being actively undertaken. Cabinet recently approved measures for the acquisition of land to expand the San Juan/Laventille market. In fiscal year 1997, the focus of attention would be on the San Juan/Laventille, Couva, Chaguanas, Rio Claro/Mayaro, Marabella, Arima and Penal/Debe markets.

Mr. Speaker, we intend to fast-track our development programme by ensuring the early release of funds in order to take full advantage of the dry season.

Our development programme initiatives will be complemented by other programmes at the institutional level and closely associated with our recurrent expenditure. In this context, as part of our local government reform programme we would be addressing the human resource technical, managerial and other deficiencies at municipal corporations. The planning of the ministry would play a pivotal role in this segment of our programme, especially in the planning, programming and scheduling of activities for implementation.

In keeping with our policy of consultation at all institutional levels during the local government centralization and reform process, the planning unit would liaise with and solicit the input of all municipal corporations and other relevant institutions during the formulation of its programme for implementation.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[HON. D. SINGH]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

Mr. Speaker, we will be placing special emphasis on the following areas during fiscal year 1997:

- i. establishing an appropriate corporate structure and organization for municipal corporations;
- ii. providing within the confines of available financial resources, the necessary human resource capabilities inclusive of a professional management cadre;
- iii. providing within the confines of available financial resources the necessary equipment, tools and technology;
- iv. continuation of training and retraining;
- v. establishing an appropriate house rate or property taxation system in order to boost local revenue earning capacity;
- vi. establishing an appropriate municipal police service on a pilot project basis focusing on the Chaguanas Borough Corporation;
- vii. establishing systems and mechanisms to increase productivity inclusive of the expansion of incentive awards schemes;
- viii. strengthening the internal audit machinery in order to ensure accountability and the achievement of value for money expended by municipal corporations;
- xi. facilitating greater participation of the business or corporate sector in the development of municipal corporations;
- x. facilitating the establishment of mechanisms and systems such as advisory committees and municipal corporations in order to encourage community participation and involvement in the policy formulation, decision-making, the management of community assets and in promoting equality of justice;
- xi. amending the Municipal Corporations Act 1990/1992 in order to improve the operational efficiency and effectiveness of Municipal Corporations;
- xii. establishing mechanisms and systems that will deepen the decentralization process and make Municipal Corporations more autonomous;
- xiii. assisting Municipal Corporations in formulating an execution of their strategic plans;

- xiv. maintaining a consultative approach to administrative and industrial relations matters in order to ensure operational continuity and avoiding unnecessary disruption of service.

11.55 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the successful implementation of these initiatives will depend on proper planning, prioritizing, programme scheduling, and monitoring during execution. We have the capability to deliver in fiscal year 1997. I endeavour to ensure the judicious deployment of the collective human, technical, physical, and other available resources in order to accomplish our goals and objectives.

During fiscal year 1997, the decentralization process will be deepened. Substantial local government reform initiatives will be undertaken, and I envisage the strengthening of municipal corporations as autonomous structures capable of promoting sustainable growth, balanced development, and ensuring prosperity in local communities in accordance with their development focus and other community aspirations. Accountability, productivity, efficiency, effectiveness, economic reliability, and customer orientation should be synonymous with the delivery of local government service during fiscal year 1997 and beyond.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, on behalf of my family and myself, I extend Yuletide greetings to you and other Members of this august House. I wish all of you success and prosperity in the coming year and may God bless and preserve you to continue to serve the people and country whom you represent without fear, favour or ill-will.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Jarrette Narine (*Arouca North*): Mr. Speaker, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to make a contribution in this the 1997 budget debate. When I heard the Minister of Local Government, I wondered if he went through the 1996 budget debate, because most of what he said was contained in his contribution to the Appropriation Bill of 1996. It seems to me that he went about doing nothing for this entire year 1996, and he continues to be looking at and wanting to and hoping to, while interfering and dictating to all the corporations in Trinidad; he has no authority in Tobago, thank God, so that probably he should go back into that 1996 budget debate and he will understand what I mean.

I am amazed. Not since 1987 when the NAR presented its first budget had we so many negatives to a budget delivery here in Parliament as in the 1997 Budget by the Minister of Finance. Mr. Speaker, not only have various persons and organizations in Trinidad and Tobago commented unfavourably on this budget, but

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. NARINE]

Tuesday, December 17, 1996

during the session today, I received two documents, one from the Co-operative Credit Union League of Trinidad and Tobago, and another from the Faith Revival Ministries.

I will not worry to go through these documents because they were circulated in Parliament. I am saying for credit unions, that my number in the Agricola Credit Union is 651. I joined the Agricola Credit Union about 28 years ago, and my entire life has been hinged around the credit union movement. I am certain that the credit unions respond where the banks do not respond because of the need for collateral and other things which one has to present to the bank. In the event that one has a medical problem or a death in the family or so, the credit union is the one that responds very quickly, and on a timely basis. These remarks are only by the way.

Mr. Speaker, you have heard from our side, the Opposition Benches, excellent contributions by all our Members. As a matter of fact, because of the type of budget that we have for 1997, I know that on that side there is very low morale, so that they cannot make a proper contribution. I was even surprised at the Member for St. Joseph who is normally very good at debating but today he was a bit surprising to me. Not only the man-in-the street, but organizations throughout Trinidad and Tobago made negative comments on this budget.

I have some documents here from the Arouca North UNC constituency, which had meetings on Saturday. They do not recognize the UNC of Arouca North. I am not surprised because there are two constituency executives in Arouca North; one is claiming to be still the last candidate in the election for Arouca North. He is claiming to be the chairman of Arouca North. I understand that there is also a parallel movement that is not elected, but appointed, and this is the style of the UNC Government. They appoint people all over the place.

For what it is worth, on Saturday last, there were 20 spot meetings all over the Arouca North constituency, dealing with the treatment that is meted out to the people of Arouca North, including the UNC supporters in Arouca North. They have indicated here, and I do not want to go through all these documents which they circulated in the constituency, but to just say that on December 3, 1996, a letter was written to the political leader of the UNC and it states:

“UNC Arouca North Constituency has strongly expressed concern over their accessibility to the party, consultation, involvement and national unity issues.”

12.05 a.m.

“To date, (3rd December) two (2) letters have been acknowledged by you, six (6) by the party organizer, none by any other official. None of the requests in these correspondence have been acted upon by any of the party executives.”

But of much concern in these documents is a proposal which states:

“On the said 14th December, 1996, we will continue our drive to get one thousand (1,000) supporters to donate one hundred dollars (\$100) per month for four (4) years to achieve our objectives, especially to ensure that the UNC/NAR parties continue to govern the country until the year 2050.”

These letters were signed by Mr. Rawle Raphael, Chairman, UNC, Arouca North, and interim president of the National Activist Support Club.

That reminds me of “Club 88”. They taught persons how to do it. So this is just a matter of continuing what happened in 1988 when a team broke from the NAR and formed a club called “Club 88” and then formed a political organization.

Mr. Speaker: I have absolutely no problem with the foreplay, but I would ask that, having regard to the hour, we get on to the meat of the issue and the relevance, insofar as the Appropriation Bill goes. I understand it is necessary to introduce, but please, could we try to get to the issue quickly.

Mr. J. Narine: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, but if you would remember, I started off by saying that it was not only the national community that was not satisfied with the 1997 Budget, but even the political activists of the Government are complaining about this budget. Last Saturday there were meetings all over Arouca North telling the people that they did not support the budget as presented by the coalition government and called upon them to pay the teachers, and so forth. It is in this document. This is why I did not read the entire document.

Mr. Speaker: With the greatest deference, the parts you read had absolutely nothing to do with the budget. That is the reason I called on you. If you were showing relevance there, I would have said, all right.

Mr. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, part of this document states:

“We say that teachers, police and public servants must get a good increase in their salaries to decrease the violence and crime in the nation.”

This is part of their document. I did not want to spend much time on this because although I have 75 minutes, I would like to have my entire 75 minutes to speak.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. NARINE]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

I would like to thank the Minister of Finance for not coming, like in the previous budget debate, and announcing about “curry sardines” and “curry cheese.” He made no statements on food this year because he has found that during the year 1996, that went against what he had said in the last budget because the prices went up. Even persons who had supported the UNC in this budget, last Sunday one fell by the wayside at an election for Pan Trinbago.

The minister’s statement in the last budget presentation, and in this one also, spoke about autonomy for local government. I would like to quote from the *Hansard* “Debates of the House of Representatives, Volume 1, No 7” at page 496. The heading is “Appropriation Bill, Tuesday, January 15, 1996.” It states:

“This is a clear sign of the intention of this Government of national unity to support local government and the empowerment of the people at the local government level. “

Another part of his presentation at that time stated:

- “1. There was no clear definition of areas of responsibility between central government and local government bodies and the arrangement for management and funding of the operations of these bodies needed to be changed so that authority is placed in the hands of local government bodies.
2. Local government bodies were operating as departments of the Ministry of Local Government.”

Yet this year we had a situation where, after making all these fancy statements and having a document here for local government elections which stated, “Empowering the People”—there were definite statements here which I will come to—I would have hoped that the Minister of Local Government would have addressed the situation with the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism because this document clearly states that local government bodies will be allowed to keep all funds collected in the form of vehicle licensing fees, property taxes, and so forth. The licensing fees from which the local government authority was hoping to have additional revenue of 1997 is now to be put into the Consolidated Fund.

One could identify with the Tobago House of Assembly. Now that we have the local government election of Trinidad, and the Tobago House of Assembly election in Tobago behind us—

Hon. Member: Which you lost.

Mr. J. Narine: We got 63 seats in the local government election in Trinidad and they got 61. I do not know if he could count; probably he can only write. They did not win the local government election in Trinidad and there is much to be desired in Tobago.

While the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism knew that these licensing fees should have gone to local government, they were taken out and put into the Consolidated Fund and there was no structure for collecting licensing fees, so the financial base for local government authorities was eroded.

They want to empower, to give them autonomy, but they are taking away the funding from them. The Minister spoke about using the development funds in the dry season in 1997. The Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism, in his budget speech, indicated that for Tobago, at the beginning of each quarter, moneys are going to be deposited in the account for the Tobago House of Assembly. *[Interruption]* You must not anticipate what I am going to say.

Miss Nicholson: You are too backward. Tobago is not the same!

Mrs Robinson-Regis: Pam, you are behaving “bra-brass”, man!

12.15 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, if the Member for Tobago West would not get up before I could finish my statement, then she would have heard what I was going to say. I am happy that they are going to be given the money at the beginning of every quarter.

Miss Nicholson: Who they?

Mr. J. Narine: The House of Assembly—so that they can plan their programmes for the first quarter, the second quarter, the third quarter, and so forth, without waiting on the Ministry of Finance and begging the ministry for releases.

What I am saying is, that the same policy should be applied for local government authorities which should get their money on a timely basis, say January, and after three months, the second release, so that we can utilize the funds for development and in other areas so that the local government authorities could have their work programmed in the first six months in the dry season. This is my contribution on timely releases. I am happy for Tobago, and I am hoping that the regional corporations in Trinidad will be treated the same.

Mr. Speaker, when you talk about empowerment, I would like to go to some documents that we have in our possession and it is a matter that I raised earlier this

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. NARINE]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

year. The Minister of Local Government in his dictatorship style for local government, went ahead in most of the PNM-controlled corporations and vired \$13 million and transferred it to other corporations.

I would not want to rehash what I said at that time, but it was a situation where allocations which were given to local government authorities this year for scavenging in 1996, were removed. When you look at the scavenging in these areas, Mr. Speaker, you would note that the money was removed, and areas like La Horquetta and Maloney, in the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, which had two days' garbage collection, had to remain with two days in 1996. The additional funds were asked for, to extend the garbage service to these areas, and other areas such as Caroni East, Chaguanas and St. Augustine which belong to the Tunapuna Regional Corporation.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the sitting of the House is suspended for half an hour for supper.

12.18 a.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

12.47 a.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. Maharaj: Mr. Speaker, I apologize for the late arrival of Government Members.

Mr. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, before we took the break I was speaking about timely releases both for the Tobago House of Assembly and for the local government authorities in Trinidad. I remember that when we were in government we brought a motion to this Parliament asking that the financial year be changed to September instead of January. I am calling on the Government at this time to reconsider having the financial year in the third quarter of the year so that money would be available in January for developmental and other programmes in the dry season. So I am looking forward to next year. This was not supported by the then Opposition.

Mr. Humphrey: We supported it.

Mr. Narine: Not at all.

Mr. Humphrey: We supported it with conditions.

Mr. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, I am asking that this be revised for the benefit of local government having timely releases. I also went on to the transfer of funds for garbage collection and indicated that these funds were sadly missed by the corporation affected, namely, the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, where

areas within the corporation that still had two-day garbage collection should have been upgraded to at least four or five days because of the population density in the Tunapuna/Piarco area.

It was also a resolution of the council this year that that \$7.2 million which was removed illegally by the Minister of Local Government be reinstated to the council funds. This was supported unanimously by all the councillors of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, including the five UNC councillors at that time. The five councillors of the United National Congress voted because their areas were also affected.

In the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation there will be 900 houses in Bon Air West. As a matter of fact about 50 per cent of those houses have already been completed. The NUGFW intends to build 450 houses on Lopinot Road and this year the Prime Minister delivered the first 32 houses there. At this time it is almost triple with 63 new houses at Bon Air, Phase I; 200 at Castleton; 500 at Paradise in Tacarigua and a number of other areas within the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation came on stream this year. So that the upgrading of the scavenging service was very important to the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation.

One can well imagine that at this time of the year when there is cleaning of drains and people putting out their household refuse for the Yuletide season, there is an absence of the open-tray truck and that funding of \$7.2 million would have gone a very long way to having those areas cleaned on a timely basis.

Mr. Speaker, what has happened to the removal of funds? They went to other corporations which are controlled by the United National Congress. The funds were utilized in areas where we on this side felt moneys should not have been spent. I speak of the Independence Day celebration in the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation this year.

I have in my possession a complete document on what took place at the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation on Independence Day this year where \$41,000 was utilized out of the funding for the corporation to have celebrations.

In September, 1996, a request was made for funds for the Independence Day celebration by the Chief Executive Officer of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation which reads as follows:

“Reference is made to letter dated August 19, 1996, Re: request for funds for Independence Celebration 1996 and to inform you that bills have been submitted to the amount of \$40,052.31 and payments are outstanding.

Forwarded for your urgent attention please.”

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. NARINE]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

The following letter is from the Accountant, Community Development dated August 19:

“With reference to the above subject the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation is hereby requesting the undermentioned funds to cover cost for the upcoming Independence celebrations.”

which indicated the same amount.

Mr. Speaker, eventually funds were not approved and they then had to apply to the ministry to vire funds. A request for virement dated September 16, was made but this was not brought to the council. It went to the ministry and asked for that amount of funds to be vired, and it was vired from the security vote. Viring that money from the security vote which was spent for Independence Day celebrations in Sangre Grande left the garage unattended where a number of vehicles were vandalized in the garage and parts were stolen. I am certain that the Minister is quite aware of that.

My concern is that the amount of money that was spent for that celebration: photography, Gerard Toney of the Photo House—I should not call names, the Member for Tobago West is very secretive about that—costing \$120; 25 hampers, \$2,500; refreshments, \$8,880 a total sum of \$3,388 went on one invoice and then there was the grocery and bar, \$9,898. Other items were requested from the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation for the 34th Independence celebration: 15 boxes of groceries at \$100 each, refreshments and drinks \$9,898. There is another receipt here—may I say that this Narine is not related to me, Mr. Speaker. I have no other Narine but my immediate family. That is something that I would probably tell the House on another occasion.

“The Sangre Grande Regional Corporation,

RE: INDEPENDENCE CELEBRATION

Hereunder is the final amount for Food and Beverage supply.

450 Chicken Lunches

75 Fish Lunches

600 Juices (12oz)

400 Fruit Cocktails

Cost per plate \$30”

I understand that this was one of their political investors getting this contract to deliver that, at a total sum of \$15,750.

1.00 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, it goes on and on and I would not want to go through the entire document but the fact is that the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, controlled by the UNC, has spent that money which should have been spent on security, for food and drink for their friends ordered for the 34th anniversary Independence celebrations. If it was done for the 50th anniversary of Independence, I would not raise this matter here. This is to tell you what is taking place.

Further to that, this year, the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation received a memorandum from the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Local Government, dated November 18th 1996. It states:

“Transfer of funds by virement, variations of appropriation.

The Minister of Local Government has approved the variation of funds in respect of the 1996 appropriation of the Ministry of Local Government to supplement the 1996 appropriation of the corporation in the sum of \$100,613 as detailed hereunder. Sub item—07, San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation, sub-head—02 goods and services, item 006—maintenance of state traces, subject item 12—materials and supplies to the amount of \$100,613.”

This sum of money was sent to do particular areas controlled by the United National Congress, in the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation.

If we are to give local government autonomy and go by Act No. 21 of 1990, then the corporation must sit at a statutory meeting and take this decision. The Minister’s authority is to pass policy decisions from the Government to the authorities, and to the regional corporations. He dictated to the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation that it was a directive to transfer gangs from Aranguez to El Socorro, and then to transfer \$150,000 from sub-item number 92—local government building projects from the garage. The regional corporations had a vote from the development funds to complete their garage in order to take care of their equipment, and these funds were transferred to do work at Martin Trace in El Socorro, which obviously, we know is a UNC area, but it is a corporation. The government of this corporation is the People’s National Movement. He used an underhand method of taking funds from them and directing them to where he wants.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. NARINE]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

Councillor Reyes of the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation moved a motion at that time, and I will read the resolve: "That the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation expresses its strongest condemnation of the highhanded, partisan, divisive approach of the Minister of Local Government in treating with this council." This is another instance.

Dr. Khan: Thank you for giving way. Martin Trace is one of the worse roads in the constituency, so I think that was the reason for the transfer of funds.

Mr. J. Narine: I am saying that there are many areas in Trinidad that have bad roads, but the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation has the authority to say, and prioritize, which should be fixed. It is certain to me now that the Member for Barataria/San Juan is the one who approached the Minister and asked him to divert the funds to repair Martin Trace.

Dr. Khan: Are you saying I should not look after my constituency? If something is going wrong in my constituency I think it should be done as an emergency. Are you saying I should not make a request for that?

Mr. Valley: You can make a request.

Mr. J. Narine: Certainly, Mr. Speaker, the Member of Parliament is right, but he has to understand that Act No. 21 of 1990, gives authority to the local government bodies to decide when they get their development funds, which areas should be given priority. They ask for this funding long before, and know what projects they would bring on stream for the year. When one removes these projects by sleight-of-hand, one is eroding the authority, and when the Government talks about autonomy for the council this is eroding that from local government.

Dr. Mohammed: I see this as a two-way process. Recently the ministry, based on representation made by the San Juan/Laventille Corporation, took a note to Cabinet for the purchase of lands for the extension of the San Juan/Laventille market. This was based on representation made to me. As the Minister presiding over the ministry, if it is brought to my attention that a particular road needs to be repaired, I feel that I should ask the corporation to do so, and in this instance money was taken from the head office of the ministry and given to the corporation to repay that loan.

Mr. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, it is clear to me that while I am giving way to the Members on the other side to clear themselves, in one instance the Minister is saying he got a request from the San Juan/Laventille Corporation, which is what should happen. A minister should not be telling them what to do, when they have

already allocated their development funds to certain councillors in certain areas; and this is being done in the PNM corporations. We handled it with fairness and equity to all the councillors. Five UNC councillors in the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation will tell you, that when funds are disbursed, they too benefit, but it comes to the council in a programme form. It is passed and then work is executed; not by a sleight-of-hand as it has been done here, that someone asks, and says that Martin Trace is the worse trace. I could find 100 traces in Trinidad worse than it. I am saying you took away the authority of these corporations.

On the other hand, this sum that was moved from the garage, was \$150,000 already allocated and earmarked to fix the garage in the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation. This is not the only corporation that is PNM, which was affected, there are other corporations. For example, the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporations, \$2 million was given; Diego Martin was also involved, but I am drawing some examples. Approximately \$2 million was sent to the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, and the Minister indicated to them what road should be paved.

1.10 a.m.

I am drawing some examples. Approximately \$2 million was allocated to the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation and the Minister indicated to them what roads should be paved in the constituency of Chaguanas, in Caroni East. Those were not passed by the corporation. If one is talking about giving local government authorities autonomy and empowering them and one dictates to them, I am wondering what would happen with the development funds that will be allocated to these corporations in 1997. The corporations controlled by the People's National Movement councillors are very concerned about the type of treatment that is handed out to them and they will seek redress in other ways in the new year.

Mr. Speaker, I am also very much concerned about the development funds in the Appropriation Bill, 1997. Under the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme for 1997*, I would like to point out that for the city of Port of Spain they have removed—and every regional corporation received an increase, but I will show the hon. Member what is taking place in the Ministry of Local Government as far as the development funds are concerned.

Port of Spain City Corporation, in 1996 the revised estimates—\$1,931,119; 1997—\$2,510; Arima Borough Corporation 1996—\$1,151,546, 1997—\$2 million; the San Fernando City Corporation 1996—\$1,899,280, 1997—2,480,000; Point Fortin Borough Corporation 1996—\$1,777,401, 1997—\$2,510,00. Listen to this,

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. NARINE]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

Mr. Speaker. The Chaguanas Borough Corporation received last year—\$1,830,824, 1997—\$4,010,00. That is an increase for the Chaguanas Regional Corporation. I just read into the records the revised estimates for the Port of Spain and Arima Corporations. One would see that they have received over \$2,200,000 more, whereas, some of the other corporations have received a mere \$0.5 million more.

Diego Martin Regional Corporation 1996—\$1,797,757, 1997—\$2,000,000; San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation—1996 \$1,728,332, 1997—\$2,000,000; Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation 1996—\$1,596,009, 1997—\$2,00,000; Sangre Grande Regional Corporation 1996—\$1,596,500, 1997—\$2,000,00; Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, and I stress this region, 1996—\$1,637,518, 1997—\$4,010,000. One would understand, because the constituencies of Couva North and South are in that regional corporation; Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation 1996—\$1,449,384, 1997—\$2,00,000; Siparia Regional Corporation 1996—\$1,567,287, 1997—\$1,990,000.

The disparity is reflected even in the hon. Member's constituency *[Interruption]* If the Member does not get it, she does not mind. She is always getting gifts from the Prime Minister so it does not matter. What happens to the people in the Member's constituency is not a problem.

Mr. Speaker, when one talks about national unity, I say national unity for Caroni, the Chaguanas Borough Corporation—\$4,010,00—places in the East-West Corridor which are the most populated with more vehicles but areas in Couva North have received the best part of the development funds.

Mr. Speaker, I was also concerned when the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism spoke about the national library in Port of Spain. I, like the rest of my colleagues, am very satisfied although a year late, that the library will be built in Port of Spain. We are concerned about the commercial part of the library. Already people around Port of Spain are asking if Royal Castle is going to be in the Penthouse of the library complex and who are the other persons who will occupy businesses in the library.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. J. Narine: I thank you, Mr. Speaker, and Members of the House. The people of Port of Spain and surroundings are very concerned about this commercial segment of the library. I hope that when the Minister is replying that he would clarify what he meant by putting commercial areas in the library. I do not know, maybe Platinum Motors might be situated there.

Another provision which I am very much concerned about is the tourism thrust that was spoken about in this budget presentation. Sunday night I reached home very late, but I was fortunate to see on Trinidad and Tobago Television, "Black Britain" a BBC programme. That programme itemized and made out Tobago to be the AIDS capital of the Caribbean. Ironically, as soon as that programme was completed, Caribscope came on and a Trinidadian businessman, Mr. Galbaransingh, was on Caribscope indicating that it was the first time that the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism was attending this big exhibition in London to boost our tourism thrust. Mr. Galbaransingh stated that the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago wanted this tourism thrust. I viewed a programme just before that which is viewed in Europe, stating that Tobago is the AIDS capital of the Caribbean, and up comes Caribscope saying how much money will be spent in that tourism thrust.

Miss Nicholson: Were you pleased about it?

Mr. J. Narine: I was never pleased. Am I going to sit here and watch you spend taxpayers' money because of certain individuals and political investors of the UNC for their own whims and fancies? That is what I am talking about. Actually, they were reading the budget in London. I said so in a meeting a week ago that the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism will be coming and using as a mouth piece, the budget debate for the political investors on how they could get money out of this Government. I remember years ago seeing a film, "What Lola wants, Lola gets" It comes like "What Ish wants, Ish gets" in this budget.

I am also concerned about the licence fee which was removed. Not only for local government, but let me talk about what a diesel truck—I know that the taxi drivers will be affected because in two months' time they would have to pay back for the 10 cents or 45 cents on a gallon of gasoline. So, for the next two months for the new year they are going to be paying for gas in excess of what they would have paid for licences.

Mr. Assam: Rubbish!

Mr. J. Narine: That is a fact and I could point it out to the Member. If one is a taxi driver using 10 gallons of gas per day, that is \$4.50. One normally would

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. NARINE]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

use more than that. So it will be \$5.00 per day. A taxi driver normally works for about six days per week, so he is spending about \$30.00 per week. He pays \$185.00 in licence fee. Tell me, how that will grow or if taxi drivers will gain by the rise in gas prices.

1.20 a.m.

I would say that the contractors would benefit from this because they own the vehicle for which licence fees up to \$2,500 a year are paid and they only have to pay approximately 10 to 13 per cent more on a gallon of diesel, so they are the ones who will save. Do you know who will save? The people who have the rental business. Singh's Rental. How many businesses does he have? He is saving all his licence fees one time and when he rents the vehicles, the person who is renting the vehicle has to put the gas, not the owner of the vehicle. The owner of the vehicle does not put the gas. If you receive the vehicle with a full tank of gas, you return it with a full tank of gas. Therefore, if you are saying that the poor man would benefit, you are quite wrong, Mr. Minister of Finance. The poor man is going to get squeezed with that 10 cents more on every litre of gas.

I am asking if the right hand did not know what the left hand was doing because my understanding is that the Minister of Works and Transport went ahead and printed 40,000 licence stickers. What would be done with them? How much money was spent? How much taxpayers' funding was spent on printing those licence stickers which now have to be dumped? What has happened in 1996 with the \$50 million gas tax for road repairs? I hope that when the Minister of Works and Transport comes here he reports because according to law he is supposed to come to Parliament every six months and report how many kilometres of road were paved out of that tax and where in Trinidad they were paved. The former Minister of Works and Transport did it religiously, because that was the law. This Minister does not pave a kilometre of road anywhere that one could see, and I would say boldly that the Ministry of Local Government paved more roads this year than the Ministry of Works and Transport. I am saying that. If the Minister of Local Government has to be taken to the Ombudsman of the UNC, carry the Minister of Works and Transport instead. Therefore, I am asking where is the \$50 million in gas tax spent? The Minister has sent out a circular to us, saying that he now has a hotline for potholes in Trinidad. More than a "pothole" Minister—a "pothound" Minister.

The Member for St. Joseph would know that when we were in Local Government, as a programme came on to patch potholes, our antennae went up.

There is no accountability when patching potholes, so that one can put 500 tons of material on a programme in local government. They cannot do that, so that they are in agreement that the Minister sends out a hotline to patch potholes and uses \$50 million to do so. Mr. Speaker, where are those potholes? Where were they patched? You heard about Martin Trace. The Member for Bartaria/San Juan told you how bad Martin Trace was. They could not have patched potholes in Martin Trace, so that he made representation and although it was illegally, Martin Trace was repaired, and that is a credit to the Minister of Local Government. But the Minister of Works and Transport takes \$50 million out of that 5 per cent tax and one does not know where it is. I am not seeing any potholes patched.

I understand that a lot of drainage work was done at Roundabout Plaza where the first casino is to be opened. I am saying that if the first casino would be at Roundabout plaza, then maybe \$50 million is going to solve the flooding around the plaza. I got some reports from Madamus Road, in Paria. This is what happened. About two months ago, there were seven landslips on that road. There are about 15 farmers on that road, citrus estates and others. I am very sorry for the Minister of Works and Transport because it is not his fault that the road had several landslides because of the rainy season and a favourite contractor in Central—one of your investors—was given a contract for \$50,000 to clear this area and he took six weeks to do so. He carried a tractor and tried to clear the roadway, damaging the road totally. The poor farmers had the vehicles for six weeks. All the citrus fell and the produce could not come out, therefore they came to me asking what could be done.

Mrs Persad-Bissessar: Is that contractor the same Narine?

Mr. J. Narine: If you want me to call the name I would call it. I operate on the ground level. I do not raise my nose in the air so if a shower of rain catches me I will drown. I work with the people. I am a people's person and you know that.

Mr. Assam: It is because of your height. You could fall anywhere because of your height.

Mr. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, I walk with humility so my nose is facing the ground. I am not sure if the hon. Member walks through a shower, he would survive these grounds.

These seven landslides took 6 weeks to clear with help from the farmers. I am saying that they are contemplating legal advice to get compensation for their crops and some of the vehicles coming through there. One of the persons who came

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. NARINE]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

through there with a Land Rover vehicle was Mr. Gokool. He had his crank case completely smashed and he had to wreck his vehicle from up there into Arima.

Therefore, I am saying that some of these allocations in the 1997 Budget and taxpayers' money that was mishandled this year; the money for maintaining roads and local government to carry out its programmes were dictated to, and there is no accountability at all. Did they ever come here and say where the \$50 million was spent?

1.30 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, I thank the Minister of National Security. In the last budget debate I raised the question about a police station for Arouca. I indicated that in the 1995 budget \$1 million was allocated to start the station at Five Rivers Junction, Arouca. It was removed in 1996 and sent to Cunupia and now the URP workers are building that station. I am seeing in the development programme for this year that money is allocated for building a police station in Arouca. On behalf of the constituents of Arouca North and the environs, I thank the Minister of National Security for giving his word to deliver in 1997.

The Member for Tunapuna also wrote the Minister asking for a police post in the Tacarigua area. Those are built-up areas, Mr. Speaker. You are quite aware of those areas. He also wrote to him stating that when the police station is built in Arouca, it would accommodate those areas. We are happy with that. I wrote the Minister of Works and Transport early this year informing him about projects in Arouca North that were not completed in 1995. I hoped that he would have put them on his programme for 1996. *[Interruption]*

I never sent any list for employment. I know that he is in a tug-of-war with the Member for Chaguanas for employees for the police station in Cunupia. It is in the Chaguanas constituency and all his people from Caroni East are working. If the Member for Chaguanas would allow it I have no problem with that. The Member for Chaguanas was mamagued by the Member for Tobago East. He took money from his ministry and sent it to Tobago for the Tobago House of Assembly Elections. He felt good. The sum of \$2 million was vired from that ministry to send to Tobago. Ask him! The Member for Tobago East, the Minister Extraordinaire, said that although the Minister is not so eloquent, he has a good heart. He mamagued him. None of these projects was completed in 1995.

As a matter of fact, two rooms were to be built in the community centre at Lopinot. It took 21 fortnights this year and still it is not completed. That is the productivity level they talk about. It has risen in 1996, but nowhere in Arouca

North or in Trinidad. The Minister could not open a project this year. He is cutting ribbon for footpath. Those things we never thought about. That reminds me of the outhouses which were opened in Laventille when the then Prime Minister went to cut ribbon. With the four projects there were in Arouca North, one was in Bon Air and within two years we built a complex with three hard surface courts. There were many developed areas. We also built a children's park.

Do you know what they did for the 21 fortnights? They put six posts to build a summer shed with the foundation. That would have taken one fortnight to build. When the Member for St. Joseph was on the council with us we did the drainage in Red Hill and then we paved the roads. They started to put the footpath above those same drains and did 300 feet of footpath in 11 fortnights. *[Interruption]* How do you think I ended up here in Parliament? It is because of performance. If that is divided by 10 fortnights, that is 30 feet per fortnight. At 10 days per fortnight that is three feet per day. I am not going to divide it by 14 workers. We would end up with inches. *[Laughter]* They talk about productivity!

We started in the Mausica area because of Mausica folk performers. We felt that they had a name throughout the world. They went to Japan, Monaco, Las Vegas and Canada. It is a village of which we are proud. Because of Best Village they made a name for themselves. We started a folk performing theatre and we spent the money for the foundation. It is still there. Not another project in Arouca was done. This is why the UNC in Arouca North is complaining. They talk about nepotism. If one goes across the country and looks at the job sites to see who is working, one would understand that. The Minister alluded to that fact yesterday; there was massive corruption in the Unemployment Relief Programme. I would not go into that because one reads about it in the weeklies.

Because people know that I am fearless and I would speak about the corrupt practices which are going on in the Unemployment Relief Programme, I say no more. Three persons from Arima were arrested last week for having a ghost gang. When they were asked who gave them that ghost gang, they said it was the Jamaican who fought against Dr. Rupert Griffith at the elections. All the members who lost the 1995 general elections are controlling URP. Do not talk about Tabaquite. His father is the co-ordinator for the programme. He is not paid but he employs people in URP. That is a fact. I said it here before and he never doubted it and he cannot doubt it today.

Dr. Nanan: Mr. Speaker, through you—

Mr. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, I am not giving way. Not a single project was completed because they have now changed the structure of the Unemployment Relief Programme. There has been an arrest for materials.

It is my understanding that in the Pointe-a-Pierre constituency, \$42,000 worth of lumber could not be found. When enquiries were made in Region 7 in San Fernando the man said that two ministers asked him to refurbish two schools. He felt that the auditors would have stayed off his back when he said two ministers. They said they would go to the schools. Nothing was done to the schools. The lumber could not have been found at Pointe-a-Pierre. I understand the person who is connected with the UNC is a contractor who is building houses.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: What is wrong with that?

Mr. J. Narine: Nothing is wrong with that. He took the Government's material and built houses for people and nothing is wrong with that. I am appalled. The same persons who were connected with the fraudulent activities in URP at Arima last week are on Temple Street. A mandir and a school are there, but it is private property. I know them well, so when PNM was in office they asked me to fix the yard. I told them that it was private property and I could not spend one cent on it. They went about asking year after year and we did not do it. As we got out of office, the Jamaican co-ordinator paved the whole yard, fixed the lawn and put plants. If you want to know about corruption ask me to take you around, and I would show you.

1.40 a.m.

Today, we are in a situation where we have had many reports in local government and we know what is needed there. The Minister is quite *au courant* but I would like to raise some issues here. We must ask questions, but we must also have answers to those questions. Because of my involvement in local government for eight years and then in government as a Parliamentary Secretary—I am speaking of the challenges based on existing environment to local government—the awareness and understanding of local government must be increased.

How can we bring back local government to the people? How can the image of local government be improved? It is at a low ebb. How should local government authorities win back communities such as central government, the politicians, administrators, the women, the youth and the general society? Can local government really empower people? If so, how? How can local government gain greater institutional representation? How can local government encourage

continuous and forceful community action? We are not talking about bazaars and so forth, we have to come better than that. How can local government authorities promote self-help for which they are best suited? How do we ensure local government becoming result-oriented? How does it optimize, maximize and mobilize all its available resources? It must show it has the societal development as its major concern. The strategies that are recommended—

Hon. Member: Debate and stop reading.

Mr. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, I am just putting some of my views across which came about because of some of the seminars which were held over the years. For the eight years when I was a local government representative, I attended some of those and the Member for St. Joseph did a lecture for us at the City Hall in Port of Spain.

Mr. Speaker, an education programme relating to local government must be urgently instituted, and it should include programmes in the secondary school curriculum so that persons in the schools must know about local government and its operations in order that that generation will grow into the communities.

Local government should be promoted as the training ground for national politicians and politics. I am always of that belief and I still have that thought. Of course, the Member for St. Joseph came into local government as a back-door politician but he learnt, and today he is one of the better ministers in Government out of the lot. I have that admiration for him. There is need to establish some policy and advisory services and system to assist local government. Some system of reward and incentives is required to encourage citizens' participation which we had started. Awards were given to persons who had given service to local government and the chairman at that time, the Member for St. Joseph, was present when we had our fourth anniversary of the St. George East County Council which separated the east from the west.

Mr. Speaker: Are you about to wind up? Your speaking time has expired.

Mr. J. Narine: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would leave this document here but I would say in winding up, that local government needs to be upgraded. If one is talking about autonomy and empowering the people in local government, then the Minister must be that guiding force and liaison between the local government authority and Cabinet. He must not say where they must spend the funds because they have programmes and statutory meetings to do so.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. NARINE]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

At this time, Mr. Speaker, although I have debated for the last 75 minutes on one of the worst budgets that came about in Trinidad and Tobago in the last 10 years, I wish you and your family and the rest of my colleagues in Parliament, a Merry Christmas. I do not know about the next year. It all depends on the budget.

Mr. Razack Ali (*Ortoire/Mayaro*): Mr. Speaker, I rise to join this important debate and to stand in support of the Bill to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ending December 31, 1997.

I join with my colleagues on the Government side in congratulating the hon. Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism on his presentation of the 1997 Budget. This budget, without a doubt, is one of the best within the last decade. The budget provides incentives for every sector of our cosmopolitan population and other speakers on the Government side have elaborated on the many areas in which the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago will benefit.

Before I continue on the budget, Mr. Speaker, I would like to deal a little with the Member for Arouca North and I will like him to take his seat for that matter. *[Laughter]* *[Member for Arouca North about to leave the Chamber]* I am sure that the Member for St. Joseph is having some regrets because I know him to be a good tutor and the Member for Arouca North served for a number of years under his chairmanship. It is a pity that he did not learn anything about local government.

Mr. Speaker, he spoke about virement under the recurrent services and it seems that he does not know that the councils, presently called the municipal corporations, have the authority, according to Act No. 21 of 1990, to do their virements.

Under the development projects, virement for transfers must be approved through the Ministry of Local Government. That is a fact, Mr. Speaker. I emphasize that there was a secret under the PNM-run local government when the Member for Diego Martin East was the Minister and the Member for Arouca North was the Parliamentary Secretary.

1.50 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, there are certain sums of moneys allocated directly to the head office at Kent House under personal expenditure and also under the development project. No one knew about that money, regardless of what problems were experienced by the various municipal corporations. There were 58 bridges in the Ortoire/Mayaro area needing repairs and a number of roads and state traces were

in a deplorable condition, but they were always saying that there was no money. When we got into that ministry, Mr. Speaker, we learnt very fast. We discovered that there were hundreds of thousands of dollars, under Goods and Services, which was the money from which the Minister of Local Government took \$50,000, to assist the San Juan/Laventille Corporation. The Minister has the authority to spend that money. No money was taken from the San Juan/Laventille Corporation.

I would not like to discuss the entire contribution of the Member for Arouca North because he wasted 75 minutes here. I would, however, like to elaborate a little further on the statement made earlier today by the Member for Diego Martin East, who was very vociferous in criticizing some of the provisions in the 1997 Budget. He said that it would definitely contribute to corruption. Of course, that is his assumption.

When the hon. Member for Diego Martin East was Minister of Local Government and also Minister of Works and Transport—and I will confine myself to when he was Minister of Works and Transport—his name was synonymous with corruption, Mr. Speaker. [*Interruption*] If the Member wishes to stand on a point of order—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 36(5) refers. The Member has made the ridiculous statement that when I was Minister of Works and Transport my name was synonymous with corruption. That is an improper allegation and I would like it withdrawn.

Mr. Speaker: Are you suggesting that the Member is saying that you were corrupt? That is not what he said. He said that when the Member—I guess referring to you—was the Minister of Works and Transport, his name was synonymous with corruption. That is a very thin line but I would not construe what he said as any improper suggestions concerning the Member. If he did, I would stop it. I would like to be assured by the Member that he was not accusing the Member of corruption, regardless of what anybody else may have thought.

Mr. R. Ali: Mr. Speaker, I was not trying to impute any improper motives. I was just about to give some examples. Trinidad and Tobago is very cognizant that if ever there was corruption in URP, it was during that period. Victimization and nepotism was the name of the game. The Unemployment Relief Programme was designed to assist the needy. It was a needy relief programme, yet under the PNM regime there were people working for up to 300 days and had to be paid severance pay. Trinidad and Tobago knows that cannot happen under the UNC/NAR coalition.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. ALI]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

When I was the leader of opposition business at the Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation, just before I defeated the then Attorney General and came into Parliament, joining with my colleagues from Diego Martin, St. Joseph and Barataria in pulling down the PNM government from the reigns of power and winning those marginal seats and forming this Government of national unity, I wrote the then Minister, the Member for Diego Martin East, and the then Prime Minister about the illegal spending of \$282,000 in that corporation. My ministry is now investigating this. Section 118(1) of Act No. 21 of 1990 is very clear that all matters of a financial nature must come before the Finance and General Purposes Committee meeting. The sum of \$282,000 was spent and I kept reporting it to the hon. Minister. The Parliamentary Secretary came to the Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation and nothing was done. That is corruption. The money was spent without any authority from the council. There was no authority at the committee level and no authority at the statutory level.

People, in talking about corruption, Mr. Speaker, must not throw stones at other people's glass windows when their homes also have glass windows. The five per cent road improvement tax programme is broad, it is clear, with respect to the substandard materials that have been supplied on those roads and the substandard hot mix during the period that the Member for Diego Martin East was the Minister of Works and Transport and Minister of Local Government.

2.00 a.m.

I have been asked to make a short contribution but when we talk about giving certain autonomy to local government bodies and not giving them the funding and so forth, if ever councils were starved for funds it was under the PNM.

In Mayaro/Rio Claro there were 64 vehicles and the majority of them were unserviceable. Only today, under the UNC/NAR Government, 17 vehicles have been refurbished. I can elaborate on the deplorable state of roads and the unserviceable bridges and so forth.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition, the Member for San Fernando East, said that the Government lacks the vision to effectively deal with the affairs of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The reason the PNM is sitting on that side of the House is because it lacked vision, it is bankrupt of ideas, not having a clue how to manage the economy of Trinidad and Tobago and, indeed, to deal with the affairs and the problems of the populace of Trinidad and Tobago.

Members on this side, as well as the population, know that PNM has a long history of betrayal of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. They always offer false hopes and promises, because when money was no problem they failed to diversify the economy.

The 1996 and 1997 budgets prove that this Government of national unity knows the suffering of our people and has been addressing these problems. This Government of national unity must be congratulated for having achieved so much in just a mere 13 months. The mass population is satisfied with the performance of the Government, as indeed, the 1997 Budget.

I must state at this point that Ortoire/Mayaro is one of the largest constituencies and was the most neglected under the PNM. Notwithstanding that, Ortoire/Mayaro is one of the richest constituencies. However, I assure the PNM that under the 1996 Budget that constituency achieved a great deal and the people are quite sure that from the 1997 budget, Ortoire/Mayaro is going to experience more meaningful development such as was never had under the PNM.

I have been asked to make a short contribution and I would like to conclude on the point of the Public Sector Investment Programme. This morning, it was stated again by the Leader of the Opposition and other Members that in 1996 the Government of national unity could not have spent \$721 million, and would not be able to spend \$1.7 billion as allocated in the 1997 Budget.

In one breath the PNM is calling on the Government to deliver on its promises. However, now that the funding is available the Opposition fear that we cannot spend \$1.7 billion. Mr. Speaker, I do not think that is their fear. The fear is not really to spend or not to spend. They realize that there is going to be massive improvement in infrastructure and the creation of jobs in Trinidad and Tobago. As a consequence, Mr. Speaker, they are afraid because when the Government delivers on its promises, the PNM would have to work very hard to even sit in the Opposition.

To conclude, the PNM, through the Leader of the Opposition, also stated that the PNM has disassociated itself from the development path of the Government. Why? *[Interruption]* I would not like to go into that because it was started by the PNM—gambling is gambling—the National Lottery was introduced, Play Whe was legalized and so forth.

Mr. Speaker, let my join my colleagues on the other Benches in commending the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism for the 1997 Budget which he has

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. GRIFFITH]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

presented, and to assure the Member that the people of Ortoire/Mayaro are totally satisfied that the budget will do wonders for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, as indeed Ortoire/Mayaro.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I join with all my other colleagues on both sides of the House to wish you and your family and, indeed, my colleagues in this august Senate a Merry Christmas and a bright and prosperous New Year.

Dr. Rupert Griffith (*Arima*): Mr. Speaker, we have been debating this budget over the last 16 hours and much has been said about it. However, before I begin my contribution to the debate, may I congratulate the Member for Ortoire/Mayaro on his maiden speech. [*Desk thumping*] Since it is his maiden speech I choose not to get into many things he said, but to merely correct him by saying that the local corporation mentioned by the hon. Member for Arouca North, was not Laventille, it was San Juan. The Member may want to take note of that. The debate also gives a clear indication that a still tongue keeps a wise head.

I want to talk a little about the budget presentation by the hon. Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism. May I also take this opportunity to congratulate my good Friend, the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism, for presenting the second budget in this House. I am sure he knows that he may not be here to present the third budget in 1997, so I wish him well. [*Laughter*] He knows what I am talking about.

The hon. Minister could not lament, as he did last year, that he had only eight weeks to prepare the nation's budget and apologize for the possible shortcomings. Having had an excess of a year, Mr. Speaker, to prepare this budget, I think he should, however, apologize to the national community for presenting a budget which could only be described as a "scorpion budget".

2.10 a.m.

This budget, with its wide body front, with its claws coming out on the sides seeking what measures it could grab, has the real danger of the sting in its tail. Mr. Speaker, I am no believer in horoscope but I think this budget should have been presented in November. It is truly a Scorpio budget. This Government informed us on this side and, indeed, the national community, that it expects to realize a financial surplus of \$523 million for this year. Since the Government boasts that it puts people first and ensures that people would be at the centre of all economic growth, we, on this side, expected to see the Government bring forward economic measures that would impact positively on the quality of life on the fragile, economically

challenged individuals in this country. What we expected, certainly, is not what we observed.

As was mentioned by other speakers, the poor comprise about 21 per cent of the population, approximately 274,000 persons, with 50 per cent of these extremely poor, that is, those who are unable to afford the cost of a minimum food basket or a basket of goods. Poverty is evenly divided between the urban and rural areas of this country. However, the severity of poverty is worse in urban areas. Almost one-half of the poor live in St. George County and the highest incidence of severe poverty, 35 per cent of the poor, live well below the poverty line.

While the budget made passing reference to social services, it, however, failed to outline a definite strategy to reduce the growing incidence of poverty in Trinidad and Tobago. Such a strategy could have included mechanisms for the economic rehabilitation of the unemployed; mechanisms for the promotion of labour intensive growth; mechanisms for the provision of basic social services and mechanisms to ensure a social safety net for the individuals until broad-based growth is realized. We would have liked to see social welfare programmes as well, designed to provide more rehabilitative services to the poor, to assist individuals in gaining new skills so that they could re-enter into the world of work.

Mr. Speaker, the *Budget Statement 1996* addressed the issues of poverty in Trinidad and Tobago. I will now quote from page 4 of the 1996 Budget Speech. It says.

“Mr. Speaker, poverty continues to be an intractable problem and must be addressed with urgency if Government is to get tough on crime and the causes of crime, is to eliminate hunger, and strive towards economic and social equity. The poor now comprise at least 21 per cent of the population, and in some quarters it is believed that this rate is as high as 30 per cent. Over one hundred thousand citizens have little hope and live in despair. Large sections of the population continue to suffer from a lack of shelter and the incidence of dispossession is prevalent.

The impoverished among us are unable to access quality health and educational services. There are thousands in this country who cannot access basic health care services, while there continues to be overcrowding of hospitals, lack of maintenance of existing facilities, and grave shortages of drugs and other medical supplies.

Although numerous social programmes are available to the poor, the benefits from these programmes have been limited. These programmes have suffered

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. GRIFFITH]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

from the absence of an effective policy framework. There is no co-ordinating lead agency. Administrative costs are exorbitant. Targeting has been inappropriate and there have been significant duplication and gaps in coverage. Government proposes to address the issue of an efficient social programme in its entirety in 1996.”

Mr. Speaker, with the presentation of the 1997 Budget, I ask: where is the efficient social programme in its entirety promised by the Government in 1996? I also ask: Where is the effective policy framework? Where is the co-ordinating lead agency to administer the numerous social programmes? The Minister said that is unavailable and he spoke with urgency. Was the budget mainly lip-service or one with nice sounding words to fool people and the population? This budget reminds me of a conversation, I overheard, between a parent and a child. The child said to his mother: “Could you tell me when politicians are lying?” The mother said: “That is easy; as soon as their lips begin to move.” This budget reminds me of that. The child went on to say that he did not present the budget. The child also asked: “Mom, do all nancy stories begin with ‘once upon a time’?” The mother said: No, some begin by voting into office.” Mr. Speaker, this budget reminds me of that type of politician.

Mr. Speaker, we were also told in the *Budget Statement 1996* that in order to reduce the cost of basic foods during 1996, the following items were VAT zero-rated—let me refresh the memory of this Parliament and indeed, the national community: cheddar cheese, corned beef, curry, fresh butter, salt, macaroni, better known as pasta; peanut butter, salted butter, tinned sardines, smoke herrings; yeast; baking powder and toilet paper. All of the food items mentioned in the 1996 Budget that were zero-rated increased in prices. There were no consumer measures put in place by this Government to ensure that the zero-rated products would redound to the benefit of the consumer.

In fact, not only did those zero-rated items increased in price, we saw in the *Review of the Economy* on page 20—and I wish my good Friend from St. Joseph would take some time and read that document. We realized that he was not prepared for the budget. If he should look at page 20 in the *Review of the Economy*, he would see that there were significant increases to the consumer; for example, food prices increased by 10.1 per cent, but yet he came today and he bandied a document he claimed his technocrats provided, stating that food prices

went down. The Government laid a document in Parliament indicating that food prices went up by 10.1 per cent. The left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my good Friend, the Member for St. Joseph, to look at that document and he will see for himself the types of food prices that have increased in Trinidad and Tobago. There were higher prices for flour, rice dairy products, chicken—he boasted that chicken price did not increase but the document said that the price of chicken and seasonal food crops went up.

Other consumer items listed on that page were housing which had increased to 2.3 per cent; reading, recreation and educational materials went up by 2.2 per cent, transportation increased by 0.7 per cent—this will increase further with the 10 per cent increase per litre on gas, 3 cents increase in diesel; and 2 cents on CNG.

Also, Mr. Speaker, in 1996, health and personal care went up by 2.1 per cent; household supplies by 0.6 per cent; drink and tobacco by 0.5; clothing and footwear by 1.2 per cent. That is what the *Review of the Economy* document pointed out today. These prices would increase, especially clothing and footwear. Most of these items are imported and there are no real measures to control the import of these items so they are likely to increase.

2.20 a.m.

In spite of all these increases in 1996, Mr. Speaker, we see the removal—and my colleagues on this side talked about all of these so I do not wish to repeat—of personal allowance of \$600; spouse allowance of \$600; child allowance of \$100, and a host of other credits which were already mentioned.

What is this Government doing? It says it cares. Is this really a caring Government? Those persons who are able to save or buy units at the credit union or other organizations registered under the Co-operative Societies Act can no longer benefit by the \$625 tax credit they were enjoying.

The Government boasted in its 1996 budget that it would put people at the centre of all economic growth and development in 1997. The Government said it will go even further to empower the population to transform Trinidad and Tobago into a total quality nation. It seems to me, from the foregoing measures, that the Government will transform this country into a “total poverty nation”—not a total quality nation.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. GRIFFITH]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

The Government boasts about the unemployment rate—it was 16.5 per cent in 1995 and it is at 15.1 per cent in 1996. While this is a welcome sign, we want the Government to tell us how it proposes to reduce the high unemployment rate among females which stands at about 21 per cent and for males which stands at about 13 per cent at this time. You see, the Government has certainly talked its walk, but it certainly failed to walk its talk.

I want to turn my attention now to community development. Mr. Speaker, we on this side have always viewed community development action programmes and the principles of community development as key instruments in the nation's building process. Today, we want to reaffirm our commitment to the philosophy of nation building, through community participation, and the empowering of community groups in the development of their communities. It is for this reason, Mr. Speaker, that we regard the work being done by village councils and other community-based organizations as being essential components in the overall strategy of actions geared towards bringing Trinidad and Tobago into a new period of modernization and enlightenment.

It is therefore essential that programmes designed to impact on our communities nation-wide should be designed in such a manner as to be community-driven as well as community-managed. We on this side believe that the community-based non-governmental organizations—and village councils are included among these—are best placed to provide information and guidance as to the critical needs of the communities and the type of community programmes that are essential for their own growth and development.

Ours is a society currently moving forward to modernization as we approach the new millennium. This approach to modernize must recognize that many common processes in which we are engaging on a day-to-day basis, this coalition Government must therefore actively pursue the way forward to modernization by accurately assessing the current and future needs of our community-based organizations and associations. The Government must carefully and skilfully deploy the resources available if we are to achieve maximum benefits.

We are particularly heartened to see that many of the community development programmes implemented by the last PNM administration are still being implemented today. This continuity in the organization and mobilization strategy is necessary if the community development movement is to grow in strength and increase in intensifying the contribution it makes to this country. For after all, Mr. Speaker,

what practical good is our neighbourhood watch programme if in the final analysis it does not serve to bring individuals, organizations and communities into partnership with each other in a modern model of living?

What practical good is any of our community-based integrated programmes, be it the Domestic Support Programme, the Terminal Mall Programme, the Intensive Skill Programme, the National Service Programme, the Geriatric Adolescent Programme, or the Heritage Conservation Programme? Of what practical good is any of these programmes if it does not revitalize our village councils, our community organization and, by extension, the community with whom it functions?

Mr. Speaker, we are sure you will recall some of the community development programmes implemented under the last PNM administration. Let me just mention a few to refresh our memory of some of these. When we take the Community Centres Enhancement Programme, which involves the repair of community centres—and community centres are institutions that provide focal attention, especially in the rural areas, for those community groups. These centres were constructed with the assistance of community-based and non-governmental organizations. The programme included an apprenticeship component in which young persons were trained in basic construction skills and were paid a stipend for their labour.

When we looked at the community education programme, it had two components: one, the domestic support; and two, the employment creation generation. The objective was to prepare adults for self-employment and employment on the open market. The types of skills taught were food preparation, small appliances repair, garment construction, shoe-making and repair, coil basketry and leather craft; skills that young people can use to be gainfully employed. Rather than being on the block and getting involved in the kinds of crime the Minister of Finance spoke about in his 1996 Budget, these young people could develop skills that will enable them to be self-employed.

We looked at the Export Centres Programme, which again was implemented by the PNM administration. This programme was designed to provide skills to members of communities so that they too can be meaningfully employed and perhaps move from a state of poverty into a state of growth and development. Those programmes were done under the PNM administration.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. GRIFFITH]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

2.30 a.m.

Then when you look at the Neighbourhood Watch Groups, this programme was launched in 1994 and it was a joint effort with the Ministry of National Security and the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Women's Affairs. Officers of both ministries received appropriate training and community committees were established in some of the counties. Watch groups were also established throughout Trinidad. The objective of the programme was to reduce the level of crime in the country and improve the relationship between the police and the community. That programme is still being implemented with tremendous success, as you probably are aware.

The retired experts programme utilized the services of retired individuals within communities to provide educational assistance and social support to needy primary and secondary schools students. What the programme sought to do was to gainfully utilize many persons who took VSEP, at age 55, 57 or 58, who were still very much able and capable of imparting skills to assist the young people of the nation.

The community relief centres project was established to provide relief programmes for the low-income segment of the population. The programme offered services in the following areas: nutritional support, a second-hand book exchange, counselling, a skills bank and job location services. The project was conducted at community centres. So you see the extent of this programme, providing very needy services to members of the various communities.

The Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Project of the national service programme sought to train young, unemployed persons in the care of the elderly. There is a growing need for geriatric care in Trinidad and Tobago. The programme focused on techniques on gerontology, occupational therapy, nursing care, psycho-social development and nutrition. The programme was taught by resource personnel. The trainees were paid a stipend of \$30 per day. I am advised that in 1995, this programme trained 500 persons and many of those trainees are gainfully employed today. That was one of the programmes provided by the former PNM administration.

While we, on this side, as I said earlier, are pleased to see the continuation of the community development programmes we started during our administration, we have, however, noted with concern, the significant reduction in funds allocated for development programmes for 1997. We see in the *Draft Estimates of Expenditure for the year 1997* at Head 41—Ministry of Community Development, Culture and

Women's Affairs—a total estimate of \$62.3 million compared to \$80.75 million in 1996, a significant reduction.

Under subhead 9 of the *Development Programme*, we see that in the year 1995, the actual figure was \$23.52 million; in 1996, the estimate was \$23.65 million, but it was revised to \$22.04 million. But get this: in 1997, the estimate is \$11.07 million.

When we looked at the variance of \$10.96 million in the *Draft Estimates for the Development Programme*, no explanation was given regarding the drastic reduction. We wonder whether the hon. Minister of Community Development, Culture and Women's Affairs would explain the significant reduction in the estimate. Does this mean there will be less emphasis paid to community development programmes in 1997, at a time when our nation needs all of these services and all of the types of programmes that were implemented in the previous year?

We have noted also that in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, under subhead 01, there is a significant increase in personnel expenditure. In 1995, it was \$9.47 million; in 1996 it was \$9.95 million, but in 1997 it is \$10.53 million, an increase of \$573,600 over 1996. What we are seeing here is a significant increase in the ministry's personnel expenditure and a significant reduction in the expenditure for the development programme. We want to know what is going on with the social development programmes.

This budget does not seek to address the many needs and the types of amenities that the country requires. We looked at the removal of the deeds of covenant. I realize that much has been said on both sides of the floor about this, but I, too, want to make my own two points and make a strong appeal to this Government. We believe that the removal of the claim will surely handicap the NGOs, particularly the church organizations, in their efforts to provide social services. We recommend that the Government seriously reconsider the removal of the claim, particularly to church organizations, who rely heavily on the deeds of covenant to finance many of the social welfare and community-based projects.

The removal of the deeds of covenant from non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations will significantly weaken their ability to offer, not only social programmes, but moral development programmes. The non-governmental organizations and the community-based organizations depend very strongly on the fiscal contributions from individuals as well as organizations through deeds of covenant to operate. Non-governmental organizations and

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. GRIFFITH]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

community-based organizations are called to play a key role in community development and the implementation of social services.

Just recently, the Government laid in this honourable House a contract document numbered 872/0C-TT, which is a loan agreement between the IADB on a community development fund programme. The loan agreement requires the involvement of non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations in the implementation of the project.

2.40 a.m.

Let me read for you Annex "A" of this document. I will read the objective 1.01 and I would show that while this Government is removing necessary funds in the form of deeds of covenant from these non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, perhaps the Government forgot that a strong part of the loan agreement it laid in Parliament required these organizations to implement the projects. This is what the objective of this community development fund programme says at 1.01:

"The Project seeks to assist the government in its efforts to deliver social services efficiently to its poor and vulnerable population during a time of economic adjustment and public sector reform. More specifically, the Project shall assist the Borrower (the Government of Trinidad and Tobago) to: (a) establish an efficient, complementary mechanism for delivering basic social services and infrastructure to the poor using Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), community organizations and other agencies;..."

This is a loan agreement that this Government laid in this House. It continues:

"(b) strengthen the institutional capacity of NGOs and grassroots organizations; and (c) increase beneficiary participation in poverty alleviation efforts."

That is the objective of the loan agreement.

"2.01 The Project has two components:

- (i) an investment component which shall finance community infrastructure and social assistance projects.
- (ii) a technical assistance component which shall..."

the word "shall" is used here—

"...finance the institutional strengthening of the Community Development Fund (CDF) itself and of participating agencies and NGOs."

Nothing makes sense.

"2.02 CDF will finance community infrastructure or social assistance projects that meet the following criteria: (a) at least 80 per cent of the beneficiaries will fall within the low income population category; (b) projects are community driven, meaning that the community is a major stakeholder in the design and/or execution of the Project; (c) capable NGOs and/or community based organizations are involved in project design, implementation, and/or maintenance."

That is what the loan agreement is requiring and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago signed to it. Further, Mr. Speaker, the document states:

"2.12 CDF will finance technical assistance and training for NGOs and CBOs who wish to sponsor projects for CDF financing. During the first year of execution, consultants contracted by the CDF will develop a mechanism that will offer needed support to NGOs that solicit CDF funds. The consultants would propose a range of needs-based technical assistance and training interventions in the areas of: (a) project design, monitoring, evaluation and maintenance; (b) financial management and administration; and (c) management information systems. The strengthening will allow for a larger number of community organizations to compete for CDF funds and participate effectively in the programme."

Let me emphasize that Loan Contract Agreement No. 872/OC-TT between the Inter-American Development Bank and Trinidad and Tobago, stipulates the role of community-based organizations in this project. Again, the call is to ask the Government to seriously reconsider reinstating the claims for deed of covenant for the community-based organizations, particularly the church organization.

Mr. Speaker, I turn my attention to the much talked about casinos. Pretty soon Trinidad and Tobago would be a bustling seat for the Association of Caribbean States. This would bring citizens from all over the world to our shores. I do not think that we want to send a signal that Trinidad and Tobago is fast becoming a gambling city, I do not think we want to send that signal. We recommend to the Government that it should seek the widest consultation from organizations and citizens on the issue of casino gambling in Trinidad and Tobago. Just today, each Member of the House received a letter from a number of religious bodies, particularly the Pentecostal body, stating their strong objections against casinos in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, we need to look at that seriously, because we may find the cost may well be larger than the benefits. The whole idea of casino gambling in Trinidad

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[DR. GRIFFITH]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

and Tobago is against the social fabric of this country. When we see some of the benefits, as the Minister of Finance said—and the benefits would be accelerated investments in hotel resorts; linkages with business; increase in cruise ships visitation; income from tourism and entertainment will increase; he also said there would be job creation and overall increases in tourism investment.

When I look at some of the disadvantages, Mr. Speaker, the casinos will be an attraction for criminal elements and gangsters. This is well known among casino environments in other parts of the region. Another disadvantage is money laundering. Mr. Speaker, I have looked and listened to a number of panel discussions, and on every occasion the speakers talk about the association of money laundering with casinos.

I do not know whether in Trinidad and Tobago with a reduction of morals, and the increase in violence and drug addiction, we want to develop a culture of gambling. How about the lowering of morals? Casinos will be a catalyst for drug business, trafficking and otherwise, international perception of Trinidad and Tobago as a gambling society. I do not think we want to have the outside world perceive us as a gambling society. Of course, Mr. Speaker, there is also the repatriation of foreign currency. The Minister of Finance did not talk much about the floating dollar, and measures to stabilize the Trinidad and Tobago dollar. I think he should understand that if casinos are implemented in Trinidad and Tobago, there is going to be a repatriation of foreign currency.

Mr. Speaker, also, there is no guarantee that casino gambling will only be limited to the tourists. This is one of the arguments put forward by the Minister of Finance and Members on the other side. Given Trinidad and Tobago's cosmopolitan framework, there will be difficulty in identifying and ascertaining who is a tourist or who is not. If you take my good Friend, my fellow Arimian from St. Joseph, I am sure if he wants to go into a casino, he can pass very well as an astute Englishman.

Mr. Assam: I carry a Trinidad and Tobago passport, ID-card, and driver's licence. That is what will distinguish the foreigner from the local.

Dr. R. Griffith: You can still pass an astute Englishman, and as a Trinidadian, you will be allowed to gamble in what they refer to as the one-arm bandit.

In the case of Antigua, we have seen that citizens are very much actively involved in casino gambling, so it is a misnomer to say that local citizens do not get involved in gambling. I ask the Minister of Finance to check out Antigua and

he will find out what the situation is there in terms of locals being involved in casino gambling.

Further, the argument that casino-type gambling currently obtains in regional countries—and the budget speech document outlines some of the countries: Antigua, Bahamas, Aruba, Venezuela, and so forth—does not justify that Trinidad and Tobago should follow suit. If casino gambling is bad for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, it is also bad for the tourists and, Mr. Speaker, a wrong is a wrong. A wrong cannot be a right. Trinidad and Tobago is a sovereign state. We must plot our own course. We are an outstanding nation and viewed as a leader in the region and, indeed, the wider international community.

2.50 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, in this country we produced the best batsman in the world of cricket. Currently, we have the third fastest man in the world for the 100 and 200 metres. We invented the steelpan, the only musical instrument in this century and we have the best steelbands in the world. Our carnival is second to none. We have the world's best calypsonians. No other country in the world could play chutney music like us. No other country with a multiracial composition like ours could boast of the harmony in diversity that we live in and enjoy.

Mr. Speaker, this nation is blessed by God. He has been abundantly merciful to us. I trust and pray that he would grant us the wisdom to govern our blessed country.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Eric Williams (*Port of Spain South*): Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak on the Bill to provide for the services of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ending December 31, 1997.

Mr. Speaker, here we are again this time around. One would have thought that the last time we did this we would have provided some more meaning to the budget debate for this country. Here we are again at 2.55 in the morning attempting to fulfil the requirements of our oath of office in this Parliament.

Initially, I must say that I rise in support of my political leader's statement, yesterday morning, with regard to the foreign exchange rate which comes from any assessment of the production of oil in our country. If one looks at Appendix 5 of the *Review of the Economy 1996*, and one looks at the total crude production over the years 1991 through 1996—even though the 1996 figure is a nine-month figure—one sees when one goes back to the average daily production for each of

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. WILLIAMS]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

those years, that in 1991 the production was approximately 144,110 barrels per day. In 1992, the production averaged 137,534 barrels per day. In 1993, it dipped to 122,192 barrels. It rose again in 1994 to 128,767. In 1995, it averaged 131,781 and the projection for the year 1996 is approximately 129,315. I believe that the Minister of Finance used a figure of roughly 130,000 barrels per day.

Mr. Speaker, when one goes through various trade journals that speak of what practitioners in the energy field have to say, a reasonable estimate of production for 1997 comes out pretty close to what the Minister budgeted so there is some credence in his number. My own estimate comes out to a little over 130,000 so in broad numbers we are saying the same thing. We are talking oranges and oranges.

When one breaks down the production by region one comes to ballpark figures, land production averaging about 30,135 per day; West Coast or Trinmar production around 35,000. The practitioners in the industry tell me that they plan to be bullish this year. They are trying to build up their production. Then, the East Coast production gets factored at roughly 65,000 or so this year coming, 1997.

Mr. Speaker, given an oil price, a budgeted oil price—and I would use the Minister of Finance's numbers—of US \$20 per barrel, one can work out a rough figure that seems to be quite reasonable given the present production scenario in this country. When one does the maths in US dollars and divides the revenue figure—and I believe the Minister has budgeted a royalty for oil of TT \$520,500,000.

What is significant about the royalty number is that for every barrel of oil that comes out of the ground royalty is paid on it. So that there are no deductions or allowances; there is a flat rate of royalty. If one does a rough calculation based on that one comes to an exchange rate for 1997 that obtains today, of roughly \$6.24 to \$6.25.

Mr. Speaker, the first point is this: We are dealing with a floating currency. We are dealing with a situation in which there has been a fair amount of discussions on our economy and society about the exchange rate. We have seen our exchange rate depreciated alarmingly recently. We have seen companies with foreign exchange accounts being asked to repatriate US dollars in an attempt to shore up the exchange rate. Now we get a signal from the Minister of Finance in his budget that the *status quo* as of today will remain. So that the signal being sent is that we are comfortable with the depreciation in the currency to its present level.

There has also been a fair amount of talk to try to reassure us that this is normal but the efforts of the past few months to cause the currency to appreciate seem not to have borne any fruits and so we seem to have given up, and this is where we are today.

Mr. Speaker, because this particular type of calculation brought us to the current exchange rate, it gives one confidence that the maths is right. When one does the calculation of what was projected for 1996, again, I must agree with my political leader that no matter how one does it, the number comes out above \$7.00 and the number quoted is about \$7.25.

3.00 a.m.

The reason we can say this, Mr. Speaker, is that there are quite a number of knowledgeable individuals in this country who can do this Math. It is not limited to Members on this side. Every chief executive officer involved in a company in the energy industry, knows how to do this calculation. Every member of every unofficial petroleum club in this country knows how to do this calculation. Almost every budget analyst of energy companies knows how to do this rough calculation. I beg your pardon for the drama, it is quite an advanced sum. Regardless of how you do the calculation it comes out to around 7.25, or thereabouts. The signal that was sent to companies operating in our environment, was that the Government was predicting a rate of above \$7. That was not said. It is a signal that people picked up from the budget numbers, so that even though it was not said, prudent financial activities, suggest that one should keep one's US dollars in US accounts to pay one's bills which will come due in US dollars. To hedge or to speculate against any on-toward fluctuation in the exchange rate, two things have happened, it seems to me, and again I will always confess that I am no economist, I am merely somebody involved, apart from in the Parliament, in another place, and I have an interest in the energy business.

The point is that as of today, we plan to maintain the current exchange rate. For this past year we have either inflated the numbers to make the budget balance or we anticipated a major fluctuation in the exchange rate. Either way, there were some alarm bells that may have gone off. I can only speculate, but if I were involved in the energy business as I pointed out, and I had bills to pay in US dollars, I would keep my money where I thought it would be safe, so that I could ensure a reasonable return to my shareholders. The other issue is this: if that assumption is true, then that in itself may have led to a shortage of US currency in the economy, which may have put pressure on other people who are trying to

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. WILLIAMS]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

purchase US currency. Over time there might be a clamour by people who may not be aware of this math although it is fairly widely known. Naturally there would be a clamour for US dollars, which in itself as the volume rise, may cause others to seek to take care of their own business, which happens to be in US dollars. The long and the short is that one has the making of a run on the available US currency. If this were a dream, and at this hour I ought to be in my bed dreaming, I would say it was a nightmare. Events of the past few months where there were long lines at the banks, where we saw—I really did not mind lining up at the licensing office, I could have done without the price increase in gas.

Mr. Assam: There is no price increase as yet. It is on January 1.

Mr. E. Williams: As night follows day, January 1, follows December 31.

The events of the past few months suggest that I am not dreaming. This really happened in this country. We would like to make sure it is on the record, that when we made certain statements about the budget last year it was because this information came to our attention both by our own calculations and by myriad numbers of other people doing the same thing, and seeing the same red flag waving. It was not just plucked out of the air, many people saw it, and apparently quite a number of them reacted.

Having made those points I want to move on. One of the things that strikes me—and it is just a comment on the budget figures—when I look at the *Draft Estimates of Revenue*, on page 6, I see a reduction over the revised 1996 figures for total estimates of tax income for 1997. The 1997 Budget estimates of tax and royalty income figures for 1997, are lower than those for 1995. This is in a scenario where the oil price is stronger, and the exchange rate is higher. One has to wonder why that would be. We are aware that AMOCO, is likely to be subject to some to advance accelerated depreciation on its investment in the LNG sector. One wonders, given this scenario, if this really ought to be. So I will merely ask the Minister: Is the reduction reflective of higher investment costs by AMOCO in the coming year? If so, what is the quantum? Or is it reflective of a new tax regime which the Minister proposes to come with, or maybe it is under discussion? It seems anomalous that the income projected for 1997 is so significantly different from 1995.

3.10 a.m.

Again, I must point out, given that scenario of a stronger oil price and a higher exchange rate, it sends another signal to those who are looking at this sort of

situation. We do not want to see the same scenarios that we have just had occurring once again. It may be prudent to explain this. Probably, there is a good reason for it. We are simply asking the Minister to give us that explanation so that we can remove that element of doubt from the system. I do not think I am out of line in asking that because, if somebody like myself can see this, many other people could.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I turn my attention to the business of the gasoline trade in this country. In the terms and conditions with respect to the proposed divestment of NP gas stations, one needs to be as apparent as is possible, since the Petroleum Act allows the Minister the discretion to grant licences. Why do I say that? In fact, the Petroleum Act states that. Already, the OilFields Workers' Trade Union is asking quite a number of questions and it seems to be threatening to rumble ahead of its three-year cycle. That, I think, bears some noticing. The Act allows for the operation of a gas station if one has a licence.

The UNC has always said that it wanted to divest NP of the monopoly of retailing gasoline. That is their philosophical and policy position. Not that I necessarily agree or disagree with it. You are the Government, you got the votes, and this is what, it seems, you are trying to do. We are trying to point out some of the potential pitfalls going that route. I do not think it is necessarily what we might have done. We might have, but I do not want to get into the "woulda," "coulda," argument into which the Government side loves to go.

My understanding is that the divestment ought to take two levels where we sell the existing stations to locals, they divest further and where these locals can then negotiate with foreign multinationals either to become franchises and/or build new stations. I do not think that building new stations really is an option.

When I look at some of the statements made by some of the potential multinationals, there is a statement in the *Daily Express* of November 30, 1996 in an article entitled "Shell, Texaco eye T&T market" by Curtis Williams. I believe it is the managing director of Shell Trinidad. It says basically that there are too many gas stations in Trinidad. The article stated that compared to international standards the number of vehicles per service station was small and that Trinidad and Tobago was an over-pumped market. In his estimation, there are too many gas stations.

I do not think that building new gas stations is an option that the multinationals who are likely to be attracted, would want to consider given this statement. It

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. WILLIAMS]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

would mean that of the existing stations, one would have to keep the *status quo* or one would have to close some. I think the union is suggesting that is what in fact would happen. But let us just say that it is to maintain the *status quo*. The Act allows the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries the discretion to grant a licence. Let me ask this question, since one cannot operate a station without a licence and since one does not know if one will obtain the Minister's discretion to obtain a licence: What will be the level or potential application for a local station? Put another way: Why would someone bid to purchase a gas station if that person was not certain that he or she would find favour with the Minister's discretion in the granting of a licence? One may be the highest or lowest bidder, whichever but if one does not know all of the terms and conditions and one thought one would have won the bid—if it were a high bid or a low bid—but at the same time one does not get the Minister's favour, then what is the point? It is a circular argument.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, through you, transparency is required in this particular transaction. The terms and conditions must be made public very early in the game. I have no doubt that this Government is likely to do that but I wish to be placed on record at this stage as calling for that. We want to ensure that individuals in the society who wish to invest in these stations, whether they are the current operators or not, that they know that in fact there is a level playing field.

There is a perception that seems to be seeping into the population with regard to the awarding of certain contracts. I am beginning to learn more and more that in the business of politics sometimes perception is the reality. To avoid the continuation of that nagging perception that seems to be seeping its way into anything that has to do with a major contract, we are calling for transparency in this issue. We are all honourable gentlemen and ladies here. I like to think the best of people. I am saying that I would not like to see this particular perception getting into this matter because it is much too important.

The next question I ask—and it is a real one—is: What provisions will be put in place to ensure that operators of the gas stations will operate within the confines of the law? The current margin on operation is six per cent per day. The operators of the gas stations are saying they need to increase their margin. The margin of profit is six per cent, but it is six per cent per day and in cash, which means to say that any operator of a gas station goes to the bank on a daily basis with a significant amount of cash.

3.20 a.m.

I think one of the planks of the Government of the day is the business of ruling out things like money laundering and with some of the recent treaties that have been signed, there have been a number of investigations into white-collar crime and the nefarious activities of some of the drug lords who have not yet been arrested, and who find ways and means of laundering the money from ill-gotten gains, whatever those ill-gotten gains are. What I am pointing out, is that in this particular operation, if some unscrupulous person were to be able to own a gas station or influence a gas station owner, some sort of relationship like that could easily lend itself to money laundering. It is a 6 per cent margin per day in cash and if as an individual, I went to the bank on a daily basis with large amounts of cash to deposit, the bank would seek to know everything about me every day that I went. And that is properly so, that was put in place to prevent that sort of activity from taking place.

Therefore, I just want to ask the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism,, the Attorney General and all those who are in charge of stopping that type of activity, if the Government is considering divesting the gas stations because, today, station owners are going to the banks every day with large amounts of cash. All I am pointing out is that we need to keep our eyes on this and if there are provisions in place, all the Attorney General has to do in this honourable House, is to wink and to let us know, because he may not want to reveal his strategy. In the event that no such provision is in place as yet, we simply want to raise a red flag.

Mr. Assam: The point is so fuzzy. It is not clear.

Mr. E. Williams: For those who are befuddled at this hour in the morning, one must allow for these things. The point is that gas station operations could easily lend themselves, as several other activities, to money laundering and we must guard against that in this society.

With all the objections from the other side, there is clearly the recognition that there is the potential in the gas station trade—and today I am dealing with the gas station trade; I am not dealing with insurance or any other form of retail market.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is another question I need to ask. There is the statement that the increase of 10 cents per litre or 45 cents a gallon on the gasoline is simply a replacement for the licence fees. That is the statement. But again, there is another perception that may need to be disabused. I am saying that it is a perception and that it ought to be disabused. The perception by those who watch these kinds of

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. WILLIAMS]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

things is that people speculate in this society—there is currently a gasoline subsidy and there is currently an argument going on to remove some of that subsidy and also to increase the profit margin.

There is also the perception that the increase in the gasoline price may have another agenda. I am just stating the views which persons who look at this are expressing and the Minister may need to be a little clearer in his statement. Maybe he thought he was very clear, but he may need to be a little clearer and disabuse that particular perception that this measure attempts to further reduce the gasoline subsidy. It is just a point from me to you. *[Interruption]* Again, that is the point, it looks that way. Maybe, the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism may want to disabuse those who may be of that notion.

The fourth point on the business of gasoline is that currently the retail price of gasoline and as we discussed before, the profit margin to dealers is set by the Government in TT dollars, however, the gasoline wholesale price is quoted in US dollars. With regard to the fact that the TT dollar is currently floating against the US dollar, what incentives are being put in place to cause the multi-nationals to come into the market? Again I refer to the article in the *Daily Express* of November 30, 1996. The Managing Director of Shell Trinidad is on record there saying that the fiscal incentive must be there for them to get into the market. The Managing Director of Texaco is saying that they held meetings with the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, Finbar Gangar, and told him that they were willing to get into the market but they also want fiscal changes. So again, already the unions are alarmed by these statements. They have gone to print with it and what they are speculating on in the unions, is that this may herald a further increase in the price of gasoline, diesel and other fuels, which in turn may have a negative effect on the cost of living to the average consumer. That is, his cost of living may go up because his fuel cost may go up, and therefore transportation cost may go up. Therefore, I think that one needs to be very clear on this because the signal is already being sent. The unions have picked it up, individuals who look at petroleum and everything that has to do with petroleum have picked it up.

It is a subject of discussion and business decisions which may affect our currency. Our exchange rate may be influenced by these signals that are being sent. It is out there, so I think it needs to be dealt with quickly and prudently. The Minister is charged with doing so and I simply want to raise these issues. Maybe they are trite, but I suspect they are not, and maybe they should be dealt with soon. Those are my points with regard to gasoline business.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. WILLIAMS]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

Mr Deputy Speaker, much has been said in the very recent past about the La Brea/Brighton Industrial Estate site and I am sorry that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is not with us. Maybe he may come tomorrow, or today rather.

3.30 a.m.

In the last budget debate the Minister said that he was going to set up a committee to investigate all factors leading up to the decision to proceed with the La Brea/Brighton Industrial Estate, and to make recommendations but not limited to any further development. He said that committee should have presented its report within 30 days of its being set up. Many 30-day periods have passed since then and we have not seen that report. However, we expect to see it to make our comments.

Notwithstanding the fact that we do not have the report, several points have to be made. There has been a lot of discussion on this. The Minister is quite right. It may come up in the budget debate. The first point is that the soil creep and old well location problems were known before going into the project. It is not as people assumed, that this project was going ahead on blind good luck and faith. These problems were known. In fact, the consultants were asked specifically to quantify the problem. All the consultants indicated that an engineering solution was possible.

Some of the contractors involved have successfully built energy plants and other sensitive installations in and around the significantly earthquake prone San Andreas Fault in California in the United States. The potential instability at Brighton is nowhere near the risk involved with building activities along the San Andreas Fault. The engineering experts have the capability to solve the problem. However, it was going to cost to do it. The estimated cost of the foundation and site preparation works was estimated to be in the order of US \$56 million. If one is accustomed dealing with small sums of money in small enterprises, that would sound like plenty. In the energy business, those sums are not much. It is relative. In fact, the cost of the entire project has been quoted at US \$1.1 billion—that makes US \$56 million, 0.051 per cent of the total project cost. If I were building a house the foundation cost would be a significant amount in terms of the overall cost of the project. In an energy project of this nature, the foundation cost is rather insignificant in terms of the overall investment.

One must look at it in its overall context. Certain facts which justified the decision to go in this area go with that. At one time, the La Brea/Brighton site was

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. WILLIAMS]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

the location of Texaco's main export fuel oil storage dump. When Texaco was operating in Trinidad and Tobago in the refining and export market, it exported significant quantities of fuel. It supplied almost all of South America from Trinidad and Tobago. The location of its major storage facility for all its fuel was in tanks at the La Brea/Brighton site. None ruptured or had major foundation problems until they were torn down for this particular activity, because the business was engineered for the site.

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

There was a small oil refinery on the site doing all things which refineries do. I do not think we have heard of any refinery blowing up or falling apart because it was engineered for the particular site. Lake Asphalt's plant and machinery are still standing on the same site 50 years after it had been constructed. Only recently, maintenance work was done to old installations, as one would expect. I noticed that the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries had no problem with commissioning a new plant at Lake Asphalt. Again, it is light industry. Vibrations are taking place on the foundation which could cause any number of things to happen.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. E. Williams: Thank you hon. Members of this honourable House for extending my speaking time.

Initially, Point Fortin was considered. However, at that time the Government was looking at several options with regard to the oil refinery which was built in 1904, and which has been expanded over the years. I want to make an ancillary point with regard to the Point Fortin site where there has been a lot of talk about the project being rescued and sent to Point Fortin. That site sits along a fault known as the Los Bajos Fault. If there is one major geologic fault that is known in Trinidad and Tobago, and appears on any geologic map in Trinidad and Tobago, it runs through Point Fortin. It is such a significant fault that oil fields are dislocated at least seven miles on either side of it. It is not currently active. At present, very little or no seismicity is associated with it, but in the past it must have moved at least seven miles laterally.

All this is to say that the price of natural gas and other concessions which were offered to Atlantic LNG and Farmland/MisChem and, which obviously, would have an impact on the income royalty and corporation taxes on the budget, would have made the project viable at Brighton/La Brea. In return for these concessions the previous administration foresaw the development of another industrial estate in the country on the west coast next to an existing disused port.

3.40 a.m.

There are two other issues with regard to the La Brea site and they are ancillary points. If it is compared to Point Lisas which was originally a swamp—and there was much discussion that it could never be developed into an industrial estate but we see it today. It took about 25 years to develop the industrial estate at Point Lisas from a swamp to what it is today, and investors have no problem of locating a new plant any time there, save and except the fact that it is now full. There is no more space, and this sets up the point that there is need to have another industrial estate on the west coast, and Brighton/La Brea was perceived as such a candidate.

Hon. Member: Wrong choice.

Mr. E. Williams: It is not the wrong choice, Mr. Speaker, because the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, by his own admission, is saying that he has received unsolicited bids from industries that wish to locate there. Having already discussed that, one could engineer to put up virtually anything on that site, there is a cost, but it could be done. I am not surprised that anybody would want to move there but because of all the ballyhoo, that site has been devalued so that anybody who wants to move there can do so virtually on his own terms and not on ours as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, the natural gas price which was offered at concessionary rates to Atlantic LNG and to Farmland/MisChem, which has since relocated, was to cause them to bring their industries to that site which would in turn have the multiplier effect from their activities of the taxation and the export of LNG and ammonia, which would in turn cause significant amounts of revenue to accrue to this country and which, eventually, have been reflected in our budget. What has happened is that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the hon. Prime Minister have said that it saved the country \$200 million by renegotiating the gas price down with Amoco.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. WILLIAMS]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

What has also happened and what has not been mentioned, is that this would have been a savings if the selling price was maintained, but to date, every customer of the NGC has successfully negotiated his sale price from Amoco down so that it has virtually cancelled itself out. In addition, the point needs to be made that—and the budget document is replete with mention of the natural gas and its value to this nation—if one is trading in oranges and has a million oranges selling 500 a day at \$1.00 then one's net worth is \$1 million. If the selling price of the orange is cut to 50 cents, then one's net worth would have been devalued from \$1 million to \$.5 million. Mr. Speaker, by successfully negotiating the lower sale price of natural gas, we have reduced our net worth of what we are claiming and all that is in our budget document is our national patrimony. That is an unfortunate side effect of that successful negotiation.

I now turn my attention in the last few moments to two other issues, one is the business of the public utilities for which I am responsible. At first, I thought that not much could be said about the Government's programme in the public utilities, especially since the hon. Minister appears to be continuing with the previous administration's programmes. I have noted with interest that he has been praising the T&TEC/PowerGen activities, he has also been moving ahead assiduously with WASA and he is talking about looking at options for the post office, the Government Printery, and the same options for PTSC. I was not going to say much about that except that the Minister engaged in a long discourse on sewage and after he did so, I thought I would look a little more closely at some of the numbers, because not only did he speak about sewage, he spoke about telecommunications and did not give us any update on the whole divestment of the Severn Trent agreement with WASA—notwithstanding that they have appeared to make a bad choice of vice-chairman to the board of WASA.

I then looked at the income from WASA and it turns out that for the coming year, and I am looking at page 386 of the *Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and the Tobago House of Assembly for 1997*—there is an increase in the Government loan to WASA of almost \$40 million and the Minister did not tell us anything about that when he spoke. When one looks at the actual income on a line item by item basis, there is a decrease in income over the budgeted figure of \$20,922,000 and he did not mention anything about that. In fact, there was a budgeted surplus of \$30 million but there was a shortfall instead of \$20.9 million about which we did not hear.

When one looks at metered supplies, the estimate for 1996 over 1995 budgeted a \$2.1 million increase; instead there was a \$2.3 million shortfall. When one looks at unmetered supplies, the estimate of 1996 over 1995 projected a \$16.6 million increase but in fact, there was an actual shortfall of \$24.9 million. When one looks at bulk sales to FedChem, there was a projected budget surplus of \$7.4 million but there was a shortfall of \$6.57 million.

3.50 a.m.

It becomes clear, when one looks at reconnection charges, because WASA used to disconnect people's supply of water and it was said that this was inhumane. There was projected to be an increase of \$61,000 in reconnection charges, but there was actually a shortfall of \$1.15 million in the Government's own budget numbers. That means that reconnection charges fell, which suggests that disconnections also fell.

By the way, Mr. Speaker, this Government and the hon. Prime Minister, quite rightly so, talk about discipline and reminds the populace on every occasion that discipline is one of our national watchwords, and has stopped the disconnection of people who have refused to pay their bills for years, particularly industrial customers.

When one looks at this, there has been a significant fall-off in revenues from WASA, so much so that it comes in excess of \$20 million. It could have been worse. Here is why it was not worse. The estimated gain from royalties was \$1.5 million, but there was an actual gain of \$4.5 million, in other words \$3 million extra was collected in royalties. From where do these royalties come? To my thinking, these royalties come from the water wells. We heard in this nation, a tremendous hue and cry about the inappropriateness of the particular programme to refurbish water wells set up by the previous administration. This seems to have helped to reduce the loss that would otherwise have occurred.

What the Minister has not told this House is that during the last dry season, it was the production of water from those very same wells that caused water to be won and distributed to homes in places such as Mayaro, Penal and Diego Martin. All of the water well fields which were refurbished, after all the "ole" talk and the politicking, have paid for themselves. It has saved the Minister the further ignominy of having a larger decrease in budgeted revenues from WASA, based on his own political agenda.

There is another item call "Miscellaneous" which did not exist in 1995. The Minister did not tell us what "Miscellaneous" was. This miscellaneous item also

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. WILLIAMS]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

caused him to earn another \$10.3 million. When the Minister of Public Utilities stood before this House he did not mention any of this. He spoke about sewage; he spoke about telecommunications; he said nobody was asking him any questions; he spoke about all these things but he never explained his management of WASA over the past year. His numbers show that revenues from WASA fell and, in fact, if there was not an increase in his loan to WASA—and I also notice an increase for the next year as well—it could have been worse.

Let me just point this out in numbers. The average income from WASA per month, in 1995, was \$19.97 million. In 1996, the average income on a monthly basis was \$18.2 million. In fact, revenue fell on an average at \$1 million per month.

In closing, I want to address some issues which affect my constituency. Mr. Speaker, could you advise me how much time I have left.

Mr. Speaker: Ten minutes.

Mr. E. Williams: Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

The first issue is that of housing. I welcome the hon. Minister's recent statement which seems to suggest that the residents of John John may have an opportunity to apply for an apartment at the Cook Street project, otherwise known as the John John Towers. To assist him in his selection process, my colleague from Laventille West, Mrs. James, and I, have submitted to the NHA a list of 96 persons who are principally from John John and the environs who have indicated a desire to purchase an apartment there. The mean income of those persons who have expressed that interest to us and who earn in excess of \$1,500 per month—there are approximately 40 persons; we do not know what the terms and conditions are likely to be so we can only speculate at this time—is \$2,511 per month. In fact, there are in excess of 25 persons who earn close to that \$3,000 level and above.

I would like the hon. Minister to indicate, when he speaks, where in the budget documents are the \$3 million matching fund which he says the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism will put into the budget to assist in the development of John John. He has been very vocal on that and I have been looking through the document. It is probably included in some other project. It is not a line item by itself. I would like the Minister to indicate where those funds are located. I believe that they are in there, but maybe because of my lack of experience I was unable to find it.

I have noted with interest, on page 70, the allocation of \$1 million in the development programme, item 063, to refurbish electrical installations in NHA

apartments in East Port of Spain. I would like to point out that of equally critical importance is the repair of leaks in the roofs of many of these buildings especially at Mango Rose, Plaisance Terrace and Old St. Joseph Road. As the councillor for the area, I have written to the Minister of Housing and Settlements. All it needs, maybe, is some asphalt cement on the roof to plug the leaks. The plumbing needs to be refurbished. The upper floors of many of these buildings are without running water and the sewerage systems are clogged; the repair and replacement of fittings such as windows and doors. The buildings are old and some of these fittings have been damaged. I believe the Minister has a plan to sell the buildings, but maybe they need to be refurbished as well. The elevators in each of the nine-story buildings need to be repaired.

I want to go on to the business of national security. I noted that there is an \$8 million allocation in the development programme for the reconstruction of the police facility at the *Mirror* Building. That has always been planned and in fact the Narcotics Bureau is now located in the building which was earmarked for the Woodbrook Police Station. It was a temporary measure. I note, on behalf of my constituents in Woodbrook, that this will finally happen—they will get back the Woodbrook Police Station.

4.00 a.m.

I simply want to put on the record that there are additional police posts that may be required, at least in Port of Spain East and one in the John John area, in particular, because bandits who are not from John John, drive into the area, conduct their criminal activities and then leave. Probably a police post in that area could help to assist with that problem.

There is also now, under the Minister of Works and Transport, a project which was indicated by the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism in his budget presentation, I believe it is in the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, on page 19, in which he spoke about dredging the out-fall of the St. Ann's River, otherwise known as the East Dry River, to alleviate flooding in down-town Port of Spain.

These two issues, Mr. Speaker—dredging of the river-mouth and desilting of the river-bed—are not newly conceived measures but some people got that impression. Even before my late father was a boy playing cricket in the East Dry River, this activity has been taking place. However, it is an activity that has to be repeated, because all rivers transport sediment and other debris from the hinter land to their discharge points and it is just that the cycle time has now come around.

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. WILLIAMS]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

Of more importance, Mr. Speaker, more of the affected areas in Port of Spain that are flooding are below sea level and have high underlying water table. Therefore, if there is a coincidence of high-tides with heavy rainfall the areas become flooded. Accordingly, the problem is to get the water from the roadways into the dry river, and I have not heard the Minister indicate that there is a concomitant drainage programme to go along with the normal desilting of the river mouth.

I join the chorus of voices who are congratulating the Government on finally seeing the light and continuing the National Library project, albeit with some problem cosmetic changes. It is time that we stop growing pumpkins there and start growing minds.

In the Minister's discourse on casinos, again, I add my voice to ask the Minister to rethink that option. Already there are four private members' clubs which engage in casino-type activities in the Woodbrook area. At the very least, Mr. Speaker, they should be kept away from residential districts, but my point of view is that we should not go that way at all.

I currently have a deed of covenant for the church that I attend, as do many Trinidadians, and that is in keeping with the scripture in Malachi, which asked, "Will a man rob God?" It encourages those who so believe to give 10 per cent of their gross earnings to the work of the Lord from their heart.

In the past, Mr. Speaker, governments, not only here in Trinidad and Tobago, have sought to encourage citizens as part of the moral fibre of a nation to support NGOs, such as charitable organizations like the St. Vincent de Paul Society in my constituency, churches and all these things. I add my voice to the chorus of voices that ask the Minister to re-consider his thinking on the business of the deed of covenants.

Mr. Speaker, I wish you and all Members of this House a very merry Christmas. *[Interruption]* As a Christian, I may not love what the man does but I must love the man, with the love of God. As I said, Mr. Speaker, I wish you and all Members of the House a merry Christmas, health and prosperity in the New Year.

Mr. Chandresh Sharma (*Fyzabad*): Mr. Speaker, I join this debate to lend support to the Bill before the House and to also extend congratulations to the hon. Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism.

I want to respond to some of the areas raised as it relates to the Ministry of Works and Transport. In doing so, perhaps we need to revisit the budget presentation

and to identify the objectives as identified by the Minister of Finance and Minister of Tourism. He indicated to us then, “to transform Trinidad and Tobago into a total quality nation to support the Government’s vision for Trinidad and Tobago as a people-oriented country to get a competitive edge in the marketplace and to get tough on crime”.

I want to identify the role of the Ministry of Works and Transport in this regard. In doing so, I need to, again, identify some highlights of the budget presentation in which the Minister said to the House, “renewing and expanding the basic infrastructure to facilitate the dynamic and energetic business climate”.

This part of the work would be done through the national highway programme, drainage programme, public building construction programme. Also promoting crime prevention through the machinery that would be made available to the police service, including construction and refurbishing of police stations and police outposts. Providing the projects for employment—here the URP is going to play a very significant role. Improving the delivery of public service—here the Transport Division is going to play a role.

Coming out of the capital programme the national highways programme will include the construction of the overhead bypass. The Member for San Fernando West, in his contribution, spoke about the traffic jams and the loss of manpower. There would be the construction of the National Airport Terminal at Piarco and similar work in Tobago as well. The National Drainage Programme—and most Members on the other side indicated the problems that relate to drainage. In fact, the last speaker, the Member for Port of Spain South, indicated the problems at the St. Ann’s River. A modern transport division as well and the construction of the National Library.

How do we intend to spend this sum of \$1.2 billion? I have heard Members opposite identifying a number of negatives. One has the right to object and to oppose but, more than that, one also has to enquire what is there in the budget for oneself and one’s constituents and for the country. If it is that the Ministry of Works and Transport would spend \$1.2 billion, then certainly one’s constituents have something to receive. Members are here, at this late hour, to represent constituencies from which they came and they must recognize what their community would receive and to make sure that there is some degree of participation.

The recurrent estimates are in excess of \$408 million. The capital budget is in excess of \$658 million; the Unemployment Relief Programme is \$130 million. In

Appropriation Bill (Budget)
[MR. SHARMA]

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

the coming year there is going to be a training programme for 24 weeks. There will be some training for a number of people between the ages of 17—24 years in the first instance and 25—45 years as well.

For the first time, one saw in 1996, the physically challenged citizens of Trinidad and Tobago seeking employment and, again, there has been some large accommodation for that. Of course, there is the Road Improvement Fund of \$50 million. Certainly, there is much happening for all Members.

4.10 a.m.

The expenditure at the National Airport project will be close to \$300 million and I think the Member for Laventille East/Morvant identified the transparency in the negotiations. On Monday 07, 1996 there would be a workshop at the Holiday Inn where persons, interested groups and business organizations can participate in this conference and have an opportunity to identify the work they want to participate in at the airport.

With respect to the work at the Highways Division which we intend to do, it includes the extension to the Solomon Hochoy Highway from Tarouba to Siparia Road. This is in excess of 3.5 kilometres, and the second part is the San Fernando Bye-Pass.

In 1996, we planned the work of both engineering designs and planning, making accommodation for 70 squatters. We have also moved on to the pre-qualification of contractors. This was completed and the recommendations have been sent to the Caribbean Development Bank which assisted in the financing of this project. The engineering designs for both contracts are nearing completion and shortlisted contractors have been invited to participate.

Also, on the road rehabilitation programmes of the Solomon Hochoy Highway between the 10 kilometres and the 25 kilometres mile-mark construction on both ends are scheduled to take place from February, 1997. Also, on the Tarouba Link Road, some Members have asked about the Road Rehabilitation Programme which is 92 kilometres: Western Main Road, North Coast Road, Eastern Main Road, Siparia Road, S.S. Erin Road, North Side Road, B.25 Couva Main Road, B.15 Cunapo/Southern Main Road and B.18 Western Main Road, the Guaracara/Tabaquite Road, B.161 Southern Main Road, B.164 Southern Main Road. Again, the spread is across Trinidad, and it is in Member's interest to enquire about the areas to be serviced.

A number of queries concerning road repairs have been raised and we have launched the Pothole Patching Programme which is \$12 million. Initially, a number

of roads have already been attended to. Again, one has to identify the areas where work must be done because it is participation for all and the engineers of the different divisions are waiting to hear from Members.

More importantly, coming out from the number of queries is the question of drainage. Mr. Speaker, I am sure you have seen for the first time in areas of Port of Spain and Chaguanas that there has been no flooding. This means that the system is working and next year some of the rivers/drains we may be able to identify are the Caparo River, Caroni River, Oropouche Lagoon, Maraval River, Friendship River—this is in Tobago; Moruga Drain, Lady Hochoy Drain, Carib Drain, Mt. Lambert Drain, Pleasantville Drain, Tunapuna Dry River, Belle Vue Ravine, Arima River, Mausica Jadoo River and the St. Ann's River. Mr. Speaker, there has been a national programme. We have spent the last 16—20 hours looking at the negatives, and I am presenting the positives in 10 to 15 minutes showing that numerous opportunities are available to serve your constituents.

I want to end my contribution and invite persons to communicate with me for any further information.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

ADJOURNMENT

The Attorney General (Hon. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to later today, Wednesday, December 18, 1996 at 10.30 a.m. May I indicate that we intend to take the Bill through all its stages later today.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I think it would be remiss of me if I do not place on the record the objection of the Opposition to the way the Government is conducting the business of this House. They are doing things in such a way that they are subverting the democracy of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, the time is 4.15 a.m. and we are being asked to resume here at 10.30 a.m. I am making just one request, and it may very well fall on deaf ears, that this House meet later today at 1.30 p.m., please. The debate has already gotten out of hand, and I really do not believe that what the hon. Leader of Government Business is now suggesting is a proper course of action. Some of us live far from here and we have to travel home and then to get back.

From the standpoint of the Opposition, we have had four days in which to prepare our responses and many of us have been going to bed quite early on mornings. This matter is entirely out of order!

Adjournment

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

Hon. R. L. Maharaj: Mr. Speaker, in response, may I say that there is precedent in this House, when the PNM was in Government, for the House to sit later than this period of time, and for us to get a shorter period of time—we all know that the national interest is most important. The national interest deserves that this debate be concluded tomorrow. With respect to the policy and the agenda of the Government, I would not entertain the personal attacks being made by the Member for Diego Martin Central. What I would say is, if they do not want to work they must tell the population; they must give up the moneys that they are getting because they are being paid to come here to work and they must do the work of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. *[Desk thumping]*

Question put.

The House divided:

AYES

Maharaj, Hon. R.L.

Persad-Bissessar, Hon. K.

Humphrey, Hon. J.

Sudama, Hon. T. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: No, that is not the way it is done. With the greatest deference to the Leader of the Opposition you know that is not the way. The whole point is that you know the Government is within its rights, seeking to adjourn the House to whenever it wishes. The Opposition cannot dictate the pace for the Government. You may not agree but they are in a position to do it however they like. Could the Clerk just start again, please.

The House divided: Ayes 17 Noes 14

AYES

Maharaj, Hon. R.L.

Persad-Bissessar, Hon. K.

Humphrey, Hon. J.

Sudama, Hon. T.

Maraj, Hon. R.

Nicholson, Hon. P.

Rafeeq, Dr. The Hon. H.

Adjournment

Wednesday, December 18, 1996

Assam, Hon. M.
Khan, Dr. The Hon. F.
Singh, Hon. G.
Nanan, Dr. The Hon. A.
Partap, Hon. H.
Mohammed, Dr. The Hon. R.
Singh, Hon. D.
Ramsaran, Hon. M.
Sharma, C.
Ali, R.

NOES

Valley, K.
Manning, P.
Draper, G.
Imbert, C.
Lasse, Dr. V.
Narine, J.
Hart, E.
James, Mrs. E.
Griffith, Dr. R.
Bereaux, H.
Joseph, M.
Boynes, R.
Hinds, F.
Williams, E.

Question agreed to.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 4.20 a.m