

*Leave of Absence**Friday, October 29, 2004***HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Friday, October 29, 2004*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

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

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, (Miss G. Lucky) who has asked to be excused from today's sitting. The leave has been granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the financial statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation for the year ended June 30, 2004. [*The Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.
2. A Draft Policy Paper on Local Government Reform 2004. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. The Eighth Report of the Elections and Boundaries Commission on the boundaries of the electoral districts in the electoral area of Tobago. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. The Elections and Boundaries Commission (Local Government) (Tobago House of Assembly) Order, 2004. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

**Residents of Frederick Settlement, Caroni
Issuing of New Leases**

1. **Mr. Manohar Ramsaran** (*Chaguanas*) asked the hon. Minister of Housing:
 - (a) Would the Minister state whether there is a delay in the issuing of new leases to the residents of Frederick Settlement, Caroni?
 - (b) If so, would the Minister state when would these leases be issued?

The Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, in reply to question No. 1(a), the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee (SILWC) is currently processing the necessary documents for the issuance of 199-year deeds of lease for residents of Frederick Settlement, Caroni.

In order to issue new deeds to the residents at the housing settlement, field surveys had to be undertaken and approvals from the Lands and Surveys Division granted.

To date, 80 per cent of the field surveys have been completed and all residents have been informed to submit relevant documents to the office of SILWC. So far, 50 per cent of the eligible lessees have submitted documents and, of this number, approximately 40 per cent of the cases have satisfied the legal requirements for the issuance of deeds of lease by the SILWC.

In addition, the cadastral plan for the housing settlement was submitted to the office of the Director of Surveys for approval. On receipt of the approved survey plan, the vesting deed for the transfer of the lands to the SILWC is to be executed by the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, to enable the SILWC to sub-lease lots to eligible lessees.

In answer to part (b), once the approved plan is received by the SILWC, consideration then has to be given to the time frame for the preparation of the vesting deed by the SILWC and also the vetting and execution of the deed by the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. This exercise is anticipated to take about one month.

Barring unforeseen circumstances, therefore, it is practical to expect that the issuing of deeds of lease to lessees by the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee should commence in December, 2004.

Mr. Ramsaran: I would like to remind the hon. Minister that this has been on-going for the last four years and whenever I ask questions, the answers are the same, I do hope—

Mr. Speaker: Please, that is not a supplemental question.

Mr. Ramsaran: Would the Minister keep to his word that the leases will be given in one month?

Hon. C. Imbert: I will certainly inform the line Minister and ask him to comply with your request.

Mr. Sharma: Mr. Speaker, I will like to know what infrastructure accompanies these plots.

Hon. C. Imbert: I will relay that question to the Minister of Housing, and ensure that you get an appropriate response.

Mr. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform that this is not the question I asked.

Mr. Speaker: You cannot do that, you either ask the question or you do not ask the question.

**Distribution of Caroni Lands
(Irrigation System)**

2. **Mr. Manohar Ramsaran** (*Chaguanas*) asked the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources:

With respect to the distribution of Caroni lands to rice farmers in Chaguanas, is the Minister able to confirm that the irrigation system would supply water to food crop farmers in the Bejucal, Munroe Road, Charlieville and Felicity areas?

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources (Hon. Jarrette Narine): Mr. Speaker, with respect to question No. 2, 2004/2005 session, irrigation water is provided to food crop farming areas in Bejucal, Warren Road, Charlieville, Munroe Road and Felicity by the Guayamare River and its tributaries.

However, in the dry season this river is reduced to a trickle and in order to facilitate the farmers of the area, water is transmitted from the Caroni River to the Guayamare River via the Kelly diversion weir and then to the Bejucal Canal.

During the severe dry season in 2003, the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA), released water from the Arena Dam into the Caroni River to service the Piarco Water Treatment Plant leaving some residual flow in the Caroni River downstream.

In an attempt to address potential water deficit, a series of meetings were convened with the stakeholders: WASA, the Ministry of Works and Transport, Drainage Division, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, Caroni (1975) Limited and the farmers of Bejucal and environs resulting in the food crop farmers being able to obtain a water supply for their crops.

Historically, in the dry season, there has been insufficient water to service the food crop farming area. At this time, it will be difficult for the ministry to confirm the availability of irrigation water supply, but it is actively pursuing ways and means of assisting food crop farmers with a supply of water for their farming endeavours.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Ramsaran: Through you, Mr. Speaker, with the new distribution of Caroni lands—which I understand is 2,000 acres—to these new rice farmers, how will this affect the water to the farmers?

Hon. J. Narine: As I said, the release of water from Caroni has to go through the Kelly Weir into the Guayamare River because in the dry season there is a trickle of water in the Caroni River Basin. You will realize that Caroni has now been dammed at Arena, so we are dependent on WASA, because their first priority is to supply water to homes, and if we are fortunate as we are this year, we may probably have some water and the excess flow will go into that area.

Our experience is that during the dry season there is a problem and we are working this out with WASA and the Ministry of Works and Transport, Drainage Division.

Mr. Singh: Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the Minister is aware that there was a plan for the Beetham Sewerage Treatment Plant, that the 22 million gallons of effluent water discharged be utilized for agricultural purposes. Is that one of the options being pursued to ensure that food crop farmers get a constant supply of water regardless of the season?

Hon. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, I am aware that the grey water from the sewer treatment plant was supposed to go into helping the farmers in agricultural production. I am not aware that the ministry, which is not my line ministry, is ready at this point. We have been providing irrigation systems as we did in the Longdenville area and we are doing a number of areas in agriculture to do ponding of water which will help in the dry season.

As a matter of fact, the 42 ponds at La Savane were because of that and we are going to put in 32 more ponds in that area. So that Mc Nair will now have 22 new ponds and we will have no need to send some of that water into that area.

I expect that the 2,000 acres of rice will take some water because we will like to have our rice production increased by 100 per cent in the coming year. It had increased by 102 per cent because 1,000 acres were given to crop and 1,000 acres to Nariva farms. We are hoping to reach 40 per cent of our need for local consumption of rice.

So we are taking care of the farmers and it depends on the dry season, but we are putting things in place now so water will be available to all farmers throughout the country.

Thank you.

Mr. Sharma: Mr. Speaker, could the Minister please submit to this House a list of the farmers who will benefit from the distribution of lands?

Mr. Speaker: That is a new question, and perhaps you can file it, but it does not arise out of the answer he has given.

Mr. Sharma: The Minister indicated that farmers in two areas are going to benefit, I am asking if he can provide a list of those farmers' names and the acreage they will be receiving.

Hon. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, the rice lands were the Caroni 2,000 acres about which I was speaking. If the Member for Fyzabad needs detailed information about the number of farmers and their names, he can put a question and he will get the answer.

Mr. Ramsaran: As you know, rice farming absorbs a lot of water; did the Minister do a survey to realize how much water would be needed in this area? Was a survey done to ensure that over 300 farmers are not without water in the dry season?

Hon. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, this is not a new project, this is one that was carried out by Caroni (1975) Limited and a survey is there. As to how many farmers; it is only a couple of years now that Caroni has not done any rice production. So now that we are starting it, it is the same survey they have had three or four years ago that we would use, and I am certain we will take care of the other farmers also, because it is not a new project, but one that had been done by Caroni (1975) Limited for a number of years.

Mr. Ramsaran: Would the Minister promise to give me a copy of the survey done?

Hon. J. Narine: Certainly, if I can get it from Caroni (1975) Limited.

La Paille Squatting Village (Issuing of Deeds)

3. Mr. Manohar Ramsaran (*Chaguanas*) asked the hon. Minister of Housing:

Would the Minister inform this House why is there a delay in issuing of deeds as promised to the squatters of the La Paille squatting village?

The Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education (Hon. Colm Imbert): The issue of deeds to the squatters of the La Paille squatting village is being dealt with through established process. The La Paille squatter site is on State lands and the preparation and issuance of deeds to squatters on State lands is done after the following are completed:

- (i) acquisition of all the statutory approvals for the site;
- (ii) completion of all relevant infrastructure works;

- (iii) receipt of Certificates of Completion from local government Authorities validating that the infrastructure works have been properly completed; and
- (iv) approval by the Director of Surveys of the final survey plan.

With respect to the La Paille squatter site, this process is in its final stages. Thereafter, the matter of the issuance of deeds will commence.

Mr. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, I would like to tell the hon. Minister that all these surveys had already been done three years ago.

Hon. C. Imbert: That is why it is in its final stages.

COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY

The Attorney General (Sen. The Hon. John Jeremie): Mr. Speaker, during the course of the budget debate the Member of Parliament for Caroni East raised a number of allegations against a sitting Cabinet Minister.

Mr. Speaker, two months after I was sworn in as Attorney General, I began an investigation into certain allegations made against the Prime Minister. I acted in the public interest. Sometime later, it came to my attention that the Integrity Commission was conducting an investigation into that very matter. It acted as it must, independently of me, because it is a superior court of record established under the Constitution. It acted in the public interest.

Mr. Speaker, I say that to make this point: No one is above the law. As Attorney General, I have been focused in reversing the stigma of corruption which continues to tarnish this country's reputation locally, regionally, and internationally. Whenever evidence arises, once it passes a minimum threshold, which is determined by law, an investigation is warranted. The principle of the rule of law must be applied with most vigour to persons in public life and to the so-called exemplars in the society.

The purpose of any investigation must be to get at the truth. Today, I am called to account for the actions which the Government has taken in relation to this matter.

I begin by making the point that the Prime Minister has been responsive and flexible in attempting to ensure that any investigation of this matter ultimately gets at the truth.

He has not responded dismissively by saying: "Take the evidence to the police." The decision to appoint a public Commission of Enquiry in matters

relating to a sitting Minister is without precedent in our recent history and speaks to this Government's commitment to transparency. Flexibility is not weakness when it is guided by principle, and Prime Minister's attempts to fashion an appropriate enquiry were guided by principle. It is now time to act. The time for talk and adjustment and discussion is at an end.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday I wrote to the Integrity Commission suggesting that a thorough investigation into this entire matter be conducted in the public interest. Hon. Members will know that the Integrity Commission is a superior court of record and it marches entirely to the beat of its own drum. It has a proud history of independence and Members on the Opposition Benches have also expressed at times—although for obvious reasons I hesitate to speak for them—confidence in its ability to adjudicate on this matter.

Mr. Speaker, on Monday I advised the Prime Minister and after discussions with my Cabinet colleagues in the absence of the Member who is sought to be impugned, it was agreed to set up a Commission of Enquiry with the following terms of reference:

- I To enquire into the allegation of the removal of materials, equipment and resources from the site of the Scarborough Hospital to the site of a private construction project called Landdate at Mason Hall with particular reference to the following issues:
 - (a) whether the materials, equipment and resources were in fact removed in the circumstances as alleged.
 - (b) if materials, equipment and resources were in fact removed as alleged, whether there was any impropriety on the part of any Minister;
- II. To enquire into the circumstances surrounding the procurement processes and the awards of all contracts made to NH International and Warner Construction Ltd. from 2002 to the present, with particular reference:
 - (a) to whether the awards of those contracts were made in accordance with the law and the established practices and procedures governing the award of public contracts;
 - (b) to whether there was any impropriety on the part of any person or authority in relation to the procurement processes or the award of any contract to NH International or Warner Construction Ltd;
- III To make such observations and recommendations arising out of its deliberations as the commission may deem appropriate.

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Mr. Speaker, this matter shall be thoroughly investigated by impartial persons. It makes no difference to a Government which is committed to transparency that this is so and that there shall, in this case, be multiple investigations.

The Chairman of the Commission is to be former High Court Judge, Annestine Sealey, who of course would have been chosen to be a judge by the Judicial and Legal Service Commission. She left the Judiciary to become the principal of the Sir Hugh Wooding Law School, again she would have been vetted by the Council of Legal Education, a body established by Treaty to which Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory. She speaks for herself.

Mr. Chandrabhan Sharma is to be a member of the Commission. He is the President of the Association of Professional Engineers of Trinidad and Tobago and a senior lecturer at the University of the West Indies and has sat as a member of a two-man Commission of Enquiry into the public service in Jamaica.

Mr. Eustace Hobson is the third and final member of the Commission. He is an architect with a number of years of experience and he lives in St. Kitts.

The Commissioners shall be sworn in on Monday and are being requested to report in six weeks. I shall reiterate that no one in this House is beyond the reach and processes of the law. This Government is committed to returning Trinidad and Tobago to a better place and making Trinidad and Tobago a beacon of integrity. To do this we have to battle corruption because we must arrest this and we must declare to all who might live or come here to invest that they have come to a land in which the law is upheld at all times and is scrupulously maintained.

Thank you.

OFFENCES AGAINST THE PERSON (AMDT.) (HIV) BILL

Bill to amend the Offences Against the Person Act, Chap. 11:08 [*The Attorney General*]; read the first time.

PROVISIONAL COLLECTION OF TAXES ORDER

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Conrad Enill):
Mr. Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas it is provided by section 3(1) of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act, Chap. 74:01 (hereinafter called "the Act") that where proposals for general or supplementary appropriation of public funds are made to the House of Representatives and are embodied in an appropriation or a supplementary appropriation bill, the President may, for the purpose of raising revenue to meet

the expenditure specified in any such bill, by Order, provide for the imposition of a tax or the variation of an existing tax and from the date of the publication of the Order in the *Gazette*, the tax as imposed or varied shall be payable:

And whereas it is provided by section 3(5) of the Act that an Order varying an existing tax shall cease to have effect if the Order is not confirmed with or without modifications, by a resolution agreed to by the House within the next twenty-one days after the commencement of the Order:

And whereas the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2004, made under section 3 of the Act, provided for the variation of taxes in the written laws mentioned in the said Order to the extent and in the manner set out therein, for the purpose of raising revenue to meet the expenditure specified in the Bill entitled “An Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2005”:

And whereas the said Order commenced on the 8th day of October, 2004:

And whereas it is expedient to confirm the said Order;

Be it resolved:

That the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2004 be confirmed.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to move the Motion for the confirmation of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2005 that was published on October 08, 2004 pursuant to the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act, Chap. 74:01.

The Provisional Collection of Taxes Act allows the President to issue an Order for the imposition of any tax, or the variation of any tax in order to raise revenue to meet expenditure contained in an appropriation bill. The Provisional Collection of Taxes Act provides that from the date of publication of the Order, or such later date as may be specified, tax as imposed, or varied by the Order shall be payable.

An Order varying an existing tax ceases to have effect unless it is confirmed by Resolution agreed to by this House within 21 days after the commencement of the Order.

The Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2004 was published on October 08, 2004 and should therefore be confirmed by October 29, 2004, that is by today. The Motion now being considered is for the confirmation of that Order.

Mr. Speaker, the measures contained in the Order were outlined by the hon. Prime Minister and Minister of Finance on Friday, October 08, 2004 when he

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presented the budget for the financial year 2005. The matters dealt with by this Order pertained to:

The variation and extension of the import surcharge payable on the importation of certain products into Trinidad and Tobago and the increase in the baggage allowance permitted to passengers entering Trinidad and Tobago.

2.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, it is proposed to modify paragraph two of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order which seeks to amend the Seventh Schedule to the Miscellaneous Taxes Act. Paragraph II repeals that schedule and substitutes a new Seventh Schedule. The new Seventh Schedule sets out to achieve two objectives: one, to reduce the import surcharge payable on chicken and turkey parts, from 86 per cent to 40 per cent with effect from November 01, 2004; and, two, to maintain the rates of surcharge that existed on these products other than chicken and turkey parts prior to October 08, 2004 when the Provisional Collection of Taxes, 2004 Order took effect. The circulated list of amendments is intended to achieve that objective.

Trinidad and Tobago is a relatively open economy. Together, exports and imports represent 51 per cent of gross domestic product in 2004. Government has had a long history of support for the local poultry industry. In 1995, Government initiated reforms in the agricultural sector to rationalize incentives and to encourage the use of domestic resources consistent with international comparative advantage.

Government has been particularly responsible in its approach to liberalization within the agricultural sector, providing fiscal support where needed and implementing legislation initiatives, such as the Anti-Dumping and Countervailing Duties Act, 1992, to address possible dislocations. We have exercised particular caution in the case of sugar and poultry parts. In 1995, in pursuing our commitment under the 1993 General Agreement on Tariff and Trade Agreements (GATT), all agricultural products were eliminated from the Negative List with the exception of sugar and poultry parts. Products such as meat, chicken, turkey, fruit and vegetables, were removed from the Negative List, and although persons are no longer required to obtain a licence to import these products into Trinidad and Tobago, a system of tariffication was introduced to protect our local farmers.

Poultry, in particular, chicken, are common ingredients in our cuisine. The relatively high prices for beef and other meat products further contribute to the

popularity and preference for chicken, especially among the poorer members of our society. When the domestic poultry industry was threatened by cheap imports because of consumer preferences, in the North American market, Government, in 1997, amended the Seventh Schedule of the Miscellaneous Taxes Act, Chap. 77:01 to introduce an import surcharge regime on chicken parts at a rate of 103 per cent to protect local farmers for a specified period of time, until the year 2004, as they adjusted to the liberalization of the market. This protectionist regime has allowed the domestic poultry industry to thrive over the past decade. However, there has been growing concern over increases in food prices in recent years. Food prices have escalated by 10.5 per cent over the 12-month period ending August 2004, and 14 per cent over the 2002/2003 period.

Several factors affect food prices. These include: increased transportation cost, both locally and internationally; exchange rate movements; increased worldwide cost of raw materials; the reduction in agricultural subsidies, in particular dairy products; increased energy costs; increased bunkering and associated custom charges, and rising prices of major commodity products, such as corn, soya beans and wheat.

In addition to these factors, the industry structure is also a major determinant of prices, in terms of the poultry industry. This is one of the main issues that impact the Trinidad and Tobago market. The retail price survey compiled by the Consumer Affairs Division of the Ministry of Legal Affairs, reveal the following: Recent movements in the price of live whole chickens went from \$2.48 per pound in January 2003 to \$3.94 per pound in December of that year. In January 2004, the price of live chicken jumped to \$4.28 per pound, dipping in February this year, to \$3.89 per pound and further declining until April, to \$3.50 per pound.

The retail price for live chicken took an upward swing in May this year, with live chicken fetching \$3.99 per pound, increasing between June and August by 14 cents, and dipping again to \$3.99 per pound this month. Processed chilled chicken parts are obtained only from local producers and the retail prices of these parts vary according to the parts of the chicken. Frozen chicken parts are, however, obtained from both local and foreign sources. Chilled thighs and wings fetch lower prices than breasts, legs and drumsticks in Trinidad and Tobago.

Unlike the United States of America, the retail price for chilled drumsticks in this country is even more expensive than chilled breasts. The retail price for chilled breasts in June this year was \$9.01 per pound, as compared with the retail price for drumsticks in July, of \$11.99 per pound. The retail price of chilled wings moved from \$6.06 per pound in January 2003, to \$10.49 in July, 2004. This is to

be compared with the retail price of chilled drumsticks which rose from \$7.42 per pound in January 2003, to \$11.99 per pound in July 2004.

While the increases in food prices have an impact on all classes in our society, the impact is more severely felt by the lower income group. There is, therefore, an urgent need to address this issue to contain any further escalation in prices and to provide support to those most in need. We are addressing the problem, based on a twofold approach: one, by introducing measures to contain the increase in food prices; and, two, by increasing the resources of lower income households in order to mitigate the impact of rising food prices.

To this end, it is proposed that by January 01, 2005, the common external tariff (CET) on basic products, such as powdered milk, split peas, black-eyed beans and cheese will, subject to the approval of Caricom, be removed. In addition to removing the CET on certain products, it is also proposed to reduce with effect from November 01, 2004, the surcharge on imported chicken and turkey parts, from 86 per cent to 40 per cent. This measure is expected to trigger a reduction in the price of these specific products, improve the level of competition in the market and lower chicken/ turkey prices in general.

With respect to products other than chicken and poultry parts, we proposed to continue the existing rates of import surcharge in respect of those other products at this time. The products affected will be geese, duck, guinea hens, fatty livers, cane, beet sugar and icing sugar. The initiative to reduce the surcharge on imported chicken and turkey parts from 86 per cent to 40 per cent will serve to bring additional choices to the consumer. The availability of chicken and turkey parts at a considerably lower cost represents additional choices in the marketplace.

We have provided additional choices to the public at cheaper prices. By reducing the import surcharge to the domestic industry, from 86 per cent to 40 per cent, Government is signalling that it is prepared to strengthen competition at the border in order to ensure that consumers also benefit from liberalization. The Government is of the view that the reduction in import surcharge on chicken and turkey parts does not in any way threaten the future viability of the poultry industry, but rather provides an opportunity for the industry to realize its true competitive potential.

In fact, there was no protective regime for chicken and turkey parts before 1997, when only imported whole chickens, red meat, liquid milk and certain fruits and vegetables, attracted the surcharge. The rates under the earlier surcharge regime were progressively reduced to zero by 1999. In 1997, Government introduced

for a limited period, until 2004, the surcharge for poultry products, such as chicken and turkey parts as distinct from whole chickens, geese, duck, guinea hens, liver, cane and beet sugar and icing sugar. Were it not for Government's intervention at this time, the import surcharge regime under the old Seventh Schedule to the Miscellaneous Taxes Act would have continued only until December 31, 2004. After December 31, 2004, the import surcharge regime would have been eliminated altogether, unless the period was extended by legislation.

With specific reference to chicken and turkey parts, the rate of import surcharge was progressively reduced over the years and the industry has not died. Between 1997 and 2004, the rate of surcharge for chicken and turkey parts moved from as high as 103 per cent in 1997, to the current rate of 86 per cent in 2004. I repeat, the industry has not died.

In accordance with item 6(A)(a) of the Second Schedule to the Customs Act, individuals travelling abroad currently enjoy an exemption from customs duty in respect of goods not exceeding \$1,200 in value. The goods covered by this exemption are goods which accompany the passenger and which are acquired abroad or in local in-bond shops for personal or household use or as souvenirs or gifts. This exemption will not be granted where the accompanying goods are alcohol beverages or tobacco products, exceeding the quantities allowed to be imported by a passenger. Wine or spirits must therefore not exceed 1.5 litres in total; tobacco not exceeding 250 grammes; cigars not exceeding 50 in number, and cigarettes not exceeding 200 in number.

The duty-free allowance has been increased over the years, from \$50 in 1973 to \$100 in 1993 and \$1,200 in 1994. The quantum of this allowance does not reflect the effects of current worldwide inflation on goods and services and it is therefore proposed that the allowance be increased in 2004 from \$1,200 to \$3,000. These initiatives lend tangible support to our strategy for enhancing competitiveness, particularly in the poultry industry. They also serve to ensure that the benefits of economic growth and development are shared by all segments of the population, as they also provide for relief from rising food prices to those most affected.

With these few comments, I beg to move that the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2004, subject to the modifications as circulated, be confirmed.

Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Mr. Manohar Ramsaran (*Chaguanas*): Mr. Speaker, the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago mandates in section 112(2) that:

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“No moneys shall be withdrawn from the Consolidated Fund except to meet expenditure that is charged upon the Fund by this Constitution or any Act or where the issue of those moneys has been authorised by an Appropriation Act...”

The framers of our Constitution and, more so, the past colonial masters of our country, have enshrined in our laws a strict control of our resources, in this case our financial resources. Of course, that is why we are here today. Of course, it is the very last day; the last minute, because by today, this should have been done already.

Section 3(5), Chap. 74:01 reads:

“An Order varying an existing tax shall cease to have effect if the Order is not confirmed, with or without modifications”

and agreed by this House within 21 days of the commencement of the order. That was done on the 8th and today is the 29th.

When one looks at the Order before us, one could be attempted to easily dismiss it, say, “thank you” and move on. However, when you look at the Constitution and the laws governing finance in Trinidad and Tobago, Government expenditure and revenue collection and, of course, if you look at the Finance Act, we therefore would be very wary and worried about the immoral manner in which the present Government is contaminating the financial resources of the State.

As I said, this Order is simple, but let me look at section 2 of the Order before us; the Seventh Schedule to the Miscellaneous Taxes Act, which is now repealed and following schedule substituted. However, this section of the Constitution I mentioned before, prompted me to ask this Government when is it going to bring to account to the country the accounts for the period December 24, 2001—September 30, 2002. Because according to this section 112 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, as previously stated, funds must not be varied without final consent of the Parliament. Of course, what are we seeing? We learnt after the fact that state resources were used to create programmes and to scandalously campaign in marginal constituencies prior to the 2002 general election.

That is why I am concerned about this Motion before the House. As I was saying before, let us look at this section of the Order. When one looks at this, it is very simple to the eye. But after listening to the Minister presenting this statement to support this Order, he mentioned words like: “the increased cost of living”; he also spoke about a “trigger in the cost of chicken” and he also spoke about the removal of common external tariff on various articles.

Mr. Speaker, let us look at this Order before us as we talk about the chicken industry. This was done to protect, in 2004, which expired this year—1997 to 2004—and I would ask the Minister to tell us whether this was revalidated; I did not hear whether this was revalidated, because this was supposed to have expired on December 31, 2004. When we look at this, what are we seeing? The rate of surcharge has been reduced by 46 per cent, from 86 per cent to 40 per cent. When we look at the CET as it is, chicken attracts 40 per cent duty and 15 per cent VAT. If you do the calculation you would realize that—I do not know what the intention is, but I want to comment that at this stage, do not expect any miraculous reduction in the cost of chicken. However, on the other hand, I see it as a threat to the local chicken industry. It is nothing more than that, because if you go down the Order you will notice that for ducks, geese and guinea fowls, the surcharge has remained the same; also other fatty livers, and so on.

So the point is, people with ducks, geese and guinea fowls are not considered in this amendment. When we look around Trinidad and Tobago, what do we see? We see that in Trinidad and Tobago—again, when I went through the CSO reports, it was as if there was no government after 2001, because all the figures we have on the CSO web site end December 31, 2001. At that time we had 429 chicken farms in Trinidad: in St. George, there were 104; Caroni, 124; Mayaro, 24; St. Andrew/St. David, 115; Victoria 31; St. Patrick, 31.

Again, is Caroni a bad word? Maybe it is because Caroni has 124 chicken farms that this Government is bent on destroying the chicken industry, and maybe the Minister would reply. I do not want to criticize for criticizing sake, but I want to put it to this Government that if you want to lower the cost of living; if you want to encourage people to buy cheaper foods, you should look at the other countries of the world.

I have been doing some research: the United Kingdom, America and Brazil; three examples that come to mind. The American poultry industry hires more than 324,000 persons. It is 135,000 in the United Kingdom and a little less than that in Brazil. If you look at the 449 farms and multiply that by 10, you have 5,000 people employed in the poultry industry. When I look at what is taking place in the United Kingdom, they have vision; they understand their ministry and they know what they are talking about. I quote:

“Particular issues which are being dealt with currently include:

- Concern over poultry meat imports (particularly from Thailand and Brazil).

- Creating a level playing field to ensure that our industry is not undermined by unfair competition from other countries.”

What do we have? If you look at the facilities afforded to the people from whom we are importing chicken, their product is subsidized. So here we are, in Trinidad and Tobago, subsidizing the farmers in North America and in our country we tell our chicken farmers, “pack up and go home”.

This is the vision of that Government which talks about lowering the cost of living which, by the Minister’s own admission, has increased by 14 per cent in 2002 and another 10 per cent in 2003. I am sure this is 10 per cent of what was before, plus 14 per cent, so that would add up to much more than that.

We cannot re-invent the wheel in Trinidad and Tobago. We have the major countries in the world protecting their agricultural products and, in this case, protecting their chicken industry. But what do we have in Trinidad and Tobago? For some reason which I do not know, they decide to just ask people to abandon the chicken industries.

I want to read on, because the social issues must come in here.

“In addition to the usual issues around pay, conditions of employment and health and safety, the trade group has been voicing concerns over the image of the industry and the need to ensure that consumer confidence is maintained.”

This is the point I want to make. Here we have a Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, they could set out terms and conditions for the chicken industry. They could encourage the chicken industry to be viable. The same Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources in his budget contribution mentioned that hundreds of thousands of hatching eggs were dumped. If this were true, the Minister should not have come here and said it. He should have done something about that to ensure that when the Government allows hatching eggs to be imported into this country and the articles are dumped, something should be done. The Minister has the information and he has done nothing about it, and I believe this to be very negligent in the performance of his duties.

While we are on that, I know recently there was a disease in the Cunupia area and one farmer, Mr. Harry Noonoo, lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. He said there was a problem on the farm. It was not in the public domain whether this man was paid or not for the loss of his chickens.

So the United Kingdom protects its workers. I continue to quote:

“We also firmly believe that the workers should not be penalised in any way for blowing the whistle on any breaches of hygiene or welfare regulations.”

While we talk about blowing the whistle and we talk about reducing the cost of living, we are talking about poor people, about creating employment, about encouraging our people to become better citizens, I understand that the Landate issue has its first casualties. People were fired by NH International for purporting to do certain acts that they were not authorized to do. Again, do we care about the people of Trinidad and Tobago?

When we talk about cost of living, how could we decrease cost of living when we have expenditure all across the board not being accounted for? We spend billions. This budget statement of 2005 just touches the tip of the iceberg. When we examine the yellow documents and we see the expenditure taking place there, it is something that would blow the mind. I just want to mention one of them and it concerns the travelling and subsistence of our hon. Ministers.

2.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, just to summarize—I would not go into details—but in 2004, \$73,256,960 were spent on overseas travel for official entertainment; hosting of conferences and other seminars; publicity; promotions and printing. This year that figure is a scandalous \$167,312,440, and they talk about the poor and lowering the price of chicken? Mr. Speaker, I sat here and I thought that the hon. Minister was a chicken himself. This is the expenditure, Mr. Speaker, and this is what is taking place in this country; scandalous spending and the poor are getting poorer. But I will deal with that on another occasion.

Mr. Speaker, when I heard the Minister talk about “trigger reduction” in the cost of chicken, I wondered how this “trigger” could really affect the cost of living in Trinidad and Tobago when you have \$167 million for Ministers travelling. Last year, I think I used almost the same term, when I begged the Minister of Finance not to increase the price of gas in a time of plenty, when the cost of oil was high. I warned him that if he introduced that 15 per cent increase it would trigger the cost of living in Trinidad and Tobago, but no one listened.

In this country today we have so many talk shows all over the place; we talk in Parliament but nobody listens and the country is going downhill. This is the evidence of the scandalous waste of this Government. As we listen to the hon. Minister—and being a new kid on the block, I do not want to be too hard on him because he does not understand. Maybe in a couple of years he would say: “Boy I was really set up, you know.” Mr. Speaker, I understand that the Mannings have about \$15 million in travelling and subsistence.

Mr. Speaker, let us go back to this Order and look at: “Cane sugar and beet sugar” and so on. I know this was not changed. The cane sugar will now attract 60

per cent import surcharge and icing sugar, 72 per cent surcharge and so on. I will touch on this because the Minister mentioned the CET and the VAT. Cane sugar will be reduced by 15 per cent when VAT is waived. I did some rough calculations—as I said before, the whole question of getting figures in this country is extremely difficult—I went onto the web site of the CSO where we discovered the quota of sugar cane that we must supply to the European Union, which expires in 2007. Mr. Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago produced 134 million tonnes of sugar: 2000, 162 million tonnes of sugar; 1999, 112 million tonnes and so on. When it comes to 2004, I was reliably informed and I stand to be corrected, as I said we have the official figures, that Trinidad and Tobago produced 60,000 tonnes of sugar, which is a deficit of almost 74,000 tonnes.

We have to fulfill our EU obligation, Mr. Speaker, but when we do this we have to import sugar. So you understand the whole malady. We have to export our sugar to fulfil our quota and import sugar for local consumption.

What does this Government do in its wisdom? It removes the VAT on sugar. In other words, we are providing facilities from the foreign sugar manufacturers to export to Trinidad and Tobago. The Government is giving up 15 per cent across the board in VAT. When we calculate that for 70,000 tonnes of sugar, it is over \$15 million that we give up in VAT.

Mr. Speaker, more than that, I understand from reliable sources that recently Cabinet approved the importation of sugar into Trinidad and Tobago, waiving all duties and VAT by the sugar company of this country. From what I understand they forego over \$40 million. Those are the losses that the Government is now faced with, with the destruction of Caroni (1975) Limited, and this fallout will continue.

Mr. Speaker, you will hear sometimes that there is a run on foreign exchange. Why do we have to use foreign exchange on sugar? I cannot understand that. Trinidad and Tobago was built on the sugar industry but we now have to import sugar and forego millions of dollars in customs duties and we are going to have to get foreign exchange. What is happening? This Government is going to awake one morning and realize that it has misled this country and has taken us downhill.

Mr. Speaker, we now come to a famous one: “Travelling abroad”:

“The Second Schedule to the Customs Act is amended in item 6(aa)(5) by deleting the word ‘\$1,200.00’ and substituting the word ‘\$3,000.00’”.

Mr. Speaker, if I turn to page 48 of the budget statement, as I said before, this is only a statement, this cannot be anything else. I quote:

“Mr. Speaker, individuals travelling abroad...”

I hope that is a mistake because persons travelling abroad do not enjoy exemption from customs duty; it is when you are returning to Trinidad and Tobago or when you come in to Trinidad and Tobago, so let me correct him: “Individuals returning”. I continue to quote:

“currently enjoy an exemption from customs duty (Duty Free Allowance) in respect of goods belonging to them not exceeding \$1,200 in value per annum.”

This is something the Minister did not explain. The Prime Minister said “per annum”, the impression you gave was “every time you travel”. I want to know which one is correct.

“The goods covered by this exemption are goods which accompany the passenger and which were acquired abroad or in local In-Bond shops for personal or household use or as souvenirs or gifts.

We propose to increase the exemption from \$1,200 to \$3,000 per annum.”

Mr. Speaker, let me explain what is, “personal effects” and this is free in its own right, you do not have to be guided by this Schedule. Personal effects are, as mentioned by the hon. Minister, alcohol to a certain extent, tobacco and computers that are part of your personal package; your personal radio, anything that you want to use and there is no value. For example, a medical doctor coming back to Trinidad and Tobago could use the opportunity to travel with all his personal equipment, to any value, because those are his tools of trade and they are free under the custom’s tariff. Then we go to household effects: these are items for your homes and the declaration, as I said last week, belongs to you and you make your declaration. This, too, could accompany a passenger coming through the ports of Trinidad and Tobago.

Now we come to the gift part, Mr. Speaker, and this is the scary part. I am not saying \$3,000 is too much in today’s world, but when you add it to your personal effects and your household effects and you now come to your gift allowance, \$3,000 could mean anything. I have been hearing at the airport already that there is no use for the Red Line because anything under the value of \$3,000 is duty free. The normal custom duty—when I say normal I use the word guardedly—when you import goods through airfreight or sea freight, you pay duty on the cost, insurance and freight. When you travel as a passenger you do not pay freight and you do not pay insurance, in fact, you pay on the Free On Board (FOB) cost that you paid for the item. This \$3,000 would normally be \$6,000 on the wharf. *[Interruption]* I am glad the Member for Diego Martin East said “So”. I remember

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sometime in the past he was caught at the airport doing something that was not proper with some suitcases. Mr. Speaker, the Member for Diego Martin East is now easy; he could send away 15 persons. Think about it. Now you have unfair practices; you are now giving the competitive edge to persons who think like the Member for Diego Martin East—15 passengers with \$45,000 duty free goods coming into Trinidad and Tobago and people will do that. I saw it happen before and I know it is possible. The competitive edge now will go to people who—of course, they will not be doing anything illegal. Maybe the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West could now stop using containers to import his goods; he could use persons doing the suitcase trade.

Mr. Speaker, there is no restriction. You could bring five suitcases through the airport, which will be duty free, as long as you pay for the other three. A person as smart as the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West will not bring in cheap goods through the airport. There is another side to it, you know. Now that the customs officers are relaxed at the airport, they will see themselves, more or less, as revenue officers—although they are in charge of protecting the revenue and protecting the coast from illegal activities, they are trained almost 95 per cent in that direction. Today, when they stand at the airport and realize if they examine two suitcases of clothes they cannot get \$3,000 in gift allowances—Mr. Speaker, the Green Line is now the longest line at the airport so everybody would come through the Green Line.

Mr. Speaker, I have heard that the average loss of duty to Trinidad and Tobago will be \$2 million per month. It will add up to \$24 million in 12 months, that is the estimate we have.

Mr. Speaker, they spoke about savings, protecting the chicken industry and reducing it by less than 40 per cent. They come to this Parliament and say that they care about the poor but yet they want to increase the cost of living. We cannot sit here and allow this to happen.

Mr. Speaker, I want to educate this House on a statement which the Prime Minister made in the budget. I quote:

“We propose to remove the Common External Tariff (CET), subject to the approval of the Caricom Secretariat, on:

Powdered milk,
Split Peas;
Black eye Beans; and
Cheese.”

Mr. Speaker, with due respect to the hon. Minister of Finance, when the duties remained on these items, it was again to protect the local farmers and producers. Earlier this week we saw where the dairy farmers voiced their disapproval about this. Mr. Speaker, what are we doing by sending these signals of 5 per cent duty? That cannot help anybody but you are sending the signals. Mr. Speaker, you are asking our local industry to close down. I believe that should not happen.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to split peas, we were protecting a couple producers in Trinidad and Tobago who survive on that. From what I have heard the profit margin is very small because when you import the whole peas and do the splitting and polishing and so on, the profit margin is extremely small and the same would go for black-eye beans. Of course, cheese is another problem that people believe should not happen.

Mr. Speaker, the trouble is not with us because when we talk in this country nobody listens. You talk from the Opposition Benches; you talk on the radio show; you get “Gladiator” to make noise but nobody listens!

Mr. Speaker, I understand that the Caricom countries are rallying together to make this a non-event. When they go to Caricom to have this approved, my understanding is that these will never be approved by Caricom because we have countries out there that depend on a couple of these items as a matter of their export market.

We propose to zero-rate for VAT purposes and with immediate effect, brown sugar—I explained that before, Mr. Speaker. Let us understand what is happening. We are selling out the poor in this country for a few. Cocoa powder: this is another area on which I want to touch. I hope I do not take too long to find my document. I quote:

“We propose to Zero-rate for VAT purposes and with immediate effect:

Brown Sugar;

Cocoa powder;

Mauby;

Coffee; and

Orange Juice.”

Mr. Speaker, if you take these items, one by one, you will realize that they were protected by Trinidad and Tobago governments in the past. For example, cocoa powder: in 2001, Trinidad and Tobago exported 500,000 kilograms of cocoa—

this is in the CSO's report. Coffee is the same, as I have mentioned. Mauby: I do not know about mauby, I found that this was an oversight somewhere, but again it attracts 5 per cent reduction in the duty, Mr. Speaker. If people drink mauby 12 times per month they will save about \$3 on their overall yearly cost of living. Again, this is not any injection, of which the Minister spoke, in lowering the cost of living.

We move on to orange juice. This is another area that my colleague mentioned last week where thousands of acres of citrus in this country are being destroyed by this Government and what do we do? We remove VAT to import orange juice from elsewhere. Again this Government is showing that it does not care about the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The Government prefers to subsidize some other farms in another part of the world rather than in its own country.

Mr. Speaker, we must understand that this question of coming to Parliament this afternoon to talk about a simple piece of legislation, the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2004, in my mind is really how this Government thinks. They just come here without understanding how the economy of a country is made up. If you continue to pay scant respect to agriculture and our local produce, it cannot work. I know the Minister knows this. That is why I have said that in about two or three months he will come and say that he has made a mistake by removing VAT on all these items.

Mr. Speaker, I mentioned customs a while ago and I spoke about lifting the duty-free allowances. Again this is in the area of making the cost of living affordable. If you look at customs and excise, you would see that the whole area is a disaster. I read the TTMA recommendations and I agree with a couple of them. For example, when goods land at the ports, the average time to clear these goods is well over the rent-free period. All this would add to the cost of living, much more than the couple per cent in orange juice and mauby. They are asking for the processing of the customs documents within six hours of lodging; funding, and installation of dated ASYCUDA programmes. I understand it now takes six days and there is a customs law which says that you cannot bring your documents before the goods arrive in the country. I do not know whose wise idea that is. I believe the exchange rate is, more or less, stationary at \$6-plus and if you allow persons to pass their documents, for example, the exchange rate might lift or drop a bit and persons could make the adjustment entries to allow for that. But what you have done is to make it mandatory that you bring your documents on the day it arrives. This is something that we have to look at.

The TTMA asked to have the capacity doubled at the Port of Spain ports. They believe that it is archaic and is not serving the present importation of goods and so on.

Mr. Speaker, I have also looked at what was recommended by NATUC. We must sometimes bring their voices to the Parliament. To me, what NATUC talked about is very important. The Minister said it, you know; I was expecting someone else to do it but I will be a little lenient with him because maybe he read somebody else's speech. The Minister spoke about anti-dumping; he spoke about reduced cost of living. Mr. Speaker, when the Prime Minister was preparing to present his budget, I understand that NATUC spoke to him. I want to put something on the table, which the United National Congress has been talking about for a long time. One of NATUC's recommendations and I want to put it on record on their behalf—as I said, this was presented to the hon. Prime Minister so it is not the first time they are hearing about it.

We are making job security and the creation of permanent sustainable jobs for all the centre of our presentation because it impacts on so many other aspects in society.

Mr. Speaker, when we look at the \$3.1 billion spent on social programmes and when you go through the list, you will see programmes that were never started. They were in the 2004 budget but they were never started. There are numerous programmes and I plan to lay it one day in the Parliament. Mr. Speaker, the question of wastage continues and if this wastage was transformed into sustainable job creation—the Minister could have risen this afternoon and have said, yes, we have done this to improve the quality of lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This has not happened; it is handouts and more handouts and I make no apology for saying that. Yes, we need handouts because there are people who are unemployable and disabled and we have to cater for them, but when you go to these other make-work programmes and you see the people working there and you know that it is a temporary thing; six months.

I understand that from the electoral district, Enterprise North, 24 persons started the MuST programme and all 24 “must” exit; they said the work was too hard. They expected jobs in air-conditioned offices and URP ten days. People were not given the opportunity to understand what MuST is about. They told me: “MP, you think I am going there to mix concrete for eight hours to get \$60.00.” Mr. Speaker, the Member boasted in this Parliament. Mr. Speaker, all these social programmes would fail because they were not thought out.

Mr. Speaker, I will continue with NATUC's request.

Unemployment: although considered to average just over 10 per cent, it is much higher in particular pockets of our society and in some areas it is believed to be as high as 50—70 per cent.

This is something that we have told them time after time and they do not take it into consideration. Forget the propaganda; 7.8 per cent is a dream and it is a bad dream; it could make your heart palpitate a little faster than it normally does. Let us be real in this country. Let us invest the money wisely.

Mr. Speaker, I mentioned before that prior to the 2004 general election that money was spent by the millions and because of the wastage at that time NSDP was formed and they granted persons money all across the board. According to the economists, you have to create not only for the present generation but also for the future generations. If we continue to spend and squander the day will come—I am not being the voice of doom and gloom—when something could change and the price of oil could dip to where it started. What will happen to this \$3.1 billion voted for those make-work programmes? Had this money been invested in the proper area, for example, by encouraging the chicken industry to be sustainable—I am not speaking about subsidy because I do not believe in subsidies. What I do believe in is to give them duty-free concessions; you treat them as approved industries; have your officers of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources visit and make sure they do their things properly and inject the downward cost of production material, and that will make an input in Trinidad and Tobago; not by subsidizing the farmers in the United States and Brazil.

Mr. Speaker, the whole vision of this Government—when I read the cover of this book and I see “Vision 2020” my heart screams. We cannot reach 2020, the time, much less to be a First World nation.

I asked the Member for Arouca North a simple question this afternoon—I do not want to go back there—but the fact is that you have a meagre irrigation system. I admit that nothing was done over time but now you have added 2,000 acres to that irrigation system, you are now going to put over 300 farmers out of a job. Those are persons who have never relied on the State. My friend and I from Caroni East know the area quite well. That area supports itself. I invite the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources or anybody to go and see the quality of goods they produce. What would happen in the dry season? Caroni (1975) Limited under our watch, when they started to plant rice there I spoke with the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources and I represented them, forcefully, in Parliament to stop that rice cultivation. A couple of acres could not improve the quality of rice production in this country. You have 300 or 400 farmers and their dependants depending on their private crops and you are going to close down that?

Mr. Speaker, this is why I say the vision is not there. They are destroying it piece by piece; whether it is the chicken industry and so on. I have said it 100

times. I like the term the Member used: to trigger reduction in the cost of chicken. I want to read NATUC's recommendations. They talked about the issue of under-employment and the growing army of the working poor.

This country, in my opinion, would need much more than the reduction in the surcharge of "gallus domesticus" that is the term for fowls of the species. When you come to this Parliament to tell us you want to amend the Seventh Schedule this cannot impress anybody.

Mr. Speaker, I will now go back to the hon. Prime Minister's budget statement to show where—I want to put it on the record because I do not want the Members on the other side or the public to go away with the impression that this statement made in the budget would really do anything. The Minister of Consumer Affairs came here and blamed somebody else for the rise in prices, but I am glad the hon. Minister spoke about the rise in 2002/2003, which is a fair way to look at it; we live in the present. I quote:

“Measures to address the rise in prices

We propose to reduce the surcharge...reduce the price from 86 per cent to 40 per cent. This measure is expected to reduce the price on these specific products,...This measure will take effect from the First of November 2004.”

Mr. Speaker, I want to put a damper on this. I did my calculations and this would be about eight or nine cents on a pound of chicken that would be imported into the country. This would never make this measure successful. I continue to quote:

“This measure is expected to reduce the price on these specific products, improve the level of competition in the market and hopefully...”

At least he was honest for once.

“lower chicken prices in general. This measure would take effect from the First of November 2004. If this measure does not generate an appropriate reduction in poultry prices, the surcharge will be reduced further...Mr. Speaker, we should note that under the Seventh Schedule of the Miscellaneous Taxes Order of 1997 this would come to an end on 31st of December 2004...”

Then, of course, he went to:

“Poverty Alleviation”

I will not go there at all. I firmly believe that the measures announced in this Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2004 will in no way assist the poor and needy in this country.

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Mr. Speaker, we see the removal of VAT on golf balls, lawn tennis balls inflatable balls for soccer, other inflatable balls having tariff heading 9506, and other balls having tariff heading 9506.

Again, when Government does certain things you must understand why it was there in the first place. You should not just awake one morning and decide to remove VAT on certain items. This was designed to serve a particular purpose—it could have been done how many years ago—it was done with an intention. The whole agenda of this Government is to destroy what we have in this country and I am telling them that they have to be very careful of how they remove VAT. What I am trying to get at is the squandermania and the waste on this side. On the other hand, they have removed taxes that would not really affect the cost of living in this country.

To me it all adds up to just spending and throwing money at every problem there is in this country.

3.00 p.m.

I want to show you a little wastage and I want the Members for Tunapuna and Laventille West to listen to this. This is in the *Public Sector Investment Programme 2005*, and I want to take my time and read this.

“The Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs continued its construction and rehabilitation programmes at community and civic centres nationwide. The sum of \$9.2 million was spent on the refurbishment of community centres in Cane Farm, Tacarigua...”

and I put a pin there—I understand that was not done—

“La Romaine, Hermitage, Vance River, Point Fortin, Sobo Village, La Brea and Mayo.”

A grand total of five community centres were refurbished.

And one was not from listening to a call-in programme last night. That meant that \$9.2 million was spent to refurbish four community centres. Did we use gold tiles to pave those and so forth? Then, of course, it went on:

“In various communities throughout the country infrastructure development works...\$2 million—were undertaken on 240 projects...water, electricity and drainage throughout the country.”

Mr. Speaker, this is my attempt to show the wastage and the “squandermania” of this Government. If one is talking about Vision 2020, one has got to give the

country hope. And while we talk about hope, I heard the Minister of National Security—and they want to improve the quality of life to get people to invest in our country; they want to have a trigger effect in bringing inflation down, bringing the cost of living down.

I want to put on record how unhappy I am about the activities of the police over the last couple of days, especially when five young persons were shot.

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. G. Singh*]

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, I am so disappointed when the police officers shot to death five young persons in Trinidad. The Commissioner of Police made a statement yesterday—I heard him on the radio where he said the death of the late Mr. Monsegue in the Member for Diego Martin West's constituency will tarnish the image of the police service and he went on to talk about the family and so forth.

Mr. Speaker, on the other hand, and I hope it is a mistake being made by the Commissioner of Police, he never mentioned the four persons who were brutally murdered in Central Trinidad. To me, this is a crime—murdered by the police. I want to put it on the public record—they want people to love them in this country, they want people to believe we are one country. According to the Member for Diego Martin East when you watch through the hole you would see love, kindness and no racism and we want to see that. Yet, nobody on that side asked the Commissioner of Police what he meant by that. They kidnapped somebody someone said, but the fact is there are laws in this country. Former Minister of National Security, are you saying that it is okay for somebody who committed a crime to be tried and executed by the police? I have said it is not okay to try and execute four young persons. There are laws in this country. When people commit wrong they should be tried and sent to jail. Are they supporting the fact that—

Mr. Speaker: Perhaps, you should come back to the Motion before us.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: I am talking about the whole question of injecting into our country confidence as my colleague said, to get people to love this country and I will show you that. But this is a serious issue and I want the Minister of National Security to bring this in a way that it would not send the wrong message. Even Members opposite are commenting on that. This is a sad day for this country; four young persons.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, you are being irrelevant. Come back to the Motion before us.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, my contribution as I always contribute in this Parliament, is to understand first hand when a Bill comes before us, that we study the Bill. The whole question of this, according to the hon. Prime Minister, is to decrease the cost of living. Mr. Speaker, this does not happen like that. The cost of living is not decreased by removing 5 per cent on mauby and orange juice.

To reduce the cost of living, and the Member said it, is to trigger the downward trend in the development of Trinidad and Tobago, the overall development of agriculture, mainstay. Of course, there is the offshore sector which we know provides the needed funds, but when it comes to our own country—look at tourism. If we want people to visit our country there should be a clean slate but in 2005 when a Commissioner of Police or anybody makes a statement like that, it is a sad day for this country and that is what I am trying to put on the record, that nobody should justify the death of four young persons. I am asking the Members opposite to please understand that. We all have lives and when you look through the magic hole you want to see people pleasant. You see people pleasant and treat it equally.

We think it is a very simple Bill, but I am sure if the Minister would listen, this would not in any magical way decrease the cost of living. I have my reservations and I am sure any right-thinking citizen in this country would want to appreciate this. The Member mentioned an interesting term, “allowed to thrive”. If you want this country to be allowed to thrive, you have to share your wealth equally.

I was going through the whole question of this Social Sector Investment Programme, and when you look at last year figure \$2.6 billion spent in the social investment programme, and when you look at the jobs that were given and the training offered to the people of this country, the distribution was airy-fairy. It was political patronage at its best. I am asking this Government once more—as I said before, we talk but we want them to listen—if they want to improve Trinidad and Tobago they are going about it the wrong way. And do not just do what you want, we do not care. That is not the way to do it. I am saying to the Member for Ortoire/Mayaro that things are not good as the officers reported to him in the central area. And his answer was that we had our share when we were in Government. It does not happen like that. There are billions of dollars in this country at our disposal and I say to the Government, please, when you come here, especially on an important debate as this Bill, let us talk about injecting the economy either upwards or by carrying down the cost of living in a meaningful

way. If they want to vary taxes, they should vary taxes that will assist the country in a developmental way. I want to let this House know that the people I represent are not happy with the performance of this Government.

I end my contribution with one observation. I went into Felicity, an area shared by the Member for Couva North and myself. There I saw hundreds of young people liming by corners. That was the day the four children were murdered. The whole village was in a sort of wake-like atmosphere. I spoke with them and what came out is that there is depression and not because of the death only. I asked them if they were not working anywhere and they said no, they make a little hustle catching some crab; they work with the fishermen and catch some fish. I asked, "Why not look for jobs?" They said that they have been trying for two years to access the URP and the CEPEP—they see these as Government jobs. To be fair, they are not skilled in any way but, of course, they could perform in URP. I said to them why not visit this year and they said, "We are tired, we fed up." This is a fact. I did not sit there. I investigated and I saw that the 30 URP jobs in Chaguanas, 24 were in the Enterprise area; and my friend from La Brea would know that area quite well—*[Interruption]* That is not true—when you could justify something like that, that is the point I am trying to make all evening.

Mr. Bereaux: Hon. Member for Chaguanas, is that not part of your constituency, therefore, why are you complaining if they are getting jobs?

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Enterprise area I said. There are three Members of Parliament who share the Enterprise area. I am happy for them. Why the disparity? Why out of 30 URP jobs, 24—and the records are there, you could go and see them. And there are unemployed young persons on one side. Please, if we do not stop this political divide the people in this country will suffer and when they rise up, who knows what would happen. All we can do is put their names down for the URP because the resources are available.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member for Chaguanas, I must remind you we are debating the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order. You said you are winding up but wind up on the basis of the Order before you.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Thank you for your guidance, Mr. Speaker, but again, this is what this country is made up of. I do not want to be rude but when we look at what is taking place and when we come to this Parliament to represent 25,000 constituents, and we bring their plight at a time of plenty when the Minister is talking about Provisional Collection of Taxes—

Mr. Speaker, everybody pays taxes in this country. We talk about the cost of living—maybe you never experienced poverty. Maybe you do not know what it is

to work anywhere. When a Member of Parliament comes to this Parliament and he is shut up; he asks questions on behalf of the poor farmers whose livelihood is threatened and the Speaker says no to the questions.

Mr. Speaker: Let me give you a ruling. If the Speaker refuses a question you cannot in the course of debate allude to it; so Members be advised.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You confirmed my opinion. We are here as Members of Parliament to bring—we have been elected to represent people. We have not been elected to come to a tea party and to do like some of those, to wear jacket and tie and the trappings of office. We are here to assist the people and when we are debating an important issue like the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order and the price of chicken, we must add to it. I want to put on record—for example, I want to show the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources maybe to guide him, because when we come here next year or during this year, when we are debating the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order that we talk about agriculture seriously.

Let me inform the Minister that in 2001 this country exported 648,000 kilogrammes of cocoa. It is in the Central Statistical Office (CSO) report and when they removed the VAT—coffee, beans—this surprised me. This country produced 406,000 kilogrammes of coffee. This is where we are. Oranges: This country exported 61,000 crates of oranges in 2001, and this is why I am particularly worried that this Government would take this country to the brink.

Mr. Speaker, when one talks about total chicks acquired; total local broilers and local chicks acquired; 23,854, broilers were grown and sold in Trinidad and Tobago. There is a viable chicken industry so I am calling upon this Government to please be careful. When one looks at the beef, pork and the mutton one would realize it is very small in comparison with the chicken industry. There is no problem in opening up the market if you want because you have done it but at least ensure that the local producers are given a place. People take out full page ads. I do not want to read those ads into the record, they are already there. People who have invested—and we all invest—when these people have to close down their chicken industry—send home 5,000 persons—it is a sad day for Trinidad and Tobago. Let us give them some encouragement. Let us make it viable and if you go back to my constituency, for example, 5,000/6,000 persons unemployed and you increase your industry. You must employ these persons and maybe I would not have to come and say do this and do that because it would have been done. This, to me, is the failure of the People's National Movement. They never encourage anything local. If one looks at the records one would see every time

this Government gets an opportunity it is to destroy something local. Why is this done? And you will talk about things, but especially in agriculture and manufacturing service areas, you see that is being destroyed on a daily basis.

I take this opportunity to again ask that we do something to make this work. I am sure we all learnt that after unemployment the next stage is crime and when you ask why is crime on the increase, it is simply because of unemployment. I do not believe poverty is a cause for crime but I believe that unemployment is when people are accustomed to a certain standard of living and they do not have it anymore, they do silly things. I want people to understand this. I am asking you on the other side please talk to your colleague and do not justify discrimination or maybe, if it is not racial discrimination, it is my constituency, do not do it. Come together to improve the quality of life of our people. As I said before, we could easily have come and said that we do not have any problem with this Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, but from where I sit I see that this has not given the country any enthusiasm to move on. This, to me, is an important piece of legislation.

Last year there was much debate. Nobody listened. The Members on this side said not to increase the price of gasoline but the Minister went ahead and did it. The cost of living spiraled and today, I am warning, let us be careful how we treat with our industries. Let us be careful how we fiddle with the few agriculture strengths, whether it is oranges or the chicken industry. They have destroyed the agriculture industry with one fell swoop—9,000 persons sent home. All the experts are now talking about it, that that has sent our country down. And I could go on and on for the record. Let us, as I always say, build Trinidad and Tobago together. If you want to build Trinidad and Tobago talk with us and we would give you ideas on how to build this country but if you continue on the path of destruction, there would be no more Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources (Hon. Jarrette Narine): Mr. Speaker, obviously, the Member for Chaguanas was not quite prepared for this debate. He probably was asked by his leader on that side to try to speak for 75 minutes, but the ability with some people is not there because he rambled all over the place. He spoke about chicken about five times and did not say anything. He also spoke about some other things which I would like to answer before I go on to speak about the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2004. But before I do so, I need to say congratulations to the Attorney General for coming this afternoon and placing on the front burner what we are as a PNM political organization; transparency, integrity in public life, honesty. I remember on many occasions—[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Ramsaran: I was warned three times about sticking to the debate.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Hon. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, I will deal with that at some other occasion, if not today, because the Member for Chaguanas spoke about that, the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. He spoke about scandalous spending and so on. I will deal with that also, but I would like to deal with a matter that he raised fumbling around at the end of his contribution and to indicate to this House that the broiler industry increased in the last year by 2.25 per cent. Those are the facts, I do not know where he got his figures; as against oranges, there was an increase of 381.45 per cent in oranges, and I can tell you because he is not an agriculturist and he does not understand the industry. Last year there was a bad citrus crop, and it varies. If you had a bad crop last year obviously this year you would have a better crop. Anybody who has been involved in agriculture would know that. Citrus is like that and you are representing people who only plant marijuana.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the Member is on his feet and you are supposed to listen to him in silence. You will all have an opportunity.

Mr. Singh: The Member cannot be allowed to say that the Member only represents people who only plant marijuana. He cannot say that.

Mr. Speaker: Did you say that?

Hon. J. Narine: Yes.

Mr. Speaker: No. Please withdraw it. I did not hear that.

Hon. J. Narine: I apologize. He represents a constituency that is supposed to be an agricultural constituency and yet he does not know anything. Grapefruit increased by 187 per cent. Paddy production increased by 102 per cent and let me say paddy production must have gone up by 102 per cent because it was very low. It is not a quantum leap but what we are trying to do is to put paddy production to about 40 per cent of our local consumption then we would have done something. When I met it, was something like 5 to 8 per cent. That is after the Nariva issue. I understood that production went down but the Government at that time took no decision to put anything in place to increase paddy production. We are now doing that; we are now trying to bring rice on the front burner and that is why we are in that state.

Mr. Speaker, copra decreased by 24.63 percent. There was a decrease because the copra industry, for years now, has failed and the green nuts are valued more than the dry nuts. A coconut around the savannah is selling at \$3.00 for one,

obviously they would not wait for it to dry and collect it to make copra. These are facts of life. And it seems as though some on the other side look at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources as a bhagie and pumpkin ministry and now they are on that side they have a different tongue. They love to quote all kinds of things.

I was laughing here when the Leader of the Opposition was quoting because they are like George Orwell's Satire *Animal Farm*. When they are on that side they have the Ten Commandments and when they are on this side—I remember George Orwell writing: "No pig shall sleep in a bed". That is where they are on that side, and when they came on this side they wrote, "without the sheep at the end". So it was: "No pig shall sleep in a bed without a sheep." That is the type of thing we are dealing with here everyday. Everyday, [*Crosstalk*] that was one of the commandments Napoleon changed when he got into the farm. Even that you did not read.

Small ruminants mean goat and sheep. Three per cent of our total consumption which means we imported 97 per cent. You do not research, you come and talk nonsense.

I want to talk about cocoa which the Member just spoke about. I am happy the Member raised that question because I did not have time to raise it in the budget. In reply to my colleague, cocoa production in the years 1995/1996 when my colleague from Diego Martin was the Minister of Agriculture, our cocoa production was 1.986 million kilograms. And this is from the Cocoa Industry Board. By the time they left office—the UNC that is in 2000/2001 do you know what was the cocoa production, 871,000 kilos. Do you know what it was at the end of 2002 /2003? If you need the figures I will give them to you.

Cocoa: The finest cocoa in the world grows in Trinidad. They produced no plants but rehabilitation of those cocoa fields caused cocoa production to go up in our time and it went down in their time and we are now building it back. Last year we provided for the farmers 300,000 plants and we are targeting 500,000 this year, to be sold to the farmers at \$1.00 for one. This is the kind of information that they bring to the Parliament to talk about taxation and all that.

Mr. Speaker, I am responding to the Member for Chaguanas and I am going to use my notes to refer to it. Sometimes they talk about the distribution of lands to the farmers and he talked about Bejucal and other areas.

3.30 p.m.

In 1996, the Cabinet received at least 38 applications for land. In 1997, the Cabinet received 104; in 1998, 79; in 1999, 76; in 2000, 112; in 2001, 119—you would see that it has been climbing—in 2002, 152; in 2003, 168 and in 2004, 396.

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It is easy to come here and attack the personality of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, but the people in agriculture are satisfied that this Government is putting its money where its mouth is. We are getting increased production in agriculture in other areas based on our tax collections. We have been doing so much with that increase in revenues that we got last year, which was given to us for development. This year we got \$52 million. The reason we got \$52 million is that we spent almost 100 per cent last year.

Probably many people have their own views on this Order for the reduction of surcharge on chicken. I know that the Member for Princes Town, in the debate, took a lot of time to explain the difficulties in the poultry industry. My colleague, the Member for Arouca South, and I met with the players in the poultry industry early in 2002 because even at that time prices were increasing as the Minister in the Ministry of Finance said this afternoon. The price of chicken went up to \$3.99 per pound in May. We took it in when it was \$2.48 at one point in time and we were trying our best to speak to the industry to keep a level price on chicken.

There are certain reasons why chicken is the only meat used throughout the nation. For religious reasons some people do not eat pork; some do not eat beef; some do not eat wild meat or duck, but across the board, if anyone uses meat, it is chicken. We have been trying our best to help the industry. In 2002, I had to meet with them because the School Nutrition Company came to us saying that because of the rise in the cost of chicken, they were under pressure and they were not able to make a profit. Chicken prices were going up and they had to provide the School Feeding Programme with chicken. At that time, the players decided that they would speak to the School Nutrition Company in order to give them a better price. The School Nutrition Company was asking that we give them some benefit to import chicken without taxation, so that they could provide those meals for the school children. We spoke, they agreed, and when they left they did nothing about it.

We have been trying to keep the industry alive. The Prime Minister said in the budget, and quite rightly so, that this is the first step in stabilizing the price of chicken—the cheapest meat on the market. If it is not done—they are saying that it would not make a difference—obviously, it is only moving from 86 per cent to 40 per cent. If that does not work, we will find some other way of dealing with it. The cost of back and neck and wings is not the problem; the problem is that on importing chicken—as quite rightly said by the Member for Princes Town—the legs are the problem. [*Interruption*] Forget the other parts.

The legs sell at US \$0.39 per kilogram, while back and neck and so on are priced higher. What is wrong with our poor people eating legs? Is there something

wrong with our people eating chicken legs? Are they only to eat breast and back? We have a taste for chicken legs and if that is the lowest price for importation that is where they want us not to go?

We are not going to kill the chicken industry by doing this. We are going to make meat available in the groceries for the poor people, so that they do not have to face the pluck shops. For your information, the pluck shops that take the chicken from the farms do not make any money on the amount they pay per pound of chicken live weight. They make their money on the plucking and the gutting of the chicken. The cost at the pluck shop is that they charge persons \$5.00 to pluck a chicken and then they charge an additional price to gut it so that is their profit. The other part of it is that when there are bad scales and you get less weight than what you pay for. *[Interruption]* I am talking about my experience. It is not who produces the chicken; it is the sale of chicken you have that is going on. *[Interruption]* I must lock somebody up?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, perhaps you should address me and you will get rid of some of the crosstalk.

Hon. J. Narine: He could not lock up anybody, he is asking me to lock up somebody.

There is another thing in the industry. Yes, the price of feed has risen. They are saying that the price of chicken did not go up. That is not so, Mr. Speaker. The price of chicken has been increasing. The other part I would like to touch on is that the Member for Chaguanas talked about NATUC making a statement, but he just glossed over the statement and did not explain anything.

NATUC was saying that employment in the industry is underemployment and lowly-paid jobs. Check it back! Do you know, Member for Princes Town, that there is child labour in the industry? Do you know that there are people 14 and 15 years old working—

Mr. S. Panday: Mr. Speaker, I wish to inform the Member that poor children who go to school during the week try to make a living on Saturdays and Sundays. I know that there are young people who go to school and try to make a living.

Hon. J. Narine: That is the time that they transport chicken, Mr. Speaker—Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Those are the days. I was told by a young man; when I saw him on the truck, I asked him how old he was. He was 12 years old. Do you know what they did with them? There were two young fellows who had to collect the chicks on the farm, put them in crates, put them on a truck, deliver them to the pluck shop—\$20 alone. *[Interruption]* They have all kinds of excuses

because the facts are now coming out. If they come 2 o'clock in the morning to the farm, they may be able to make two loads or three loads—\$40 or \$60.

There is no union representation in that industry. There is no agreement. *[Interruption]* How can we interfere with private enterprise? The first time that I worked with the union to unionize one of those farms—I would not call the name—they sold the farm. I made sure that we had 100 per cent of the persons on our side.

So when you are crying wolf and say we are going to break down the industry—in one case the Member for Princes Town said that the industry will go; in the other case, the Member for Chaguanas said that the price will not make a difference. So let us wait and see what will happen. If we have moved from 86 to 40 per cent and nothing happens, then the Prime Minister has said that we will re-look at it.

In this Collection of Taxes Order 2004, when we talk about reducing the cost of chicken, it is really to help stabilize the price of chicken so that the underprivileged people, who depend on chicken for a meal with meat, would be able to buy chicken. I remember going to the grocery and seeing that the prices are starting to fall, although they have not made too much importation.

I grew up in Arima near the largest supermarket—Maharaj West Side Supermarket. Mr. Baliram Maharaj and Mr. Kumar Maharaj are my friends. Mr. Maharaj went on television saying how many thousands of dollars extra they would have to pay in labour as a result of the increase of \$1.00 imposed in the budget debate for the minimum wage. I met him the following day and I told him: “Kumar, it seems that you only have people working for you at minimum wage. Your entire staff is at minimum wage.” He was against it. He then said, “O shite! I did not even realize I made a mistake.”

Mr. Speaker: You are in fact challenging me now to determine whether that is a parliamentary word. Until I determine it, you may want to rephrase that.

Hon. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, I apologize. I would rephrase his statement and take that first part out. “Oh my goodness!” He did not realize that he was saying that he only had persons working with him who were working at minimum wage. He realized that when I drew it to his attention. *[Interruption]*

We are talking about the chicken industry and the labour component. He should have been here from the beginning and he would have realized that the Member

for Chaguanas opened up this debate to a wide area, although the Speaker tried to keep him in line. There are many other things that were spoken of here.

When he says there would be no miraculous reduction, perhaps he is right. I do not doubt that, but we do not want to kill the chicken industry. We want to bring the prices down in a way that it would be across the board and there would not be that fluctuation. Rightly so, in the industry, this is the time of demand and supply and this is the time they will have to increase their production. If they are telling me that their increase was 2.25 per cent, then what the farmers have been telling me is quite true. Those who had 30,000 and 40,000 grow out, at this time they are only getting 20,000 and 25,000 for a grow out. It is demand and supply. When I was getting 40,000 or 50,000 for a grow out, if I am now getting 50 per cent of that, it means that I am interfering with the pricing of chicken because it is demand and supply.

When I was told that chicken hatching eggs were being dumped, I was also told they were telling the Minister of Consumer Affairs about the number of hatching eggs they were bringing into the country; but table eggs came in together with that. I was told that by someone big in the industry. So, they are trying to keep their turf. We understand that, but we are only trying to have the consumers pay a regular price for chicken—an understandable thing. You work hard, you try to make a profit, but you must not squeeze the consumer. That is our business.

They say we spend money on the Community-based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) and other areas. People are proud in Trinidad to have the CEPEP programme because it is sustainable employment. If they have to work for the entire year, they have been working. *[Interruption]* This world of work, you do not understand. You probably would have to talk to the Minister of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development, because the world is changing and you have never been involved in trade union movement.

Mr. Speaker, he spoke about the farms. Who own the farms? My information is that the people at the head of the industry contract the farms out for people to manage. No poor people have farms. The farms belong to the big conglomerates and they contract them out. It is a cartel that is running the industry. You do not understand this because you are just one track. You are thinking about one person. *[Interruption]* I am not attacking anybody. They have done quite well under the PNM. It is the PNM that has brought the industry to this stage and the PNM is just trying to control the price of chicken. They have been made millionaires in this

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country from the PNM and we do not mind that. We encourage entrepreneurs. They started with nothing.

He told me he had a load of chicken on loan to pay off and today he has done well. I am happy for him like other people who have done well because this is a land of opportunity because the PNM, after 48 years—since 1956—has made it possible for education, for this industry that we are dealing here with and this tax Order.

I know what I am on. I am speaking about chicken. This entire Order is about chicken and sugar cane, but since the Member for Chaguanas spoke about honesty and tax collection and where the tax money is going, I said that the Attorney General has said something in this House today that the former Prime Minister, the Member for Couva North, almost ad lib, said, “Let the chips fall where they may”, and did nothing about it.

Then the Member of Parliament for St. Joseph said, at that time, that we were running down red herrings and commissions of enquiries were worth nothing. *[Interruption]* The Member for St. Joseph said that in your time. I have it here recorded.

When the \$10 million was in the bank in London, he did not say anything about that.

Mr. Speaker: Please, please! Ten million dollars in a bank in London have nothing to do with the business before us.

Hon. J. Narine: The Member for Chaguanas was talking about moving taxpayers’ money and went all over the place and ended up in one bank in London, Mr. Speaker. Nobody resigned. Nobody asked for an enquiry because he said no more enquiry. However, our Member, who has no land, who signed no contract, who had nothing to do with what they are talking about, they are asking him to resign.

Mr. Speaker: Please, hon. Minister, I am appealing to you, just like I appealed to the hon. Member for Chaguanas, stick to the Order before the House.

Hon. J. Narine: I am trying to do so, Mr. Speaker, but because—

Mr. Speaker: I implored you earlier to address me. You are supposed to address me, so please do.

Hon. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, I am addressing you. I am saying we have done certain things because of what the Member for Chaguanas said, to put things in perspective. Nobody asked him to resign.

There are other matters we need to talk about, probably in another time and place. I am saying that the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin West will be exonerated because there is a paper trail. He has no lands. If his wife owns lands, thankfully she is gainfully employed.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, I have just indicated that you come back to the Order. Come back to the Order!

Hon. J. Narine: Unlike other people who never worked and had a banking account.

The Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, with respect to the collection of taxes to promote sustainable rural development in agriculture is very important. Then there are other areas to increase the involvement of the youth in agriculture. I spoke about that before, so I do not want to go into anything there again. Another area is to increase competitiveness in the export and domestic market. I was speaking on the domestic market on cocoa and coffee, and even the export market.

Matters were raised here today about the sugar cane industry and I will tell statistics that are different from what my colleague, the Member for Chaguanas, spoke about. Sugar cane production by farmers this year was 610,453 tonnes. This is 30 per cent less than produced in 2002/2003. Obviously, there was a target to produce 610,000 tonnes, as we indicated earlier on. That 30 per cent drop was anticipated. Please note that approximately 18,000 tonnes of sugar cane were left in the fields unharvested and approximately 13,000 tonnes were burnt due to the factory breakdown. They were not able to get to the factory.

I indicated before that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, apart from our Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP), got \$48.5 million to support the farmers in the industry. The Ministry simply only has the farmers. So that the raw sugar production was 42,838.25 tonnes this year, which was 36.6 per cent less than the previous year.

The reasons attributed to this decrease in sugar production were—and we are talking about this Order where we are going to decrease the cost of bringing in raw sugar, icing sugar and other types of sugar like raw sugar not containing added flavouring or colouring, cane sugar and beet sugar—problems with the poor quality of cane, with high levels of extraneous matter resulting in low sugar recovery. For years, farmers have been using urea to bring their crops. We have changed that on their request. This year, they did not get urea; they got a mixed fertilizer—26:0:26. There were teething problems in the industry because of the scales and we are trying to address that. I am not satisfied that the operation of the

scales this year was what we wanted, so we have a team that is working and I have asked them to come up with a better proposal to have those scales distributed.

The poor quality of canes was one problem and the inconsistency in supply was another problem. Someone may doubt that unemployment has gone down to 7.8 per cent, but the direct delivery farmers and Mr. Tambi of CFATT and Mr. Dave Persad called asking me to get Guyanese to cut their cane. They were not getting labour at that time. They are still complaining. That is one of the difficulties they are having and this year I have written to them asking them to give us a proposal, because of problems we have had this year, to go on to next year's crop. That is part of the problem.

There was an increase in the cost of sugar cane, but they would rather get other increases so that the workers would not know that they are getting \$180 a tonne for cane, so that they would not have to pay them \$80. The point is that they are having a problem with the increases.

Then there is the problem of the labour at the factory. We are all aware of that. There were strikes. There were malicious fires as usual and poor weather conditions. This year there was rainfall right through the year. There were abandoned cane fields, but there was also a problem with the Dhanpur mill. I do not want to say much on that. We bought a mill for \$20 million, as far as I heard. I have not seen any figures on that, but I do know that during the past few years we have spent over \$100 million to repair it. It was an 1837 mill, which was outside. That was brought by the former government for \$20 million. I would like, when we are doing the museum, to put that as a monument to the UNC. If I am there and I have my way, I would not get rid of it. I would put it somewhere where my great grandchildren could see what has happened with a government called the UNC who bought a mill for \$20 million, it never did work and it cost us more than \$100 million and that mill was manufactured in 1837. The whole sugar cane industry knows about that. How can they hope to get sugar at a cheaper cost, when Guyana produces at one-third of the cost at which we produce sugar and Belize is going guns? They are about one-third, too. We are producing at a high cost, that is why next year when the European Union drops the price 33 per cent, they will thank this Government for taking that time last year to deal with the sugar industry, instead of waiting until this year or next year. It was done on time and that timely intervention would save this country millions of dollars. This year, it has already saved us \$.5 billion and it will go again. That is a yearly thing and they are talking about unemployment? We could not get people to work in the industry this year.
[*Interruption*]

Who is paying? The Government is not paying anybody, Mr. Speaker. If they are paying slave labour, it is because they should have been reported to the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development. There are people working for less than minimum wage and by the time they get into the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development they have lost their jobs. Sometimes they work for the minimum wage of \$8.00 an hour, but work 12 hours.

4.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, export sales of sugar for the European Union for the period January—June 2004 were approximately 43,500 tonnes of cane. There was foreign exchange and, as a result, the sugar export totalled \$272.2 million. The foreign exchange earned was 3.5 per cent less than the previous year. On the one hand, the sugar industry fell by 30 per cent and the foreign earnings we got from sugar, was just 3.5 per cent less than that of the previous year. The Sugar Manufacturing Company Limited sold 24,103 tonnes of sugar on the local market during the period January—June 2004.

In the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, the support comprised an administration team called the Sugar Industry Team and support staff. That cost \$2 million in administration for the entire year.

With respect to area scales operation, the farmers had 30 scales and the sugar industry team operated 12 scales. This cost \$6.424 million. On the issue of the maintenance of access roads and traces, this cost \$2.3 million. That was used for earthen roads and in some cases gravel roads. There was a networking of 349 miles of roadway. We need to do that.

Cane transport cost \$11.2 million. We used a different type of fertilizer. This cost \$6.188 million. Insecticides were subsidized by \$6.5 million. We paid \$8.6 million for the frog hopper control, which is 100 per cent government. There was the increase in the price of sugar cane to farmers, from \$170 to \$180. That cost \$5.2 million extra this year.

The Member asked about the sugar industry and what the Government has done for the farmers this year. Approximately \$50 million were spent. We will continue to do that because of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order. With respect to this sugar cane matter, we can only do better next year than we did this year. The sales comprise 23,000 tonnes of refined sugar and 1,100 tonnes of washed grey sugar. The total amount of sugar refined in grey wash, sold on the

local market, was 13.4 per cent less than the amount sold during the same period last year. The company earned \$61.5 million in revenue from the sales of sugar on the local market. As you are quite aware, we bring raw sugar; it is refined here and sold on the local market. The Sugar Manufacturing Company is the one which has the authority to bring the sugar. Revenues from sales in sugar on the local market were 17 per cent less than the amount earned in January—June 2003.

I think I have said sufficient on this matter that was raised on sugar. The matter was well dealt with. Sugar has a bright future. In the next debate, when we would be debating the Vesting Bill, I would speak about the other areas. I do not want to say anything on that this afternoon.

With respect to the Harry Noonoo farm, that matter was raised by the Member for Chaguanas, who rightfully said that there were problems. It was not totally their responsibility. I think we got it in time. You would remember that the farm was infested with an influenza called Laryngotracheitis, which was something brought from America and Canada.

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. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

Question put and agreed to.

Hon. J. Narine: Thank you for the extension of time. I would not take all. Because the matter was raised, I need to say something about the Noonoo Farms. We culled approximately 22,000 laying broilers. According to the Act, it is up to the Minister to decide whether they should be compensated. At this point in time, I would not want to say what happened. Some people came from abroad for Christmas to visit the farm. We were able to isolate that part of the country, so that it would not spread to the other part of the industry. That would have been gone. Today we would not have been speaking about trying to allow the poultry industry to survive. It could have wiped out the entire poultry industry.

I complimented my workers. The surveillance was done. They also reported that they were having problems with the chicks and we had to cull 22,000 chicks. Because we had done that before, for that type of farm, we had to look at what was taking place in Canada and the United States to see how they actually handled the situation. What I can tell you is that we have come up with a formula. Over half of a million dollars will be offered to Mr. Noonoo. It is already approved and will be given to him as soon as we get our releases for this year. [*Interruption*] I am doing my work without any fanfare, Mr. Speaker.

If I am responsible for something, I would do it. I am not going to come here and attack anybody and their personality. I would talk the facts, what I read in the newspaper, what I know and what I have heard from competent people. That is what I would do. I have said nothing about Mr. Noonoo because no one raised that matter. The Member has now raised it. It was raised by the Member for Princes Town after I spoke in the budget debate. I did not have the chance to reply. *[Interruption]* I am certain about that. I am not waiting, like the Member for St. Joseph, to say that it is a witch hunt. When we have this enquiry, it would happen.

Mr. Speaker: That matter was referred to a commission of enquiry. Leave it there. Do not—you cannot let what the commissioner will or will not do. Address me and get back to the Order.

Hon. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, I understand what the Member for Couva South was saying, because he, too, had a problem for the six years that they were in government, although he was not part of that. They still have commissions of enquiry to come, although they did not want that. I will move on, Mr. Speaker. *[Interruption]* Mr. Speaker, you understand what is going on? I have a lot I can say and pass on in Parliament today.

I went through London in 2000, and everybody was telling me that someone has a house there. The name was called. When the Member of Parliament for Laventille East/Morvant said when house wet in Trinidad, forget the crime situation, everybody house wet, I told him if rain fell in Trinidad my house will wet, but if it fell in London it is not my house.

Mr. Speaker, the Noonoo Food Farm will be taken care of. There are other areas. *[Interruption]* We have already approved the amount. I can tell you it is over half of a million dollars.

Mr. Ramsaran: Rowley's wife—

Dr. Rowley: You, leave my wife alone!

Mr. Speaker: *[Mr. Speaker pounds gavel]* Order! *[Crosstalk]* Please, hon. Members! Member for Chaguanas, please, tea time is only 20 minutes away.

Hon. J. Narine: Mr. Speaker, if I may inform the Member for Chaguanas, the MP's wife is gainfully employed. She is a professional. I understand his problems. *[Interruption]* Why? The matter was raised. For those of you who do not know, Dr. Rowley's wife is gainfully employed.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister, I have said to you three times before, get back to the Order before us.

Hon. J. Narine: All right, but I remember that on another occasion they asked where the person worked. Dr. Rowley's wife is gainfully employed and has been for a very long time.

Mr. Speaker, I am here to support this Motion. I am supporting the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2004. It was my pleasure to have replied to the Member for Chaguanas. I hope—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. J. Narine: I hope the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order will be passed this afternoon. I support this. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Subhas Panday (Princes Town): Mr. Speaker, the Member for Arouca North has said nothing, so there is very little to reply to, except he spoke about a conglomerate. I did not understand what he spoke about. He tried to use statistics. There is a book called *How to lie with Statistics*. He spoke about increases in production by 102 per cent, but did not give us the figure he was speaking about.

Mr. Narine: I said it was not a quantum leap because it came for 4 per cent. We are trying to carry it to 40 per cent.

Mr. S. Panday: That is the point I am making; the Member was trying to mamaguy the House when he said that he started from nothing and reached 102 per cent.

Mr. Narine: It is very small.

Mr. S. Panday: Exactly. Maybe you do not understand what you were saying. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Before you continue. Hon. Members, let me appeal to you, when a Member is speaking no other Member should speak. Hear him in silence and please address the Chair. You are not to address parties on either side of the House. Address the Chair and that will avoid the crosstalk.

Mr. S. Panday: I am guided. Mr. Speaker, the Member spoke about the increase in cocoa production. It just goes to show his ignorance and incompetence.

Dr. Moonilal: Vacuous—

Mr. S. Panday: I do not want to say vacuous. There are two types of cocoa: the regular cocoa and the colonial cocoa. One takes about five years before it matures, and the other takes four years. It gives the impression that the moment the Member came in, production increased.

The Member went on to ask what is wrong with the chicken legs and why our people cannot eat chicken legs. Apparently he was not thinking when he was speaking. He would have asked the question: Why was there a price differential in the parts of chicken? He went on to say that the wings, chest and back were \$1.19 per pound, while the legs were \$0.31 per pound. There must be a reason the price is like that. The answer is that they have deemed that part as red meat. Furthermore, most of the injections that are given to the birds are done so on the legs. That is why they do not like to eat it. All the chemicals enter the body at that point and it is deemed as red meat. That is why we say we do not want to feed our poor people with poisonous foods and garbage. What this Government is really doing is pretending to be assisting these poor people to get food cheaply when, at the same time, it is really poisoning them by giving them garbage to eat. That is what the Government is doing to the poor people in the country; they are giving them garbage to eat, under the pretext that they are reducing prices.

The Member went on to say that the price of chicken was rising and that there was need for the Government to control price. Apparently, the Member was not listening when the Minister of Finance was speaking. He did not understand what he was saying. The Minister of Finance indicated some of the reasons for the increase in price. If I may, the Minister of Finance indicated that there were factors which increased the price of chicken and food prices in general. These factors are: transport, both external and internal; the exchange rate; energy cost; and the structure of the industry, among other things. What we have is a situation where the prices of the inputs in production, which the producers cannot control, are going up. That is why prices are going up. It seems to me that the Member did not understand what the Prime Minister was speaking about. That is why those statements were made.

One would have thought that he would have gone in the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order and tried to justify it. They can jump high or they can jump low, this PNM Government has a history of damaging agriculture. They have killed agriculture. They have killed the sugar industry. Now they are reducing the VAT on it. They have reached the stage in the poultry industry, which is the largest employer in the agricultural sector, where they are intending to kill that industry. One must ask the question: Why are they attacking the agricultural sector like that? Is it because they hate rural people, they have no regard for rural people, or is it a question of spite? The same areas in which the sugar industries are situated, one can find most of the farms.

Mr. Speaker, I want to show how shortsighted this Government is, they will kill a local industry, although they boast all over the place, saying buy local, eat local. The Member went to the savannah and tasted the soup and said that it was the best local dish he has ever had. The Government is saying to buy local, use local but they are killing the local industry.

When the price of flour was increased the Member said we should eat yam and cassava. Ask them what have they done about the research of Dr. George Sammy, when he made yam flakes? What has the Government done to create that taste in the society? Nothing at all. The Government has no interest in the local agricultural industry. I would show how the PNM is shortsighted and does not care. The Government said all they are concerned with at this stage is to decrease prices. In the process of doing that, all they intend to do is to remove the surcharges. The Government says one thing and does something else.

When one looks in the budget statement one would see that one thing is said and nice words are used when speaking about agriculture, but at the same time you can look at them and see how they are trying to damage it. The Minister of Finance at that time said:

“We believe the agricultural sector can make a significant contribution to the national development effort. Our goal is to increase the sector’s contribution to economic and social development, and employment creation while providing an increasing level of the food requirements of the nation.”

If the Government is saying that it wants to develop the local industry, one would have expected the Member for Arouca North to come here today and flesh out those proposals; how they would be developing the agricultural sector. Instead, he talked a lot of nonsense. I do not want to say he is vacuous. Instead of speaking about how we would develop this industry, what is the message the Member is sending to the farmers? The Government said that it is going to build the society and the sector so that we can feed our people. Instead, the Member came here and merely went on a parade.

On yesterday's *Express* Prof. John Spence—one would have thought if the Member knew he was coming here today to speak he would have looked at the photograph of Prof. Spence and tried to read it. Prof. Spence said that he expected that this Minister would have come before the Parliament and flesh out whatever the hon. Minister of Finance had indicated. Instead, in his budget speech, he said:

“Increase our GDP and agricultural production, while we deal with our sustainable and renewable development of the natural resources and the ecosystem; enhance food security; promote sustainable rural development;

increase the involvement of youth in agriculture; increase competitiveness in export and domestic markets; promote the development of agro-industries as sources of employment and the sustainable utilisation and conservation of ecosystems and species; promote and facilitate private investment in agriculture and develop information systems to service stakeholders in the sector.”

What do you find? These are mere words. The Member had an opportunity here today to come and explain to us and say where he is going but as you observed, there is no elaboration on those points by the Minister.

The Minister of Finance indicated in his budget speech that they intend to develop agriculture. One sees that the beginning of the budget speech he says one thing and at the end, he did exactly the opposite. He says:

“We propose to reduce the surcharge on the importation of chicken and turkey from 86.0 per cent to 40.0 per cent. The measure is expected to reduce price on these specific products, improve the level of competition in the market, and hopefully lower chicken prices in general....If this measure does not generate an appropriate reduction in poultry prices, the surcharge will be reduced further until the expected benefits to the consumer are realised.”

In one breath they are speaking about trying to save the industry and, in the next breath, they are trying to destroy the industry. It is clear that is the aim of the Government.

We believe that the only sub-sector in the agriculture sector that is nearest to efficiency is the poultry industry. There is mechanization and they are doing very well. These surcharges are there to protect the producers from external forces and subsidies granted to other producers. The producers are not asking for subsidies. They are merely asking for a level playing field. When we reduce these surcharges we are, as the Minister said, putting competition at the boundary. We must be careful we do not deal with our producers in such a way that they cannot compete with producers who are subsidized. One such example is in the United States of America where the poultry industry is heavily subsidized. When we kill our industry, and allow these chicken parts to come in, we will find that we in Trinidad and Tobago will be taking our money, our resources to subsidize foreign producers. This is the problem the people are having.

One of the factors that go into the production of chicken is rice. The question we ask is: Why not control the importation of feedstock into the industry? The Government is not controlling the price of the feedstock coming into the country, but it is trying to control the prices. That is why the poultry producers are upset

that the Government is holding them and making them alone carry the sacrifice. This is what they are bothered about.

The large producers in the United States of America use the economies of scale. They have subsidies. We have decided that, in order to protect our industry, we put those surcharges. We are not the only country that has done it. Throughout the Caribbean, there are countries that have instituted these surcharges. They are as follows: Barbados, 100 per cent; Bahamas, 120 per cent; Guyana, 88 per cent and Belize, 94 per cent. The surcharges are there to protect the farmer against unfair international competition. The reason the surcharge is lower in Guyana and Belize, is because they produce corn. One of the factors is that it is locally produced, so they can control it. Having been able to control it, they put a lower tariff for their farmers. One would have expected the Member for Arouca North to say that they intend to help and ensure that they are going to keep down prices, create employment and develop the economy of the agricultural sector. We thought the Member would have come today and say: We are going to encourage farmers to produce corn so that we will be developing an indigenous, local industry, but they have no vision.

These people who we are trying to save—who will check to see if they are getting substandard meat from the US? You will check to see the kind of food coming into our country? Who will check to see whether they are dumping rotten food on us?

Mr. Speaker: The sitting of the House is suspended for tea and will be resumed at 5.00 p.m.

4.30 p.m: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. S. Panday: Mr. Speaker, where is this vision for food security? It is said that by the year 2007, there will be a world food shortage. We are in a precarious position. Do we feel because we have oil and gas revenues we do not care to produce for ourselves? I made a point on the last occasion with respect to our poor Caricom neighbours; will we go on the international market and compete with them? Why do we not use our resources and build a strong agricultural sector, so we can help feed our Caricom brothers? Why are we so shortsighted, that we will take the moneys we have to compete with them? We are in a position where we can go in one direction and help the Caribbean and our people, or we could go in our Trinidadian and Tobagonian “show-off” self and say: “We have money we doh care about all yuh”? That is why the Bajans do not want to see us.

That is why former Prime Minister, Michael Manley, said: “The oil flow through them like a dose of salts.” I believe that! What he really meant was that they had an opportunity to develop the society and this Government, during the oil boom, never did it. This is the second time they are getting that opportunity and it seems to me that they do not intend to build an agricultural base. She is getting angry because they know why. That is the PNM’s attitude against poor people, rural people and the constituencies we represent.

Mr. Speaker: I think you need to refer to the hon. Member for Tobago East. If you are saying “she”, it is not proper.

Mr. S. Panday: I would not descend to that level and refer to her please, Sir. I would not descend to that level and refer to anyone.

Mr. Speaker: I am not following you. I said you have to refer to the hon. Member, not she.

Mr. S. Panday: With the greatest respect, I am not referring to her.

Mr. Speaker: I beg your pardon.

Mr. S. Panday: I would not condescend to that, Mr. Speaker.

The poultry industry is one of the areas in which the country is 100 per cent self-sufficient. That is the industry that the PNM has targeted. That is why everyone is so suspicious. Mr. Speaker, the Government knows what the country needs. We have the resources, yet they refuse to act.

I wish to refer to an article from the *Newsday* of October 27, 2004. The Member for Arouca North was saying what the situation is. This is why you cannot trust them. I quote:

At the moment, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources is aiming at providing food for the nation if we are to achieve developed country status by 2020.”

In order to become a First World country you must be able to feed yourself. The Government is saying: to reduce prices, feed people garbage and we intend to destroy your industry.

“Our Ministry is the most important arm of Government as we are supposed to have food security for the nation by ensuring sufficient food production.”

This PNM Government has given billions of dollars to other ministries. Out of a \$27 billion budget, a meagre, mingy \$52 million was allocated for development. I continue:

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“If we do not reach our target in food production, the country suffers economically or otherwise.”

He was speaking at the Centre Pointe Mall in Chaguanas on April 27, 2004. Hear the comedy. It reminds me of Sir Winston Churchill when a woman said: “Mr. Churchill, you are drunk.” He says: “Tomorrow I will be sober.” He told the gathering:

“The cost of importing food was very high and when you see what is being sold in the grocery, coming from aboard, I am making an appeal to start buying local products, produced by the farmers and the people of Trinidad and Tobago.”

That is what the Minister told people. When he looked on the shelves of the grocery and saw the garbage, he felt sorry for them. The Minister of Finance is now saying: “That is the garbage we are bringing for all yuh.” I wonder if they do not speak or they are just a collection of people in the Cabinet without a single voice. The Government is saying one thing in trying to explain the situation and is doing something else.

“He felt that the demise of agriculture over the years is our fault.” The PNM is saying that. I repeat; this is the Member for Arouca North speaking on October 26, 2004. He felt that the demise of agriculture over the years is our fault. That is the PNM. Do not put me there with him because I am sober. The Minister noted. He went on—the hypocrisy. The Minister noted that it was important to save grade 1, 2 and 3 lands for agriculture, when he knows full well he was fooling the people because all the grade 1 land, the PNM has put into housing. *[Interruption]* “Me eh ‘tief’ from Tobago.” “Me eh ‘fraid nobody. Me heh tief nothing in Tobago. I bad.” My wife also works. My wife is also very successful. *[Interruption]* Landate.

The Member pointed out that there are grades 4, 5, and 6. That is why we say that the Government has something for agriculture. The Government has put the best agricultural lands into housing and the most fertile lands are in the Diego Martin Valley, especially River Estate. The Valsayn area has fertile lands and it is used for housing.

Just recently, when the Member spoke about land utilization, they went into St. Joseph, in Aranguez and took agricultural land to go into house-padding. This shows that they do not care. They know what the problem is. The Member said:

“Countries have met developed status over the years. They did so because they could feed themselves.”

So far he is saying all the right things, but what he is doing today is making sure that other people feed us. By his dropping the tariff, he is making other people feed us. He said:

“So far we are not able to do that because we are not able to get the people together.”

He is making excuses. I continue:

“Agriculture is as important as education.”

Hear this joke:

“The nation is now getting health conscious and we are running around every road in the country but we are still eating substandard food that is not healthy.”

They are telling people to eat local, healthy foods but today, they are reducing the price of chicken to import chicken from another country for a quality which we have no control over. I continue:

“Start eating healthy foods from a young age.”

Today the Government is giving us those birds from abroad which are filled with steroids and hormones. Mr. Speaker, this is what they are saying.

The Member for Arouca North went on to say that the food import bill must come down. We are asking the PNM Government and the particular Minister: By dropping the surcharge and encouraging importation, will that bring down the food bill? The Government is importing sugar.

Today the hon. Minister indicated that there was a period when they said that the protection will last until 2007, if it is not renewed, indicating that the incubation period comes to an end. When that decision was made, to have the incubation period come to an end in 2007, have the conditions on the international market changed so that there might be a need to extend it? These are the questions we are asking so that we would protect our people and reduce our food Bill.

Mr. Speaker, they only say to buy local when they are in a squeeze. For example, the Minister of Consumer Affairs shouted out: “I cannot control price.” When the price of flour rose, he said: “Eat dasheen, eddoes and cassava.” What has the PNM done as a Government to encourage people to develop that taste for local food? Nothing! This Government operates by “vaps”; when the price of something increases they say do not eat that, eat this. Fifty-two thousand pounds of eddoes and 200,000 pounds of cassava were produced in 2002. With that kind of production, what is the Government doing to this population?

5.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the reason for that is to prevent price increases which the Government may not be able to control. One would have thought that a government with a vision would have put the necessary infrastructure in place to ensure that we compete without having to fight foreign importations—we prepare ourselves in such a way to compete with them—so that the switch will be quite easy. What this Government did instead was merely to announce that prices went up: stop eating this and stop eating that.

Mr. Speaker, in an article in the *Express* newspaper, again, Prof. Spence said that is only talk; they have no intention of dealing with agriculture. He said do not let them fool you; and that the dropping of this incentive is really to mamaguy you, to fool you and to hoodwink you. How does he know that? In an article in the *Express* newspaper written by Prof. John Spence headlined: “No 2020 Vision for agriculture” he said:

“Two recent statements by Ministers are indicative of the Government’s view on agriculture.”

So, regardless of what they come here and say, this is what town is saying about the Government:

“The first was made in the budget debate when the Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education was reported to have stated that a second campus of the UWI is to be built at Orange Grove.”

Orange Grove land is the last remaining fertile land in that area:

“This area contains some of the last remaining good soil for agriculture, most of the better soils having already been used for housing. The most outstanding example of this is River Estate that has first-class soils, but which has been allowed to be put into housing by squatting and then regularization of the squatting.”

So, instead of using our arable lands for agriculture, they are going to put a university there. What Prof. Spence is really saying is that we may be short in stature, but we should not be short in intelligence. He said to go up the road—shift a little further and go to Wallerfield.

Mr. Speaker, there is something called the St. Augustine sand, which is three or four inches thick, and below that sand is an area of impermeable plasticine type of material. When the rain falls it cannot permeate into the soil, so you cannot get

trees or plants to grow there, which need more than three inches or four inches of soil. That is the kind of soil that is there.

To show how this Government does not care about agriculture, they take that place where the soil is very infertile and put all the farms up there, and where the land is fertile they put houses on the land. We are saying that it is not too late. Do not use arable agriculture lands; do not alienate agricultural land and put it under concrete. Once the land is alienated and dedicated to that type of action it will never come back. We are not saying not to expand the University of the West Indies, but to go a little distance up the road and put the university there. Mr. Speaker, it is not only that they are foolish, but also their foolishness is matched by their arrogance.

He continues:

“The valleys of the Northern Range that contained fertile soils have been developed with housing...It is ironic that while the Minister responsible for Consumer Affairs is calling for more local food production, the Minister of Science and Technology is planning to put buildings on readily accessible and easy-to-mechanise fertile lands at Orange Grove.”

Mr. Speaker, if the Government does not know, they should listen to what Prof. Spence is saying here:

“Indeed there is already an excellent and detailed plan in existence for growing of food crops at Orange Grove.”

The same persons who the Government is telling that they are going to drop the surcharge in order to reduce prices are saying that they can produce agriculture there so that there will be sustainable development.

“The second statement was made by the Minister responsible for Trade...who is reported to have stated that the Caroni lands were very suitable for residences for diplomats when the FTAA headquarters are located in this country.”

What Prof. Spence is saying is that this Cabinet is just a collection of people, not a people of one vision; not a people with one objective. This is what the people are saying:

“It is interesting how persons can have different outlooks: when I look at Caroni lands I see green fields; when Minister Valley Looks at those same lands he sees upmarket housing for diplomats!”

Mr. Speaker, we are saying that this reduction in surcharge is really a short-term and a myopic position, and it does not fall within the framework of a medium-term or a long-term plan—probably they are doing it out of spite. We do not know. It appears to be so. The Government said that they are dropping the surcharge for the time being and, at the same time, they are going to immediately set up a system whereby it could reduce the cost of the factors of production to keep down prices. This is the way the Government should have gone. But, no, they want to buy from America. There is where we are going.

Mr. Speaker, on the debate with respect to Caroni (1975) Limited, I will speak about the financing, et cetera. The poultry people are saying that they do not want any subsidies. The Member for Chaguanas rightly said that subsidies are a bureaucratic system that would probably lead to inefficiencies, especially production subsidies.

The poultry farmers are only asking for this Government to keep its word. This makes us feel that the Government only comes here and uses nice phrases and they do not follow them up. The poultry farmers are not asking the Government for subsidies, but to implement the proposed measures which were in the 2003/2004 budget. That is all they are asking the Government to do.

The Government fooled the population when they told them in fiscal year 2003/2004 that they were going to develop agriculture by putting certain measures in place. One year later they come and lick them down. In the 2005 budget, the Government did not say anything about what was proposed in fiscal year 2003/2004.

Mr. Speaker, they are asking for the reform of the fiscal regime for the agriculture sector. They are not asking for subsidy; they are not asking for any help. They are asking for the introduction of tax credits; investment allowances; and an initial allowance of 100 per cent of capital expenditure on plant and equipment for agro processing activities.

The Government has done this in other areas; for example, in the tourism industry. When the Government wanted to develop tourism in Tobago, they were encouraging persons to build hotels in Tobago, and they were giving them a tax rebate on capital expenditure. They promised the same thing in agriculture, but they are just mamaguying the farmers. The farmers are saying that they want lower interest rates and electricity for agriculture; adequate compensation for losses due to flooding—not \$46—and natural disasters; restructuring of the Agricultural Development Bank. The Government promised the people these measures in order to encourage them to produce food, and they are asking for the Government to do these things and they will produce the food.

Mr. Speaker, the farmers did not ask for this, but I am certain that the Government could set up some reinsurance scheme for agriculture insurance, if it really wants to encourage people to produce food without having great losses. I will go into these details at another time, but merely to say that this Government says one thing and does something else.

The Member for Arouca North spoke about food security in the context of the poultry industry. If one looks at the whole spectrum of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources that Minister and his predecessors have been a colossal waste of time.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. S. Panday: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. The Government has reduced value added tax (VAT) on cocoa powder. It seems to me that the persons who the Government is trying to help will have to drink cocoa water. Cocoa is a beverage which should contain milk. What the dairy farmers are saying is that there is a noose around the neck of the dairy industry. The Government is trying to reduce the price of cocoa powder instead of trying to develop the cocoa industry; and the dairy industry has a noose around its neck.

Mr. Singh: That is cocoa tea without cream.

Mr. S. Panday: That is cocoa water. The dairy farmers are saying that the only purchaser of their milk is Nestlé. Nestlé purchased 99 per cent of the milk produced by dairy farmers in Trinidad and Tobago. They produce nine million kilograms per year, and that figure has reduced. Prior to 1998, dairy farmers sold 11 million kilograms of milk to Nestlé. The farmers said that they were hit when Nestlé cited economic reasons—the farmers were taking too long to get their milk to the factory. So, the farmers were forced to reorganize.

Mr. Speaker, Nestlé told the farmers that the milk must be at four degrees centigrade after being milked. So, if a milk van is going for milk by a farmer down in Barrackpore or a farmer down in St. Francique, by the time the van reaches Nestlé, the milk must be at four degrees centigrade, if not, Nestlé will just throw the milk away. They just reject the milk.

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If this Government was interested in agriculture and feeding the nation, all it had to do was to set up some areas for refrigeration where the milk could be stored. As a result, the number of collection stations was reduced from 13 stations to two stations. There is one station in Wallerfield and another station in Carlsen Field. As a result, all the farmers south of Carlsen Field went out of business. Nestlé's policy forced many farmers out of business.

The farmers were paid \$1.55 per kilogram for their milk and they were also getting a little subsidy. When Nestlé sold that milk to the population it was sold at \$5 per kilogram. Now, having driven the farmers out of the system, Nestlé is importing skim powder—the waste from milk—and making Svelty milk and so forth and that milk is being sold at \$6.69 a litre. The same poor persons whom the Government is trying to protect were producing the milk here. The Government could have put the necessary infrastructure in place to help dairy farmers, but instead of doing that it allowed the dairy farmers to die, and now Nestlé is importing second-class material and selling it at a high price in our country.

The hon. Member for Arouca North said that if agriculture suffers the country suffers. In the budget statement the hon. Member said that the Government would take other action with respect to the poultry industry. The Government said that if the surcharge does not generate an appropriate reduction in poultry prices the surcharge would be reduced further until expected benefits to the consumer are realized. That is the sting in the tail of the scorpion, and that means: they are coming for you. We feel that the same thing is going to happen with the dairy farmers. The conglomerates are going to deal with us. Those conglomerates do not have an interest in production; they do not have any investments.

The hon. Member for Arouca North said that the big fellows are putting down the farms and giving the people the chickens to rear. I want to inform the hon. Member that I know of many instances where people put down their farms and the processors give them the chickens to rear. This is where we are going.

What the people are saying is that when this generation of farmers goes the other generation will not pick it up. We have the Youth Apprenticeship Programme in Agriculture (YAPA) and they know, as well as we know, that this YAPA programme is for them to tell a friend to send some boys to give them a little thing. These are people without any interest in agriculture; people who are really residual in agriculture. For any industry to develop there must be persons with the expertise coming into the industry.

Mr. Speaker, what is happening to the University of the West Indies? We are spending so much on the University of the West Indies. The Agriculture

Department has almost closed down, and they have joined with the Department of Natural Sciences. So, people are not coming out with the necessary skills and expertise that are needed for the agriculture sector. What is the Government doing about that? If there are no persons with that expertise, the industry will always be labour intensive.

Mr. Speaker, we feel that these poor persons who are being given three months and six months with the YAPA programme are just wasting their time. They are being put in an area where they cannot survive. If you take a person from YAPA and give that person \$60 a day and a three-month course in processing and so forth, and then put that person on a cocoa estate to produce cocoa, that person then has to wait five years for the cocoa to come. That person will not be reaching anywhere. We are saying that not only the poultry industry will be going, but the Government has reduced VAT on cocoa and it has killed the milk industry which is a major component of that beverage.

We are talking about chicken here, but chicken is only a part of our diet. We could develop an aquaculture industry where we could produce, not only chicken as a form of protein, but we could introduce fish. There are only six or seven aquaculture areas in Trinidad where people are producing tilapia for protein. So, if you do not want to eat chicken you could eat fish and get protein. They are begging the Government for some assistance; they are asking for subsidies; and they are asking for the Government to assist them to market that product. They have done the necessary research—although they do not have tertiary education—and they have developed the red and silver tilapia which could match the red snapper. We could have a good export market; we could feed our people. These are the people the Government should be helping, but the Agricultural Development Bank does not lend them money.

Mr. Speaker, these same people want to help and build the economy but the same pressure that the National Flour Mills is inflicting on the poultry farmers is the same pressure it is inflicting on the fish farmers. As a result, the cost of production is very high. Mr. Speaker, in places like Malaysia, they have developed such an industry and they are exporting to Taiwan, Japan and China.

What is this Government doing about our fishermen? Our fishermen go out to sea under very hazardous conditions and they try to bring in food for the nation, but they have been hijacked, beaten and killed. What is the Government doing for them? Instead of opening the door and allowing the chicken to come in and slap us on our faces—I hate that kind of chicken because when you put it in the pot it

turns to water before it cooks. The Moruga fishermen are asking the Government to give them support.

Mr. Speaker, they boasted about the CEPEP programme and most of the fishermen in Moruga are afraid to go out to sea since a fisherman was shot and killed in Moruga. They are now saying that they will go with CEPEP. So, instead of producing food and making a substantial and tangible contribution to agriculture, they are saying everyone is going CEPEP, so they want CEPEP, too. We are saying that the Government should juxtapose CEPEP with agriculture. CEPEP is cleaning the same area all the time. Who supervises those persons? They do not go and clean different areas but they are only cleaning one spot where you could see. There are cocoa estate and citrus estates on Caroni (1975) Limited lands. [Interruption] The Member is glad that I am saying that and as the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources, he could not say that. Churchill's said: "Tomorrow I will be sober." [Desk thumping]

Mr. Speaker, with respect to the citrus industry, the Member boasted that orange production has increased. It seems to me that the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West does not speak to the Member for Arouca North. On October 01, 2003 the then Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources said that the citrus industry in Trinidad and Tobago had declined considerably; both in terms of productivity and output and the industry continues to face many challenges. He said he does not know if the persons who are collecting the data are not reading them.

Mr. Speaker, to emphasise his point, Minister Rahael disclosed that approximately 8,000 hectares provided one million crates in the early 1960s, and that figure now stands at 400 hectares—when the Member is quoting figures he must quote figures like that—an increase of almost 50 per cent. [Desk thumping] That is how you must quote figures and percentages.

Mr. Rahael also said that the Coconut Growers Association (CGA) are complaining that they are not being supplied with a sufficient number of crates to keep the factory going. They may have to close down the factory. If we do not develop agriculture and keep the basic agriculture going, the agro processing section will die. And, of course, according to Minister Rahael, the server of the citrus sector identified a number of technical and socio constraints affecting citrus production. They include agro economic constraints to pest and disease management and crop husbandry. Has the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources addressed that problem? Has the Minister looked at that matter? What are the results?

Mr. Speaker, Minister Rahael disclosed that the CGA had applied for 1,000 acres of land in the Orange Grove area. They have also asked for 50 acres for a model citrus farm and the Minister said that he would look into the matter, but for houses, the land is already alienated. When people want to produce food, they are telling them that they are going to look into the matter. We are saying that they are a pack of jokers. That is not all.

Mr. Speaker, let us take another area. There is an enterprise called Palo Seco Enterprises Limited. That enterprise is the second largest landowner in the country. [*Interruption*] They rear sheep there and the Government is planning to terminate their sheep rearing industry for housing. When the people were trying to sell out all the sheep on the project, the people cut down the trees and blocked the road and prevented them from selling the sheep. They intend to sell all their sheep for \$250,000. So, a portion of the 70,000 acres of land there will go for housing.

There are infrastructure and other things in place to develop agriculture, but it seems to me that this Government is giving agriculture only lip-service. So, when they bring these provisions today, we could see through them, because the aim is to kill agriculture and mamaguy the people.

Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Conrad Enill): Mr. Speaker, thank you. When the hon. Prime Minister began the debate on the budget presentation he made two points: firstly, he said that we were going to use our energy resources to do a particular thing. Secondly, he said that we were going to diversify the economy; and he spoke about agriculture being a major component of that. All the advice that Members on the other side give us is going to fit quite nicely within the exercise that we are looking at, as it relates to agriculture.

I would like to thank the Members for their contributions and to let them know that I have in fact listened to what they had to say. We do not agree with some of the things that have been said, but we are going to still look at them in the context of moving Trinidad and Tobago forward, as we intend to create a better society very shortly.

I would have liked to be in a position to make some more comments, but I think that my colleague dealt with all the substantive issues. Mr. Speaker, thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2004 be confirmed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday, November 05, 2004 at 1.30 p.m. That day is Private Members' Day and, by agreement, we will be doing the Motion by the Member for Caroni Central.

Mr. Speaker, before we take the adjournment, I would also like to inform hon. Members that we need to deal with the Local Government Order dealing with the Tobago House of Assembly and the Elections and Boundaries Commission Report. I would therefore like to inform Members that there would probably be a sitting on November 10, 2004. It is unlikely that we will be sitting on November 12, 2004, because of the confluence of the Divali and Eid public holidays. I am just giving due notice, but Members will receive formal notice in due course.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, before I put the Motion for the Adjournment of the House, there is a matter to be raised on the adjournment. I now call on the hon. Member for Caroni East. [*Desk thumping*]

Ramleela Celebrations (Funding of)

Mr. Ganga Singh (Caroni East): Mr. Speaker, with your permission, I wish to raise the following Matter on the Adjournment: the failure of the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs to provide adequate and timely funding to Ramleela groups for the 2004 Ramleela celebrations.

I wish to read into the record a letter to the hon. Minister of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs dated October 11, 2004, from the national Ramleela Council and it says:

“Dear Madam:

On behalf of the National Ramleela Council of Trinidad and Tobago it is my distinct pleasure to inform you of the annual Ramleela celebrations to be held at various venues. I have attached an official listing indicating the dates and venues of the Ramleela celebrations which will commence on 15th October 2004.

I would also like to take this opportunity to update you on some matters of urgent importance.

- 1) All budgets and relevant documentation pertaining to funding for groups for Ramleela celebrations were submitted by the end of April 2004.
- 2) On October 8th 2004, the President of the National Ramleela Council of Trinidad and Tobago Mrs. K. Ramsubeik was informed that the funds would not be released until after mid November 2004, that is after the completion of budget debates. We would like to express our disappointment with the information we received that even though funds were specifically sourced and allocated for the Ramleela celebrations 2004, instructions were given to direct the said funds to other non Ramleela groups.

These funds are needed for the high costs associated with the preparations and actual performances for Ramleela in advance of the celebrations. Due to the above mentioned unexpected financial constraints many of our member groups have already expressed disappointment with respect to the absence of this funding which probably may be paid at a later date.

It is well noted that besides the involvement of local citizens, this celebration also attracts many tourists and forms an integral part of the national culture.

We are therefore requesting a written response on this matter and a date to be scheduled for a meeting between your good self Madam Minister with the Executive of the N.R.C.T.T., and a delegate member of each of our groups with a view of having discussions on the N.R.C.T.T., Ramleela in Trinidad and Tobago and other matters.

All correspondence must be....

We hope that you will find time in your usually busy schedule to attend at least one of these Ramleela celebration.”

Mr. Speaker, attached to that letter was a listing of 29 Ramleela celebrations which were being spread throughout Trinidad.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs took the time to visit the Tarouba Ramleela celebrations. I want to read from *Hansard* dated October 26, 2004 where the hon. Minister indicated:

“We need to do some more of it in Trinidad and Tobago and I feel that part of our problem, even with bringing our different races together is the fact that we do not know. So our education programme this year is to expose the different cultures in such a way so that they can understand.

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On Sunday I stopped off at a Ramleela celebration. I am supposed to know exactly what it means, what it depicts, I am supposed to know the lesson that it is portraying—

Now, I am supposed to know that. I am in Trinidad, and people passing who are just looking on may ask: What are they burning there? Why is there that large flame? People are not appreciating it. They should look at it and understand the story.”

Mr. Speaker, I quoted that because it clearly demonstrates a level of lack of knowledge. I know for a fact that there is provision for funding. In 2001 I put a structure in place and we initiated a Ramleela Council. [*Desk thumping*] I want to give kudos where they are due. The hon. Member for Arima continued that funding in 2002 and 2003, but in 2004 there is a diversion of the funding.

Mr. Speaker, why is this so? Why is it that Ramleela was placed outside the pale of national identity and consciousness? In this text: *Identity, Ethnicity, Culture in the Caribbean* edited by Ralph Premdass, University of the West Indies at page 117 it says:

“Ever since Africans started to assume control over the government from 1956, East Indian leaders have complained of being ‘marginalised’ and ‘alienated’ not just from the political decision-making process, but from the entire society as a result of the general failure to give greater national recognition to and show greater acceptance of their particular cultural forms...

Thus, although the PNM from its inception had a multiclass, multiethnic and multiracial character...the nationalism that it espoused was deemed to have had a black bias since its dominant cultural symbols became the steelpan, the calypso and Carnival which are predominantly associated with the Afro-Trinidadian...Relatedly, Indian leaders have complained that more state resources are given to the promotion and development of the latter cultural forms than are given to Indian cultural expressions...”

Mr. Speaker, I could go on to quote at length from that text, but I believe that there is a kind of thinking at the level of the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs. It seems that they have replaced every cultural form to that of mendicancy. You must be beggars with the calabash bowl coming before the ministry. [*Desk thumping*]

I want to deal with that matter. You see, Amartya Sen, a Nobel Prize winner, in his text: *Development of Freedom* said:

“...It is also necessary to note the fact that cross-cultural communication and appreciation need not necessarily be matters of shame and disgrace. We do have the capacity to enjoy things that have originated elsewhere, and cultural nationalism or chauvinism can be seriously debilitating as an approach to living. Rabindranath Tagore, the great Bengali poet, commented on this issue rather eloquently:

Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine.”

Mr. Speaker, when we look at Ramleela in the context of what it means for community empowerment for the 29 communities, we only have to refer to our own VS Naipaul in his text: *Literary Occasion* at page 7 which says:

“One of the first big public things I was taken to was the *Ramlila*, the pageant-play based on the *Ramayana*, the epic about the banishment and later triumph of Rama, the Hindu hero-divinity. It was done in an open field in the middle of sugarcane, on the edge of our small country town. The male performers were barebacked and some carried long bows; they walked in a slow, stylised, rhythmic way, on their toes, and with high, quivering steps; when they made an exit...they walked down a ramp that had been dug in the earth. The pageant ended with the burning of the big black effigy of the demon king of Lanka. This burning was one of the things people had come for; and the effigy, roughly made, with tar paper on a bamboo frame, had been standing in the open field all the time, as a promise of the conflagration.

Everything in that *Ramlila* had been transported from India in the memories of people. And thought as theatre it was crude, and there was much that I would have missed in the story, I believe I understood more and felt more than I had done during *The Prince and the Pauper* and *Sixty Glorious Years* at the local cinema. Those were the very first films I had seen, and I had never had an idea what I was watching. Whereas the *Ramlila* had given reality, and a lot of excitement, to what I had known of the *Ramayana*.”

I recommend this text to the Member.

6.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, so you understand the role of Ramleela in the community. This is what Derek Walcott, another Nobel Prize Winner, in his Nobel Prize Acceptance

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Lecture on December 07, 1992 entitled: "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" had to say:

"Felicity is a village in Trinidad on the edge of the Caroni plain, the wide central plain that still grows sugar and to which indentured cane cutters were brought after emancipation, so the small population of Felicity is East Indian, and on the afternoon that I visited it with friends from America, all the faces along its road were Indian, which, as I hope to show, was a moving, beautiful thing, because this Saturday afternoon *Ramleela*, the epic dramatization of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, was going to be performed, and the costumed actors from the village were assembling on a field strung with different-coloured flags, like a new gas station, and beautiful Indian boys in red and black were aiming arrows haphazardly into the afternoon light."

"Low blue mountains on the horizon, bright grass, clouds that would gather colour before the light went. Felicity! What a gentle Anglo-Saxon name for an epical memory.

Under an open shed on the edge of the field, there were two huge armatures of bamboo that looked like immense cages. They were parts of the body of a god, his calves or thighs, which, fitted and reared, would make a gigantic effigy. This effigy would be burnt as a conclusion to the epic. The cane structures flashed a predictable parallel: Shelley's sonnet on the fallen statue of Ozymandias and his empire, that 'colossal wreck' in its empty desert.

Drummers had lit a fire in the shed and they eased the skins of their tables nearer the flames to tighten them. The saffron flames, the bright grass, and the hand-woven armatures of the fragmented god who would be burnt were not in any desert where imperial power had finally toppled but were part of a ritual, evergreen season that, like the cane-burning harvest, is annually repeated, the point of such sacrifice being its repetition, the point of the destruction being renewal through fire.

Deities were entering the field. What we generally call 'Indian music' was blaring from the open platformed shed from which the epic would be narrated. Costumed actors were arriving. Princes and gods, I supposed. What an unfortunate confession! 'Gods, I suppose' is the shrug that embodies our African and Asian diasporas.

I had often thought of but never seen *Ramleela*, and had never seen this theatre, an open field, with village children as warriors, princes, and gods. I had no idea what the epic story was, who its hero was, what enemies he

fought, yet I had recently adapted the *Odyssey* for a theatre in England, presuming that the audience knew the trials of Odysseus, hero of another Asia Minor epic, while nobody in Trinidad knew any more than I did about Rama, Kali, Shiva, Vishnu, apart from the Indians, a phrase I use pervertedly because that is the kind of remark you can still hear in Trinidad: 'apart from the Indians'.

It was as if, on the edge of the Central Plain, there was another plateau, a raft on which the *Ramayana* would be poorly performed in this ocean of cane, but that was my writer's view of things, and it is wrong. I was seeing the *Ramleela* at Felicity as theatre when it was faith."

Mr. Speaker, Derek Walcott continues:

"Here in Trinidad I had discovered that one of the greatest epics of the world was seasonally performed, not with that desperate resignation of preserving a culture, but with an openness of belief that was as steady as the wind bending the cane lances of the Caroni plain."

I say these things because when you hear talk about community empowerment, values, mores and norms and when you have 29 communities asking for funding as a catalyst for community activity and you seek to deprive them of that funding, you cannot go 2020.

I have quoted four Nobel prize winners: Amartya Sen, Rabindranath Tagore, V.S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott to demonstrate what we have is a gold mine and all we are asking for is to provide that funding as we did in 2001, 2002 and 2003 in order to provide the seat capital for social capital in the communities throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Thank you.

The Minister of State in the Ministry of Community Development and Culture (Hon. Edward Hart): Mr. Speaker, the question raises two issues: adequacy of funding and timeliness of funding.

With respect to the issue of timeliness of funding, I wish to draw your attention to the fact that Ramleela celebrations are usually observed from around mid-October to early November each year. I have witnessed the Ramleela celebrations from a youth, because I am from Tacarigua, a little village with a lot of East Indians so we have all the different traditions: Ramleela, Phagwa, Divali as the case may be, so I know about the celebrations.

In anticipation of the event, the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs planned for this year's celebrations by budgeting for funding

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in the October 2004 allocations of the Culture Division. The assessment of the several requests for assistance from cultural organizations was undertaken prior to the receipt of releases of funds from the Ministry of Finance.

Upon securing the funding, the necessary accounting processes were engaged to ensure timely disbursement. I am happy to inform this honourable House that several cheques for the various groups were distributed this afternoon to representatives of the respective organizations and on Monday morning, the exercise will continue at 11.00 a.m. because there are about 29 groups that requested funding and we are going to see about all of them.

On the question of timeliness, I have also been informed that about 50 per cent of Ramleela groups have either not yet started their celebrations or have only just begun, but the Member of Caroni East had the gall and temerity to talk about the adequacy of funding.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to indicate that my Government has increased funding for Ramleela groups by nearly 500 per cent over the funds provided in 2001. [*Desk thumping*] Whereas funds provided in 2001 were in the sum of \$60,000, they were increased to \$109,500, [*Desk thumping*] in 2002; \$295,000 in 2003, and this year, I am pleased to say that the total financial assistance given is in the sum of \$309,650. [*Desk thumping*]

Not only has this Government increased funding dramatically, but this year we made training in wire bending available to several Ramleela groups throughout Trinidad. [*Desk thumping*] Such training at a cost of \$22,650 was to ensure a better quality of costuming and drama presentation.

The Ramleela people are happy and even sometime this year we sent the President to India for the Arrival Day Celebrations. So we have a good rapport with these people. And on Wednesday, we are going to give out funding to over 70 Divali groups at the ministry.

Mr. Speaker, we care about Ramleela, we care about Divali, and we care about Emancipation. It is a Government that cares.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.12 p.m.