

Leave of Absence

Friday, November 19, 2004

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, November 19, 2004

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the Member for Arouca South (Hon. C. Robinson-Regis) requesting leave of absence from the sitting of the House for the period November 07, 2004 to December 04, 2004. The leave which the Member seeks is granted. I have also received communication from the Member for La Brea (Mr. H. Bereaux) requesting leave of absence for the period November 15, 2004 to November 28, 2004. The leave which the Member seeks is also granted.

BIRTHS AND DEATHS REGISTRATION (AMDT.) BILL

Bill to amend the Births and Deaths Registration Act, Chap. 44:01, brought from the Senate [*The Minister of Legal Affairs*]; read the first time.

PAPERS LAID

1. The Highways (Control of Advertising Hoardings) Regulations, 2004. [*The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Franklin Khan)*]
2. Audited financial statements of Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission for the financial year December 31, 2001. [*The Minister of Trade and Industry and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Kenneth Valley)*]
3. Audited financial statements of National Broadcasting Network Limited for the financial year December 31, 2002. [*Hon. K. Valley*]
4. Audited financial statements of National Broadcasting Network Limited for the financial year December 31, 2003. [*Hon. K. Valley*]

Papers 2 to 4 to be referred to the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.

**DEFINITE URGENT MATTERS
(LEAVE)**

**Biche High School
(Opening of)**

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Nariva. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Harry Partap (*Nariva*): Mr. Speaker, thank you. In accordance with Standing Order 12 of the House of Representatives, I hereby seek your leave to move the adjournment of the House for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely, the failure of the Government to open the Biche High School.

The matter is definite because it concerns the children of Biche who are forced to travel long distances outside the district in order to access secondary education.

The matter is urgent because students were injured in a recent accident when the bus in which they were travelling overturned. Mr. Speaker, 200 children are at risk leaving home early in the morning and returning late at night due to the inadequate and unreliable bus transport.

The matter is of public importance because the Government's inaction with regard to the school is in contravention with Article 28(e) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of which Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory, and which demands that the authorities encourage regular attendance at school and work for the reduction of dropouts in the system.

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

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the leave which the Member seeks is denied. Again, may I refer the Member to Standing Order 11, or perhaps the Member may wish to consider a substantive Motion.

**Director of Public Prosecutions
(Decision of)**

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Siparia. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar (*Siparia*): Mr. Speaker, I seek your leave to move the adjournment of the House for the purpose of discussing a matter of urgent public importance, namely, the decision of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) to withhold his consent for institution of criminal proceedings against the Member of Parliament, Dr. Keith Rowley, for the statutory offence of assault of the Member of Parliament, Mr. Chandresh Sharma, within the precincts of the House, despite the fact that the DPP was satisfied that the evidential test had been met.

This matter is definite in that it pertains to a specific matter, that is, the ad versa decision of the DPP.

The matter is urgent because the statutory offence of assault of a Member of the House within the precincts of the House created by section 10(b) of the House

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of Representatives (Powers and Privileges) Act, Chap. 2:02 of the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago is a summary offence and, consequently, the time limited for making a complaint which is the laying of the information—in ordinary parlance this is known as charges—to commence prosecution for such an offence is limited by section 3(2) of the Summary Courts Act, Chap. 4:20, to six months from the time when the matter of the complaint arose and not after. The matter of the complaint arose on September 15, 2004, so more than two months have already lapsed from that time.

The matter is of public importance because the decision of the DPP erodes public confidence in our criminal justice system, the rule of law, and it infringes on the constitutional right of the individual to equality before the law and the right to equality of treatment by a public authority such as the DPP.

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

Mr. Speaker: Again, hon. Members, the leave which the hon. Member for Siparia seeks is denied.

Mr. Ramnath: What is the purpose of the Parliament? [*Interruption*]

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE
(REPLACEMENT OF MEMBER)**

The Minister of Trade and Industry and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Kenneth Valley): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that Dr. Adesh Nanan replace Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar on the joint select committee of Parliament appointed to consider and report on ministries and statutory authorities (Part I).

Question put and agreed to.

**NATIONAL CARNIVAL BANDS ASSOCIATION OF
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO (INC'N) BILL**

Question put and agreed to, That a bill to incorporate the National Carnival Bands Association of Trinidad and Tobago and matters incidental thereto, be now read a second time.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill referred to special select committee of the House appointed by the Speaker as follows: Mrs. Eulalie James (Chairman), Mr. Edward Hart, Mr. Hedwige Bereaux, Mr. Gerald Yetming, and Mr. Nizam Baksh.

OLD AGE PENSIONS (AMENDMENT AND VALIDATION) BILL

Order for second reading read.

The Minister of Social Development and Acting Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Social Services Delivery) (Sen. The Hon. Mustapha Abdul-Hamid): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move,

That a Bill to amend the Old Age Pensions Act, Chap. 32:02 and to validate certain things done thereunder, be now read a second time.

Mr. Speaker, in moving the second reading of this Bill, I seek the leave of the House to discuss along with this Bill, the Public Assistance (Amendment and Validation) (No. 2) Bill since they are related.

Mr. Speaker: Is it the wish of the House that both Bills be considered at the same time?

Agreed to.

Sen. The Hon. M. Abdul-Hamid: Mr. Speaker, thank you. I am very pleased to introduce to this House this afternoon the Old Age Pensions (Amendment and Validation) Bill and the Public Assistance (Amendment and Validation) (No. 2) Bill. These Bills attempt to codify two of the fiscal measures announced in the budget of 2004/2005. These measures are to increase the grant of old age pension by \$150, and in the case of the second Bill, to increase the Disability Assistance Grant from \$650 to \$800. I would speak first on the Old Age Pensions (Amendment and Validation) Bill.

Mr. Speaker, as you are aware, there is a two-tier system that operates with regard to the Old Age Pension Grant. In the first case, a pensioner whose monthly income is less than \$100 is paid what is described as a monthly pension of \$1,000. Alternatively, a pensioner whose monthly income exceeds \$100, but does not exceed \$1,000, receives what is called a basic pension. The quantum of this pension is \$900.

Clause 2(a) of the Bill proposes to amend section 3(1) of the Act to achieve the following effect:

- (1) to increase the monthly pension from \$1,000 to \$1,150 per month; and
- (2) to raise the qualifying income ceiling for the grant of basic pension from \$1,000 to \$1,150 per month.

The proposed effects of these amendments are twofold. In the first instance, the amendment to section 3(1) will enable pensioners whose monthly income is

less than \$100, and who are now in receipt of a grant of \$1,000, to receive a monthly grant of \$1,150.

Secondly, the raising of the qualifying income ceiling widens the net of prospective recipients of the grant. An applicant who previously could not access Old Age Pension Grant because his income was over \$1,000 could now benefit, provided that his income does not exceed \$1,150. Mr. Speaker, so all the pensioners who earn between \$1,000 and \$1,150 are now eligible to apply for Old Age Pension Grant and to receive a basic monthly pension of \$1,150.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to draw your attention to clause 2(b) of the Bill, which seeks to amend section 3(4) of the Act to increase the quantum of the basic pension from \$900 to \$1,150 per month.

A pensioner who currently receives a basic grant of \$900 shall now be entitled to a grant of \$1,150 per month. However, in light of the proposed amendment to section 3(1), a new applicant for old age pension—that is the group that I referred to a short while ago and whose income exceeds \$100—shall be entitled to this increased basic grant if his or her income does not exceed \$1,150.

Mr. Speaker, it is intended that both increases are to be disbursed with effect from October 01, 2004. Therefore, clause 3 of this Bill seeks to validate any payments of the increased sums made on or after that date.

With respect to the Public Assistance (Amendment and Validation) (No. 2) Bill, Members would recall that by Act No. 7 of 2004, the Public Assistance Act was amended to increase the Disability Assistance Grant from \$600 to \$650. Members would also recall that on that occasion the group was expanded from persons over 40 years to include persons between the ages of 18 and 40 at a cost of some \$72 million.

Clause 2 of this Bill seeks to amend section 11A(3) of the Public Assistance Act, thereby further increasing the Disability Assistance Grant from \$650 to \$800. May I remind this honourable House that this is for disabled persons over the age of 18 years.

In similar fashion, as the increase of the Old Age Pension Grant, it is the will of the Government that the increase with respect to the Disability Assistance Grant be paid with effect from October 01, 2004.

Clause 3 of the Bill seeks to validate payments of the increased amounts made on or after that date. Mr. Speaker, this is a very simple Bill and the measures are simple.

I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Mr. Harry Partap (*Nariva*): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to make a few comments on these two Bills that are before this House today. These Bills are the Old Age Pension (Amendment and Validation) Bill and the Public Assistance (Amendment and Validation) (No. 2) Bill.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister has been in office now for about 35 months. I would have thought that by now the Minister would have had a critical look at his ministry with a view to instituting changes that would have eliminated the inconvenience and torture inflicted on old age pensioners and recipients of public assistance in accessing these benefits.

The Minister had a chance to be less pedestrian, and more like a reformer, advancing ways to ease the burden on pensioners but the Minister, like his leader, believes that throwing money after problems would solve them. [*Desk thumping*] May I advise that money alone would not solve bureaucratic problems that conspire to point fingers at the old, the differently-abled and the poor. Mr. Speaker, it takes vision from those who lead to put things right so that our poor and dispossessed could feel comforted by the social security process.

It was a former president of the United States of America, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who said in 1961 in his inaugural address that if a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich. Those were pathetic words which hold relevance to us here today.

Despite our oil and gas wealth in a land of plenty, our old aged, poor and dispossessed are insecure and defenseless. The spiralling cost of living has been eating up the \$1,000 a month pension that these pensioners get, and it will eat up the \$150 increase promised from October 01, 2004.

Mr. Speaker, if you examine what a pensioner purchases at a grocery, you would notice that rice went up three times this year. A five-kilogram pack of rice now costs \$25.96.

Mr. Sharma: And these pensioners have grandchildren going to school?

Mr. H. Partap: Yes. Flour went up twice this year. A 25-pound bag of flour now cost between \$35 and \$36. Sugar went up once and it now cost \$2 a kilogram. Baking powder which they would need also went up once. Milk went up twice this year. Salted fish is now \$12 a pound.

Mr. Sharma: And PNM likes salt fish.

Mr. H. Partap: And cooking oil went up twice this year; it is now \$9 a bottle. Mr. Speaker, this tells a story of food prices going beyond the reach of pensioners. These pensioners are getting only \$150 more.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to the increases in old age pension and public assistance, let me tell the Minister that one of the gravest sins that anyone can commit is to fool old people and to fool children. Almighty God will not be kind to him for fooling old people, fooling the infirm and fooling the poor with promises that he cannot keep.

The Prime Minister and Minister of Finance came to this House and delivered a budget in which he raised old age pension and public assistance. He said that the increases in old age pension, public assistance and other measures which were included in the budget would be increased from October 01, 2004. He knew full well that the benefit of that increase would not reach the pensioner until December 01, 2004.

In the same breath the Member said that the increase would take effect from October 01, 2004, why did he not say that the increases would not be reflected in the pensioners' cheques until December 01, 2004? Mr. Speaker, most of the pensioners were expecting that increase in their October cheques. In fact, some of them have already spent the increase, and they have not yet received it.

We understand that you could not announce the raising of the pension in October and that the pensioners would get the increase in October. We know that. What we are asking you to do is to level with the people.

Mr. Manning: But you know that. [*Interruption*]

Mr. H. Partap: I know it but the pensioners do not know that. They expected to see the increase in their cheques. This came from the Prime Minister who told them from October 01, 2004 they would receive the increase. He knows that it was not politically right to tell them that so he decided to try deceit on the poor and the old.

Hon. Member: "Oh, what ah shame."

Mr. H. Partap: I am afraid that the Government continues to be deceitful in its dealings with people. In the budget presentation, the Minister of Finance promised to remove the common external tariff (CET) on powdered milk, split peas, black-eyed peas and cheese. We heard nothing since that announcement. The price of milk remains the same at the groceries. The other items that the Minister spoke about are still sporting the pre-budget prices. The Minister of Finance also announced zero-rated value added tax (VAT) on brown sugar, cocoa powder, coffee, mauby and orange juice. Thank God, he did not reduce VAT on fever grass. None of these zero-rated items contributed in any significant way in reducing the grocery bill of a pensioner.

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Last week, one of the junior Ministers of Finance mamagued the population with the grand announcement that the price of building a house would be decreased with the removal of CET on selected building materials manufactured overseas. That was a big grand announcement at Whitehall. That was another public relations deceit! They are making a song and dance about removing CET on linoleum and floor coverings. You have to put on a roof first before you could put linoleum and floor coverings, shower baths, sinks, face basins and so forth.

Now, if the Government wanted to alleviate the high cost of building a house, the Minister should have announced a reduction in the price of cement, lumber, steel, galvanize sheets, bricks and other aggregate. I am sure people cannot go to the Scarborough Hospital and get sand free; they would have to pay for it. So, if the Government wants to help the poor to get a house then it should not remove CET on things like floor coverings and shower baths so forth. That is not going to help the poor. The junior Minister did not impress any one of us on this side. It would have been better if the Government could have removed VAT on items like cement, steel and so forth. That is what they should do if they want to help the poor people.

Mr. Speaker, the old, poor and dispossessed are insecure because of the escalating crime in this country. This situation has created an environment of fear and trepidation. Mr. Speaker, they do not feel safe anymore in this country. The Government's failure to protect our citizens—especially the pensioners—is appalling.

The criminals have reached the pensioners' homes. The police are powerless to do anything. That \$150 would not help the pensioners. It appears that the police are afraid to confront the criminals because they may be crushing the corns of those community leaders who are friends of the Prime Minister. So, our pensioners are not protected and they do not feel safe.

If they go for health services at the public hospitals they are given a runaround. These poor persons who access the public assistance are afraid to go to these hospitals because when they go there they have to wait long hours. All the noise that the Minister of Health was making about how things have been improved, if you go to Sangre Grande Hospital you would see the long line. Persons get there as early as 4 o'clock in the morning, waiting to get to the pharmacist's cage before 8 o'clock. They have to wait long hours for attendance in order to get their prescriptions filled. They also have to wait months to get on a list for surgery. So everything that the PNM is doing conspires against our pensioners and the poor people in this country.

Mr. Speaker, I want to raise a matter here with respect to pensioners. I would like the Minister to take note, because I would like him to do something about this matter. The Minister must do something urgently about the life certificates that are required from pensioners. It is inhumane and there is a lack of sympathy from the Social Welfare Division to demand bedridden and infirm recipients to go to the office to verify their life certificates. I think it is an imposition upon these poor people.

For persons who are unaware, a life certificate verifies that a recipient is alive and, therefore, that persons could have an uninterrupted issuance of pension cheques. Nothing is wrong with life certificates. In fact, I think it is good thing. We support that. The Social Welfare Division must be sensitive enough and send their officers to the homes of the feeble, old and so forth in order to verify life certificates, rather than torment these poor and sick persons by demanding that they go to the office and be present to have their life certificates issued. We are not asking too much of the Social Welfare Division. I think the Minister could do that without coming for improvement in the legislation. The Minister could give the instruction for officers to go out there and meet these persons and get their life certificates signed or make other arrangements.

There is another matter I would like the Minister to look at and that is an anomaly in the old age pension rules, which must be examined by the Minister. That is why I said that the Minister was in office for more that 35 months and he should be looking at these matters to make it easier for our poor people and pensioners.

Mr. Speaker, the pension rules put citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who are eligible for pension at a disadvantage over persons who are not citizens, but satisfy residency qualifications. Let me explain this matter. A citizen of Trinidad and Tobago who had been a resident of this country for 20 years and has reached pensionable age, if that citizen makes several trips outside of this country for any period of time during that 20 years—when you add up all those trips and they exceed five years—that citizen does not qualify for old age pension. I am asking the Minister to look at that matter.

Mr. Speaker, let me tell you what happens if you are a non-citizen. If you are a non-citizen and you come from one of the Caricom countries and you have been resident here for 20 years—I imagine that you would get residential status—you could qualify for old age pension. There is no problem with that. But the citizen who has been here for 20 years and makes trips outside the country cannot get old age pension. The rules give a clear advantage to non-citizens over bona fide citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. That cannot be right. The Minister should further investigate this matter and take action to correct this anomaly.

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I want to point out another anomaly which involves contributory and non-contributory pensions. Mr. Speaker, persons who have reached 65 years of age and who are receiving the National Insurance Pension of \$1,000 a month and qualify for old age pension receive only \$900 plus the old age pension. That person does not receive the full \$1,000 per month—as it now stands it would be \$1,150 per month. So, recipients of NIS pension are being penalized for contributing to their pension through the NIS. They are now being denied old age pension. These persons are being penalized for contributing to their pension through the NIS by not giving them the full old age pension, whereas old age pensioners who never contributed to any pension scheme are rewarded with the full old age pension of \$1,000 per month, and they would now be getting \$1,150 per month. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker, the Member for San Fernando East read the budget so he would know whether the figure went up or down. The question is: Why should a person who has contributed to his pension plan be penalized when being considered for old age pension? I think we have to change that. I am asking the Minister to take a look at that matter to see what could be done. Persons should not be penalized for wanting to help themselves.

The Government should really review the assessment of NIS pension benefits for persons applying for old age pension. Clearly, the full NIS pension is taken as earned income, and this attracts a decrease in old age pension benefits where a pensioner gets \$100 less. Again, that is not fair. The NIS pension is derived from one-third of the contribution made by a worker and two-thirds of the contribution which is made by the employer. The one-third contribution from the worker is the worker's money. A person pays that money in advance, and it should not be considered as an earning when calculating the level of income for a person applying for old age pension.

Mr. Speaker, when the Social Welfare Division is calculating the level of income for the person seeking pension they should remove the contribution that the worker made because that is the worker's money. The calculation should be based on the two-thirds contribution which comes from the employer, which could be considered as earned income. If that is done then many of the NIS pensioners would be able to access the full old age pension. I hope that the Minister will give some consideration to that matter.

There are several breaches with respect to old age pension. Mr. Speaker, most, if not all traditionally non-partisan agencies have been politicized by the PNM. The old age pension and public assistance are the two latest victims of PNM's

manipulation to hand out patronage to its supporters. That is extremely sad and it is also extremely dangerous.

Mr. Speaker, there are examples—I am not going to call names. I could give the Minister the names at another time—where PNM constituency officials are receiving old age pensions and they are also employed with the Community-based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) and the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP). Their ceiling is higher and they are still getting old age pension. At any rate, this is contrary to the rules of the Social Welfare Division governing old age pension.

If a person is engaged in employment and receives an income in excess of \$1,000 a month that person cannot receive this benefit. If a person is working for CEPEP or URP his or her income for the month would be more than \$1,000 and, therefore, that person should not be receiving a pension. If a person is employed with CEPEP or URP that person disqualifies himself or herself from receiving a pension. But this is happening with PNM constituency officials. Mr. Speaker, I will give you an example.

In the PNM Ortoire/Mayaro constituency, the Chairman is receiving old age pension and he is a CEPEP contractor.

Mr. Khan: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. Member for Nariva for giving way. I want to assure this honourable House that the Chairman of the PNM in Ortoire/Mayaro is not a CEPEP contractor.

Mr. H. Partap: I will say it over again. The PNM Ortoire/Mayaro constituency Chairman is receiving old age pension and he is a CEPEP contractor in Moruga. I have the name of the person here in brackets.

Hon. Member: Call the name!

Mr. H. Partap: I know you do not want me to call the name. Mr. Speaker, a PNM Nariva constituency executive member is receiving old age pension and he holds a URP contract. This contractor is building a box drain at Prince Street in Biche.

Mr. Sharma: Great is the PNM and it shall prevail.

Mr. H. Partap: Mr. Speaker, the sister of a member of the Rio Claro Social Assistance Board is receiving public assistance, but is employed with a CEPEP contractor. The name of the person is here. The same board member has been reportedly involved in sexual harassment of single mothers and widows who are seeking public assistance.

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Mr. Prime Minister, you can laugh as you want you know, the people are hurting and the person who made the complaint is prepared to go to the court for protection. So you can laugh and make a joke of it, but we are coming back to the same old system of the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) under the PNM where women had to give their bodies to get a job.

Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that the PNM nominees and social welfare boards are hell-bent on corrupting the old age pension and public assistance programmes in the same manner they did with the URP under the PNM. I call on the Minister to investigate these reports and put a stop to the abuse of the old age and public assistance programmes, and if he wants I will give him the names so he may conduct investigations, but I know it will be the same thing, he may follow what the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) says.

The time has come for the Government to provide a disability allowance to the differently-abled citizens that is adequate to meet their special needs. Do not beat your chest about giving a bus, and increasing the allowance to \$800; moving it from \$650 to \$800 per month brings a little relief or it may bring no relief to our differently-abled friends. Remember that you are doing them no favour because they are entitled to it, and there is a convention for it and if I have time, perhaps I may be able to send it to you. The Minister of Social Development should go back to the Minister of Finance and ask him to increase the disability allowance and bring it on par with old age pension.

I suggest that the Prime Minister, who is also the Minister of Finance, put things right at home first before playing Santa Claus to the rest of the Caribbean. Share the oil and gas boom money which the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries boasted about earlier this year. Share it with the poor people of this country. Let the citizens here benefit first, then you can go outside.

Mr. Speaker, the differently-abled in our society have struggled for what they have achieved so far in spite of the PNM. And it is incumbent upon the Government to provide financial resources to make life a little more comfortable for our differently-abled friends.

I want to bring to the notice of the Minister the plight of hundreds of children with various disabilities who depend on an allowance known as the Necessitous Grant or the Special Children Grant which is a grant to assist children under the age of 18. There is the disability allowance for those who are 18 and above, but children below 18 years get this Special Children Grant or the Necessitous Grant.

Now you are talking about children who suffer from different disabilities, they are differently-abled and are really in need. Some of them live in very trying conditions which are so bad that one's heart bleeds for these children, but this grant does not reach these children on a regular basis. It is like the bus service they provided for the children of Biche to go to Manzanilla and Swaha—irregular, and inadequate.

Mr. Speaker, this grant does not reach the parents on time. Some of them have to wait for six months; and I have two cases in Charuma where these children are in bad shape, they are in bed and the mother has to be there with them all the time. One case was that of a twin where one died because of the neglect, the other is a 14-year-old Down's syndrome child, and our hearts bleed for these people. They waited six months for this grant of \$300. I know they will get it, but maybe after they die.

That is unfair to these parents and it is a bureaucratic problem at the ministry. Perhaps the Minister does not know—and I will give him the benefit of the doubt—that those grants are prepared centrally. All the cheques are being prepared from the central office and they are always three to seven months late. These poor children are being traumatized.

Why can the cheques not be issued from the Rio Claro, Sangre Grande, or San Fernando offices? Why do you not put more On-the-Job (OJT) trainees there so they can have them ready on time? It takes too long for these children to get their money. We appeal to you Minister, to intervene on behalf of these children to see if you can get things to move quickly.

Mr. Speaker, an increase in the disability allowance on par with old age pension is really a fraction of what will be spent this year on social programmes. The total expenditure on all social programmes of the Government from what I can glean from the records will be \$3.1 billion; the increases in the old age pension, public assistance and disability allowance account for only \$177 million, which is a mere 5.1 per cent of the total package. "And yuh like poor people? Yuh care?"

When superimposed against the national budget of \$27.9 billion, the expenditure on the social programmes is a paltry 11.1 per cent. I am not sure that that is a commendable position, especially since there are more than 300,000 persons living under the poverty line in Trinidad and Tobago and more and more persons will be losing their jobs because of you, and may have to access the social programmes.

I must point out that the Basdeo Panday administration raised old age pension and public assistance on five occasions during its six years in office. It also

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introduced the disability allowance and other grants at a time when oil prices fluctuated between an all time low of \$9 per barrel to a high of \$34 per barrel, and we were able to raise pensions, disability allowance, and all the others in the short six years we were there under the Minister of Social Development, the Hon. Manohar Ramsaran. Now it is about \$55 per barrel.

The PNM is now swimming in money and giving away, and yet our old age pensioners and our poor and differently-abled are barely ekeing out a living. I do not think that is fair. On the question of pension, we find it difficult to understand why a more substantial increase was not given to retired public servants. When you consider the cost of living today, they are now living in poverty. Why did the Minister of Finance give them such a stingy, meagre increase? I think somewhere in the Minister's record it was revealed that the last review was in 2000 when oil price was at a low and yet they got a high increase; but now that the cost of living is about 30 per cent higher, you are giving small increases of \$150 and \$400.

Mr. Speaker, the PNM seems to want to push them further into poverty and I suggest that the Minister take a second look at this and allow them to access the old age pension as well if he cannot get the Minister of Finance to give them more money.

As I said, this ex gratia payment of between \$150—\$400 per month is really woefully inadequate and cannot make any significant impact on the standard of living of these former public servants, who have given their lives to the service of this country. We have been receiving complaints that the system of accessing pension in the public service is like pulling a tooth, and the Member for Tabaquite can tell you how difficult it is to pull a tooth.

Mr. Speaker, teachers, policemen and public servants are due to retire at age 60 and when they do, they have to wait for two years without pay before they get their pension. That cannot be right. I think the Government should be able to do something about that. Their pension cheques and gratuity should be ready to be given to them on the day they are leaving, and it happens in other countries. Why do we have to beg and—

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. H. Partap: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank my colleagues for the time, but I will not take up the 30 minutes, I have a few things to say again. I was making the point that our retirees in the public service should not have to wait an unduly long period to get their pension. Two years is too long, because when they retire, their salaries are cut and they do not get anything. So until the pension is formalized, then they will get the pension and gratuity and, of course, the back pay on the pension; but six months, one year, two years are too long. I think our public servants have enough stress, so to put further stress on them is not right.

Mr. Speaker, it is time for the Government to consider bringing old age pension in line with normal retirement at age 60. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, this was a manifesto promise of the UNC during the 2002 general election and we will do it as soon as we return to office. We are still committed to this concept because it makes a lot of sense. There is a large cadre of workers who are forced into retirement at age 60, some have no pension scheme and leave work without any income and between the ages of 60 and 65, they are being put through a trauma which should not be so. We are saying that this five-year wait before they get their pension is too long and could mean life or death for these workers. So I am asking the Minister to impress upon his Government to bring the pension age in line with the retirement age, move it down to 60 years.

There is a programme run by the Ministry of Social Development which some old age pensioners could access but are not entitled to, but some of them have to go there for food because the \$1,000 is not sufficient. It is called the Social Help and Rehabilitation Efforts (SHARE) and the argument is that the programme is for needy persons. But now that the increases given to old age pensioners have been snapped up by the high cost of living, they have to access the SHARE programme.

The Minister announced in his budget speech that 20,000 hampers at a value of \$250 each are available but, as usual, everything run by the PNM is riddled with corruption and the SHARE programme is no exception. I am going to read a report, and I will honour what you said Mr. Speaker, that we should not read too many things from publications, but to carry home this point I must read it with your permission.

I refer to page 5 of the *Sunday Guardian* of July 25, 2004 which says:

“A former regional co-ordinator of Government’s Social Help And Rehabilitation Efforts programme (SHARE) has charged that the project was ‘infested with corruption.’

He has also accused a high-ranking official of allowing his family members to collect food hampers for the last five years.

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Area co-ordinators who are responsible for distributing the SHARE hampers also talked about unethical practices in the programme, where hampers intended for the needy go instead to well-to-do, employed people.

In a letter to the Minister of Social Service Delivery Christine Kangaloo, US-certified psychotherapist, Dr. Stanley Bishop named a high-ranking official who, he said, had five family members collecting hampers from a 'variety of distribution sites'.

Bishop said the official in question had allowed another female to collect hampers at the same site with the knowledge that she had a maxi taxi service, coupled with a thriving real estate business.

Area co-ordinators for the programme claimed the five people in question got the hampers because 'someone in authority'...

It reminds me about the Tobago issue with the Bajan fishermen; where somebody in authority gave permission to send home the fishermen.

"contacted an officer saying they were emergency cases." Corruption galore!

Mr. Speaker, I am not making that up, I have just read it. The corrupt hands of the PNM have contaminated the SHARE programme, URP, CEPEP, the police service, the DPP, and the school system, and now it is heading towards old age pension and public assistance.

Our old age pensioners are doing a yeoman service in this country where there are 300,000 persons living below the poverty line. Their pensions sometimes have to run the house. For example, the pensioners in Biche have to accompany their children on mornings as early as 4.00 a.m. and 5.00 a.m. when they wait for the bus or taxis. These pensioners come with their walking sticks and wait with these 11-year-old children. They should be given an award, and not a \$150 award. *[Interruption]* It must be a figure which can meet their needs and I am sure if we do this, our pensioners will be happier.

Thank you.

Mr. Manohar Ramsaran (*Chaguanas*): Mr. Speaker, I stand on this side to talk a bit about the senior citizens of this country, people with disabilities and the poorer people. Pension was raised by \$150 per month and as we are seeing, it is throwing money at the problems and hoping that will solve them.

Before I go into my contribution, I want to talk about the Policy on Ageing as introduced by the hon. Member a few days ago. I want to put on record that it is

indeed a good document and was even mentioned by the Member for San Fernando East in his contribution, and, as you all know, everything good that happened in Trinidad and Tobago started under the UNC or the NAR.

Mr. Speaker, this Draft Policy on Ageing started in 1998/1999 and was laid in Parliament recently. I want to point out some of the areas this policy addresses. They are:

- Social security
- Income security and employment
- Participation, involvement and social inclusion
- Dignity and respect for older persons
- Health care and standards for hospitals and care facilities
- Housing
- Education and training
- Recreation
- Legislation and research.

Mr. Speaker, when one goes through this document, one notices that the intention is honourable, but what we see from year to year and the pattern of this Government is to increase old age pension, call it a day and talk about what it has done.

Before I really get into the meat of this debate, I want to make a few points. When one looks at the document *Draft Estimates Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the Financial Year 2004*, the portfolio for the Minister of Social Development has been allocated \$35 million for the year 2004, so immediately one knows that old age pension does not fall under his purview, yet he comes here and talks about old age pension, and he is not a Minister in the Ministry of the Prime Minister. I want my colleague to know that the Minister who presented the Bill this evening has nothing to do with old age pension, or public assistance and—

Hon. Member: He is acting.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, this is the second year. Where is he acting? He is the Minister of Social Development, how can a senior Minister act as a junior Minister? This is unfair to the Minister.

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I went through this document and I see Personnel Expenditure, Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance, General Administration and there is nothing. So I want to hear the portfolio.

Hon. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Member for Chaguanas for giving way. I want to advise him that the hon. Minister Mustapha Abdul-Hamid, is at this time acting in the portfolio of Minister in the Ministry of the Prime Minister in charge of Social Services Delivery.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. Prime Minister, but the question I asked was what the responsibilities of the Minister of Social Development are. We want to know. The ministry is allocated \$46 million and there is nothing that says he is employed in doing something useful. This is taking the country for a ride. Of course, all the expenditure and increases spoken about are in the Office of the Prime Minister.

I brought this up because of the wanton waste and not trusting the institutions of Trinidad and Tobago. If we go back to the Office of the Prime Minister—and we know throughout the years that various non-profit organizations were given money to do what they have to do and this is something important to the development of the country. But I see names such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Jaya Lakshmi Children's Home, Rebirth House, Families in Action and nothing is allocated to them. What is the big secret? Are these institutions receiving money?

2.45 p.m.

This is under the hon. Prime Minister's ministry and I would give way for him to explain it. Why are these non-profit organizations not receiving the money? Level with the population. This is another area of playing smart with foolishness and I want him to explain to me and the public why the secrecy. Are they not receiving money? If they are, why was it not published in the draft estimates?

Is it because there are wanton increases in certain areas and none in other areas? These are the questions we must ask when we look at the blanks on the pages. To add insult to injury, the totally blanks are \$48 million. Of course, this was not explained to us, but when we go through the financial statements, we see the bogusness of the budget that was laid before this House. The sum of \$48 million was given to non-profit institutions and no account to show to the people of this country. Why the indecency?

Then we go on to look at the various expenditures that come before us and we wonder why we have the problem of poverty in this country; the problem with our ageing population: "Draft National Policy on Ageing". I want to put this on record

for whatever it is worth, because apparently people in this country are not listening. I am asking the question aloud: Why is it that the hon. Prime Minister creates all these work programmes and all these various other agencies to carry out what could have been legally—and I use the word “legally” in the context that accountability seems to be a problem with all these programmes. Can we account for CEPEP expenditure? Have we in this Parliament received the accounts of the \$800 million spent in CEPEP?

Mr. Speaker: With due regard, we are not talking about CEPEP this afternoon, we are talking about old age pension and public assistance, so please try and come back on track.

Mr. Ramnath: Well, is money they taking away from the old age people to run CEPEP, you know.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, you know, last week I bowed to your ruling on a very sensitive issue, and I want to just put on record—and I agreed with your ruling; I have no problem with that, but I want you to also look at both sides—the Member for Arouca North called the name of a friend of mine and said that he was going to receive \$500,000. In a country today with crime as rampant as it is, how could a Minister come to this House and open this person to attack? I believe that we have to be very careful with what we do in this Parliament.

It is the secrecy; it is the non-accounting of what is happening in this country, and we are talking about in a time of plenty where poverty is now 40 per cent, by their own admission. The hon. Prime Minister got up in this Chamber and mentioned that poverty is 40 per cent, in a time of plenty. We cannot understand it. In the budget statement, the Prime Minister even spoke about the money going to the Revenue Stabilization Fund. He also spoke about a surplus. I want, as a Member of this Parliament, to find out why the existing institutions were not given the authority to spend the money. Is it because of the non-accountability? That is the question I am asking, because these are programmes to deal with the less fortunate, as was said by the hon. Prime Minister.

I want to show you something: The Civilian Conservation Corps, allocation for 2004, \$29 million. When we go back to 2003/2004, the sum of \$25 million was allocated and this was spent on 2,557 people. When we did the calculation it came up \$11,341.46 for each participant in the CCC. Is it true that these people would get that amount of money? I doubt it. We look at the HYPE (Helping You Prepare for Employment) Programme—this is another one: The sum of \$14,518,000 was spent in 2003/2004 for 1,430 beneficiaries and they spent on each person,

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\$10,152. This is my point. For whatever it is worth, why do we not trust the present institutions? Look at the social programmes—\$3 billion. Why do we not give part of that money to the existing ministries, the regional corporations, so they could do their work?

I visited Frederick Settlement yesterday, which is a part of my constituency. In a small village—because the election results will show that that is a very marginal polling division—they have three CEPEP gangs and two URP gangs in that particular village, which is less than one square mile. The people complain to me of drains not cleared and they are not doing the work—

Mr. Speaker: As I said before, we are not talking about CEPEP today. Could you get back to the two Bills before us?

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, I was the Minister of Social Development and I know what social development is about. It is about developing this country holistically. I read the Draft National Policy on Ageing. This is what this Bill is about. We have to look at the senior citizens; we have to look at the people who receive public assistance and disability grants and ask the question: Are the moneys which are allocated to these people going to them? If you boast about helping the less fortunate in our society, it has got to be all-round; you have got to develop the people in a manner that they will understand what is happening. When I talk about CEPEP, I do not know why this is such a dirty word. Is it that \$800 million were spent and nobody could account for it? I do not know. We want answers.

So what do we have in this country? As usual, I will not only criticize, but I will offer solutions. For example, the \$150 increase, I want to ask the hon. Minister—he is acting now, I understand—why this ceiling remains at \$1,150? Should this ceiling not take into account the cost of living? Should it not be indexed to the cost of living? A senior citizen would need assistance in many fields—medicine—because when you are at that age you have to get everything. Transport in this country is a disaster. All the areas that a senior citizen must seek assistance for are not there.

I humbly suggest that this ceiling be increased to \$2,000 per month. You look at it carefully and understand, not just bring it intact with the \$1,150. Increase the ceiling so that people could access—the Member for Diego Martin Central laughs. This is not only political; it could be done on a sliding scale. For example, a person earning close to \$2,000 would get less money than a person earning \$1,000, and at the end of the day there would be some equity in the distribution to deal with persons age 65 and over.

I did not hear—I asked my colleague if he missed it—why has the ceiling not been increased for the disability allowance? I understand the ceiling is \$300 per month. It is not even in keeping with the \$800. So something is wrong there. Why the disrespect for the disabled persons in this country? I met a disabled person yesterday evening and he said that he was okay because he is employed, but he believes that there is no respect for people with disability, which was especially shown by this Government recently where people were outside National Flour Mills for months. I applaud the Government for giving the \$150 increase, but the fact is: Is that enough? We have to be careful of the signals we send to our poor people in this country. Giving them a little subsistence here and there will not suffice.

Health care in this country, especially for the senior citizens—even in the Draft National Policy on Ageing, mention was made about health care and standards for hospital and health care facilities. This was laid by the hon. Minister of Social Development in this Parliament. But we read in the newspapers, for example: “PSA takes Rahael to Integrity Commission” over an issue to do with C-DAP, and we know what C-DAP is, Chronic-Disease Assistance Programme. Despite the fact they may have lowered the age, this is basically for senior citizens, but here we have in this country ministers responsible for the care of senior citizens being questioned about funding.

This is what I am trying to get across. Yes, we have the need for the various programmes—I would not say, CEPEP; but other programmes, URP, what have you—yet we hear about the corruption; we hear about nepotism, about giving it to friends. I invite you, Mr. Speaker, to call me and I will carry you to the payment offices of these URPs. When you look at the population there—you see Ministers sitting here and when my colleague goes with information about people receiving SHARE programmes working in URP—because it is said here in the legislation that if you earn more than a certain amount you would not qualify and vice versa.

That is why when we had our manifesto in 2002, we proposed the lowering of the pension age, because we believe that people 60 years and over in this country must receive old age pension, again, using the means test. Because whether we like it or not, there is this gap between 60 and 65 where women, especially, when you read what is taking place around the world, being woman, being poor and being aged is something that women over 60 cannot grapple with. Some care must be given, and when you talk about care, you have to do it meaningfully.

I want to propose to this Government, in time of plenty—the Prime Minister is on record as saying ask for it and you shall get it—I want to ask, on behalf of the

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persons 60 years and over in this country, that they be given consideration for old age pension. I am serious about it. If you look at the poverty figures they would show that in the increase in poverty—if you balance them across—persons 60 years and over are the poorest in this country, especially the women. Again, let me repeat, let us consider seriously the question of persons age 60 and over receiving old age pension.

On the question of the ceiling, how could you tell me that a person who is disabled would not receive \$800 disability grant and the ceiling is just \$300? I cannot understand that. I do not know what is the thinking behind that, because this, to me, is discrimination against persons with disabilities. Where in the world would somebody who is disabled—except they are very well qualified—be hired? In this country we do not see it happening too often, yet, if you earn more than \$300 per month, you would not receive the disability allowance. Maybe you could ask people who initiated the disability grant what it was about. I know a lot of corruption took place in the disability allowance grant, because this was created for the physically, mentally and otherwise handicapped, where you cannot earn a living. When we did a survey it was about 2,000-plus, people living in these conditions. I want to put it to the Cabinet that that ceiling is obscene. According to their thinking—and we heard the Member for Diego Martin Central laugh when I spoke about the \$2,000 ceiling for old age pensioners—the ceiling for the disability grant should be \$800 per month, because it must at least be equal.

So when we come to this Parliament and talk about social assistance, disabilities and old age pensioners, we have to understand that they must not be taken apart from the society but as a part of the society, because if we do not do that, we are going to leave these people out of the development. Most of us who are approaching 60 years would understand that the people who were there before us made a sterling contribution to this country. Unfortunately, these people worked in the vineyards, so to speak, in the farms, and so on, and they never had a pension scheme or what have you, so when they retired, what would they have gotten? A national insurance pension, a meagre pension as Caroni (1975) Limited, and they must see about themselves after their retirement. That is why I make the plea on behalf of these people who now earn just over the \$1,150 limit. Think about it carefully. Do not see it as just another Opposition point being made. Let us seriously look at increasing the ceiling to \$2,000, at least, per month, because in Trinidad and Tobago—to repeat—the cost of living is way above that. If we are serious about doing this, we have to take it where we would like to see it.

Health care is something that I want to talk about and I want to make some recommendations in addition to what was proposed in the Draft National Policy

on Ageing, because I strongly believe—and when we talk to people out there we see senior citizens struggling to make ends meet. It is not that they want handouts. What they want is some meaningful assistance from Government. So I quickly want to make ten suggestions to the Government. Health care is number one. I did research from all over the world and I came across ten points that I would like to propose. The first one is health care, which states:

“Early diagnosis and appropriate treatment is required, as well as preventive measures, to reduce disabilities and diseases of the ageing.”

Mr. Speaker, I have a relative—not a very close one—who told me that she was in the San Fernando General Hospital for 10 days and during that time there was a senior citizen lying on a bed and nothing was done. Here we talk about increasing the pension by \$150. Would that have assisted this woman? Her children took her out after that period and put her in a private nursing home. When they went there, they were shocked that nothing was done to this lady. Within two days she left the nursing home because she was not really medically ill; it was just some senior aged sickness. So in two days with some care she returned home and she is normal now. We all wondered, had she spent another two or three days in the San Fernando Hospital, would she be alive? So when we talk about senior citizens, public assistance recipients and the disabled, we must not take this lightly. That is why the hon. Minister would know that Malta offers training to deal with ageing. In the United Nations there is a division that is responsible for ageing. Because we all age. That is something we must do, in addition to dying. So I want to make this first proposal—I would not read the entire document, but I would like the Minister to hear the first line of it. The second one is:

“The trend towards increased cost of social services and health-care systems should be offset through closer coordination between social welfare and health care services both at the national and community levels.”

So there must be corroboration between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Development. If we do this we would understand the problems the senior citizens face. This corroboration is important if we want to really assist, meaningfully, the senior citizens.

While I am on health care, I understand that yesterday the statistics for AIDS were released. I do not know they were received here, but I know the figures are now alarming, that women between the ages of 15—24 are now the largest group, and they double the nearest competitor by 2:1. Is this whole health care system

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linked with poverty? Why is it, despite the fact that so much public relations is done about AIDS, that we are not winning the war against AIDS? Is it that poverty might be the cause for this? Because when you look at the age group, 15—24, young women having AIDS, this would mean much more than just casual sex. It might mean sexual favours for money—prostitution.

So this is a social problem that we have to look at. Are we treating our people fairly? Are we ensuring that the public assistance that young mothers receive would be enough to maintain the family? Is it that this is all you need to just throw \$200 per month at a person and just say, “You see about yourself for a month?” I was Minister of Social Development and I had to talk to my officers many times. People would come to me and say, “Minister, the officers visited my house and I had a small parlour that will earn about \$30—\$40 a day, and they close it down.” It is either you close it down or receive public assistance. In other words, they tell the people: “You have to be poor or no help from the Government.” You tell the people not to help themselves.

Then we go on to people who would plant something in their yards. This is real, and the Minister would agree with me that this happens. So, you know, the whole vision must change. We must refocus how we deal with poor people. They must be treated with dignity. That is why I chose this line of debate, not to only talk about the \$150 increase. As I said before, any assistance to the senior citizens would be accepted and would be welcomed. Again, my colleague mentioned the percentage of the budget, and I mentioned it in the other debate, but I want to say it must be much more than that.

If you go on the Internet now, this research is from there; everything is about ageing. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. It is there for us. We, in this country, believe—because it is so popular, “increase in old age pension by \$150 per month”. But would this \$150 suffice? Would this be enough to deal with the problems facing our senior citizens?

Let me go to point No. 3, again, Health:

“Health and health allied services should be developed to the fullest extent possible in the community. These services should include a broad range of services such as, day care centers, outpatient clinics, day hospitals, medical and nursing care and domestic services. Emergency services should be available also.”

I would pass this on to the hon. Minister so I would not read the entire thing. But the underlying fact here—and I hope people would listen to us on this side—is not

throwing money at problems. It cannot work. We have got to work with people. For example, if a Member of Parliament cannot work with their councillors to get a drain cleaned, that would impact on the community. That would allow people to be divisive. We always say that if you divide a nation along any lines, that nation would not move forward.

I am making these recommendations. We went and did our research, and you would find hundreds of these recommendations. I am saying if you want to help the poor people, it is not only throwing money at the problem. That cannot work. Everybody would tell you if you want to deal with social problems, it must be done holistically. You cannot divorce finance from housing, from community development or from any other ministry. If it is not done holistically, we are going to fall into trouble.

For example, the Biche High School—and somewhere here I was reading a while ago where it was discovered in Africa and India—and these are large countries—when children live far from school they are not able to access quality education and these children in their senior days would remain in poverty. That is why we, on this side, must congratulate the previous Ministers of Education on this side for building schools in close proximity to where the people live. When you look at the geography of this country, you will understand it. Children from Biche going to a school in Manzanilla, is but a long way and this would impact negatively on the quality of their lives. They would end up in poverty. We know the old adage: Education is the surest way to get out of poverty. How can you, then, after three years, deny the children their education? Okay, if you pronounce that the school is not fit, build another school, but think about the children there.

You talk about poverty, about giving out public assistance, but if we do not mould our children; if we do not make them better human beings, then you would need to fork out more money in their senior years. Remember, government does not end when you leave office; government continues. Some government would be here in 2050 and they would have to deal with the problem of the Biche children in those years.

Again, I pride myself in visiting certain areas in the constituency. I went into the hot spot of Enterprise recently, and what I saw there, despite the good intentions of the Prime Minister—you know, we go on a tour and we talk to the media and we promise this and that, but the fact is that there are numbers of young people looking for employment. I told them \$3 billion are being spent on social programmes and I want to access them. Another day I would come and tell

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you a horror story of trying to call ministries to find out where the programmes are, because most of these programmes were not thought out. I want anybody to get their office staff to call the various ministries to find out what is happening and you would hear: “It ain't start yet.”

The classic though, was the Minister of Public Utilities and the Environment, my very good friend. My office called her office and spoke to somebody. The person promised, “within half an hour I will call you back”. They did not call, so my office called again. The permanent secretary there—a very famous permanent secretary, if you ask the Member for Toco/Manzanilla—called back and said: “If the Member of Parliament wants anything he has to talk to me.” I attempted to call the Minister, but that was just a day or two before Divali and I know she would have returned my call but maybe something happened, because she always does.

The fact is, here was this permanent secretary, who is the accounting officer in the ministry, dealing with millions of dollars, put in that ministry to assist the poor people and we have office staff hired by the Parliament to support our offices, and when our office called there, the big permanent secretary said: “The MP must talk to me first.” The permanent secretary must know that when moneys are approved in this Parliament, it is for all the people of this country. I want the other side to know this. If the Prime Minister wants, I would write him personally to help these unfortunate youths in the Enterprise area. There are hundreds of them with nothing to do. So despite what we do with social assistance, we must do it holistically and deal with the people.

The Minister mentioned in the Division of Ageing—and I applaud him—the question of preventive measures. We must encourage the children to live productive lives. We must never discriminate politically in this country. It is unfortunate that people might hear Chaguanas constituency, but even in that constituency, 3,000-plus voted for the PNM. Let me draw a scenario for you. Let us say you discriminate against the Chaguanas Borough Corporation—it happens—and the money is allocated—do you read the figures? The sum of \$25 million was allocated to the Chaguanas Corporation, to do everything, and HYPE and all these people got more money than even your regional corporations. So they do not have the wherewithal to do it. So what happens now is that these people are politically victimized. Let us say that Chaguanas now decides to reverse the discrimination, who will suffer? It is the PNM supporters in Chaguanas, and this cycle of discrimination will continue. So we have to take a conscious decision: we want to fight poverty; we want to improve the quality of life in our country; we must do it in a manner that will improve the quality of life of everyone.

3.15 p.m.

When you build schools, do not build them in a particular area, but in Trinidad and Tobago. I appeal to the conscience of the Prime Minister to do something about Biche High School. Let the school be opened even if it is on that plot or another area. If the experts say that there is a problem, so be it. I do not think that the UNC invented gas or put gas under the school.

Mr. Speaker: I have allowed you to go on a little too long on being irrelevant. Please get back to the two Bills before us.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, I used the example of Biche High School. We must treat our children with respect. That is the point I made before I went rambling.

With respect to the protection of elderly consumers, the Government should ensure that food and household products, installations and equipment conform to standards of safety that take into account vulnerability of the age. We know what happens in this country with our aged population. How often do we hear that they are burnt to death? My colleague mentioned that officers should visit these homes. This is what good care-giving is about. In the developed countries care-givers are not in charge of such huge populations. I urge the Government to employ more people in the care-giving division. Let them focus on a smaller area to deal realistically with the problems. I am sure that on both sides and the public, when we heard that an old lady was burnt in her house and they found her charred remains—I am not blaming the Government. We must get real. Political debates and trying to win or lose points are not issues with poverty and giving grants to disabled people.

We must encourage the safe use of medication, household chemicals and other products, by requiring manufacturers to indicate necessary warnings and instructions for use. I will pass this document to you.

With regard to housing and environment, adequate living accommodation and agreeable physical surroundings are necessary for the well-being of all people. It is generally accepted that housing has a great influence on the quality of any age group in the country. I would not elaborate. That is clear to see. If you look at the inadequate housing and the way in which it is shared, much is left that we are not happy with.

The elderly meet manifold problems with transport and traffic. This is the responsibility of my good friend, the Member for Ortoire/Mayaro. Elderly pedestrians have to cope with subjectively felt dangers that restrict and limit their

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mobility and participatory aspirations. I do not know if the Ministry of Social Development still pays the Ministry of Works and Transport to transport senior citizens.

Hon. Abdul-Hamid: Yes.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: It is still happening. There is no bus service along the Southern Main Road from Curepe to San Fernando. A major part of the population lives along this route. I will like to see the return of the bus service. There are schools in this area and as in any part of the country, people need cheaper transport. We need to do things across the board and not in one particular area.

Special attention should be paid to environmental problems to design a living environment, that would take into account the functional capacity of the elderly and facilitate mobility and communication through the adequate means of transport.

As the family is recognized as a fundamental unit of society, efforts should be made to support, protect and strengthen it in agreement with each society's system of cultural values and respond to the needs of ageing members. The Government should promote social policies to encourage the maintenance of family solidarity among generations with all members of the family participating. The role and contribution of the NGOs in strengthening the family as a unit should be stressed at all levels.

We have ageing problems of various countries. There is one particular note that looks at ageing in India. It showed the keeping together of the families. In this country, we should look carefully at getting families to live together. When you do this you would care for the aged. Do national family services fall under your purview? We have to ensure that we look after our families.

Governments are urged to adopt an aged family integrated approach to planning and development which would recognize the special needs and characteristics of older persons and their families.

Governments and NGOs should be encouraged to establish social services to support the whole family, when elderly people are at home and to implement measures for low income families who wish to keep elderly people at home. When we were in government we looked at that and I hope that the ministry would continue to encourage the caregivers to be family members.

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. [*Miss G. Lucky*]

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: Mr. Speaker, to finish my recommendations, social services should have as their goal, the creation, promotion and maintenance of active and useful roles for the elderly as long as possible in their communities.

We have the world on the Internet through the division of ageing of the United Nations. We would look there for support to deal with our families and senior citizens. I make a plea to the Government not to only think about politics. Between elections we should improve our country. We come to Parliament; introduce legislation; listen to the Opposition because I believe that they talk sense sometimes and see how we could integrate views and move the country forward. Being a minister, your time is so chewed up that you cannot get things done.

I would share what we would have done from the manifesto of the UNC 2002, with the Government. Maybe, they can still look at it. The UNC recommends pension beginning at age 60 years.

This nest egg of \$1,500 for new babies, the Prime Minister was not kind about this. I believe that now that he understands future investment, maybe, we could encourage this nest egg for the young people in this country.

A kick-start for every newborn baby, \$1,500 units in the Unit Trust to encourage savings and thrift and guaranteed by the State.

The development of this country must not only be seen as talk and in one particular way. Social development implies that the country must be developed in a particular manner. I recommend to the Government to go to the Internet and send the officers for training. I know that your vote is the smallest, even in travelling. In Malta, there are various training courses to teach the people to deal with senior citizens. Whether we like it or not, the public servants would be there to encourage people to get out of poverty.

I recommend that the ceiling for old age pensioners be increased to \$2,000. It could be done on a sliding scale and indexed with the cost of living. If someone earns \$1,900 that person could get \$500 pension and if someone earns \$1,400 that person could get \$1,000. At the end the day, that person could take home roughly \$2,500 and that should be a basic salary for someone in Trinidad and Tobago, especially when you reach senior citizen status. The question of CDAP and the other areas with the alleged corruption should be made available to the people.

The second recommendation is that if all ceilings cannot be \$2,000, they should be raised to \$800. We heard nothing about public assistance. We on this side proposed sustainable development, but certain people will always remain poor. I do not know why. That population should be reduced and that can only

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happen if we look at the preventive side of things. There should be places for the less fortunate in society.

There should be schools. Whether or not we want to admit it, thousands of children do not access the school system. I remember in the old days that police officers were hired to do something like this. Why is this now becoming important? We see the scourge that continues in crime and poverty. I recommend that something be done to get children in school. Enforce the law.

The third recommendation is how we train our children to do meaningful jobs. Get them to understand that we have a role to play. All these make-up programmes are there and we cannot change them at this time, but it should be done in such a way that they reach the needy people in the country.

I have read a few examples of the administrative costs of these social programmes. We should have another look at them to see how the money that was allocated reaches the intended clients. We see duplication in many areas. People receive SHARE, public assistance and work in different areas. There are others who, maybe, because they are not so smart cannot access any. I urge that throwing money is not the solution to the problems.

Mr. Valley: But you just said to throw more.

Mr. M. Ramsaran: To manage the money. Maybe, you were not listening; you yawned too loudly. The administrative costs should not take more than 50 per cent of the money allocated. The money should reach the people and be allocated to the different agencies. I would not take on the Member for Diego Martin Central. I know that he is up and down. I would end by saying that throwing money at the problem is not the solution.

Thank you.

Mr. Nizam Baksh (*Naparima*): Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to make a brief intervention on this matter. It is one that is close to my heart. The Minister was very brief in his presentation, but I thought that it was a golden opportunity for him to elaborate on the functions and policies of the divisions with regard to the social sector.

I say this in light of a headline by the Minister, “Benefits for aged not enough”. I thought that this was a golden opportunity for him to elaborate on plans for the ministry. We hope that we can get this in his winding up. I want to take the opportunity to address one or two of the critical issues. My colleagues have raised a number of them. I will take the opportunity to elaborate on one or two and bring new points to the front.

The old age pension reflected an increase from \$1,000 to \$1,150; public assistance by \$150 and the disability assistance grant from \$650 to \$800. There is an increase of \$150. It is my understanding that a taxi driver or a property owner could benefit from old age pension after the deduction of his expenses, once you qualify in that regard. An income of \$1,000 per month or less after all maintenance expenses are deducted would enable an old age pensioner to get a reduced pension of \$900. The Minister stated that this would bring a large group of people. I do not believe so. With an increase of \$150, many people would not be able to access old age pension.

I consider it very unreasonable, to the extent of being ridiculous, to utilize the ceiling of \$1,150 per month to determine pension. I am strongly recommending that the disposable income after deductions for maintenance expenses be increased from \$1,000 to \$2,000. My colleague mentioned it, but did not elaborate on it. There are many poor people. You heard from the last speaker that poverty has risen to 40 per cent. With the daily rising cost of living, people are finding it more and more difficult to survive on pensions, public assistance and disability grants.

If you are unable to increase that \$1,150, increase the ceiling to \$2,000 per month and you can bring more people. I cannot say how many more. I am sure that those people who need that assistance the most would be able to access more. There are people below that ceiling who might be getting NIS or some other benefit and this debar them from getting old age pension. If you increase the ceiling to \$2,000 you would be able to bring some of those who experience financial difficulty and they would be able to make ends meet. That would give hope to a number of citizens.

Another point is the policy that citizens who lived away for an aggregate in excess of five years within the last 20 years, do not qualify for old age pension. This is putting some pressure on our citizens who need this pension. This provision is unfair and unjust. Citizens could have lived away with relatives and not earned an income. They would be in need when they return here. This policy should be abandoned completely. Citizens may leave the country to go to foreign countries to access medical attention because they have relatives there who might pay the cost, or they might be able to access it freely. You should not debar them from getting pension even though they have been out for some time.

A good example is the Prime Minister who has been visiting Cuba for medical attention. He went for a week and then one month. You can never tell, but later he may go for a longer period. This may not debar his pension. People who go to

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Canada, the United States, Cuba and elsewhere, when you add that period, you would be preventing them from getting assistance when they want it.

Culturally, the Indo-Trinidadians live with the extended family. Sometimes they visit their children and when they return home they will be cut off. Cultural ties are very strong. We need to look at this. I am arguing that this should be removed to facilitate and not debar these people from getting pension.

There might be a husband who is receiving old age pension and his wife benefits from public assistance. As soon as that husband dies that public assistance for the wife would be stopped. This is a very critical area that needs to be addressed. Once it is removed you put economic pressure on that family. This wife may not have worked all her life. You would leave her wondering. How is she expected to survive? She would only get public assistance if she were medically unfit. These are little issues but they have repercussions. At this point in her life she would be expected to face this trauma, a double tragedy, losing her husband and her economic survival. This could lead to suicide because she might be unable to cope with it.

Another issue is the retirement age. The retirement age in the public service as well as the private sector in many cases is 60 years. To benefit for pension you have to wait until you reach the age of 65 years. Five years is a traumatic period. Imagine somebody was getting a salary every month and suddenly, the person reaches 60 years of age and that is no longer coming. The person would have been accustomed to a certain standard of life. Immediately, the person faces this as the sun rises, that this money is not there and the children cannot be sent to school.

Mr. Valley: Could the Member give way please? I am a bit confused. You are saying that retirement is at 60, but the person qualifies for pension. Are you talking about old age pension? If you are talking about qualifying for old age pension, why would that person who retired at age 60 not be getting pension from his place of employment?

Mr. N. Baksh: Probably, I gave the wrong examples, but there are other areas. My colleague said that if you are working as a farmer, cane-cutter, labourer, or at the lower income level you do not get a pension. If you are a public servant you would get.

Mr. Valley: If one is a farmer assuming he is self-employed, why does he have to retire at 60 years?

Mr. N. Baksh: I am talking about the employee of the farmer. There are people like that. I do not know if the Minister has this information. Maybe, CSO could tell us how many people we have in that category.

Mr. Valley: Could I just ask one further question? I do not know anything about that area. Assuming that there are some of these cases, would they qualify for public assistance?

Mr. N. Baksh: The income ceiling for public assistance is lower.

Mr. Valley: I thought you were saying that they had no income between 60 and 65 years. What income ceiling are you talking about?

Mr. N. Baksh: We are getting into the nitty-gritty. We could do that outside and I would get more details. There are people in that category. We should look at this area. You should reduce the pensionable age to 60 years so that people could benefit because those five years would be critical. This is when frustration comes in and people become ill and unable to cope with this situation until they reach 65 years of age. Nowadays, people are getting false birth certificates to access pension. That may not be a big number, but there are instances where people produce false birth certificates saying that they are 65 years of age, when they reach 60 years of age to access pension.

There is a proliferation of the homes for the aged. This is now business. I want the Minister to look at these homes for the elderly and to ensure that there is a high standard of supervision. We must have stringent supervision of these homes to ensure that the delivery of service is on par with what the Government has to offer. If you could get 20 pensioners, that would be \$20,000 per month, but you would only spend about \$10,000. It would be \$10,000 profit. Some homes charge more than what the pensioner is getting and some charge \$1,500 or \$2,000. The relatives of the elderly people have to find the difference to pay the homes. People are employed and because of that they have to find somewhere to put their parents.

On the *Express* dated Thursday, November 11, 2004, page 26 states:

“Benefits for aged not enough, says minister. There are currently not enough facilities and benefits for old people in the Caribbean, and while there are 130,000 older persons in Trinidad and Tobago which represents ten per cent of the total population, this number is expected to grow to at least 260,000 by 2020.

...he stated, adding that if persons who had migrated could be encouraged to return home, they would act as a support system for families with older members.

Expressing alarm about the significance of HIV/AIDS cases among the population, Abdul-Hamid is sure this will impinge on the younger population

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as many young people would be dying, leaving behind a higher percentage of older persons in society.”

That is one scenario. When you look at how many young people are engaging in crime, in 2020 and onwards, we would have a population spending time in jail. We have to think about what we are doing to cater for these people.

With this trend we may have to build special prisons for old age pensioners. I saw an article in the *Express* dated Tuesday, November 10, 2004 with the headline: “Germany plans jail for aged”. We can look at this to see what they are doing. The article says:

“Germany has drawn up blueprints for Europe’s first jail specifically to house OAPs—old-aged pensioners.

Plans for the £8 million jail near Hanover in Lower Saxony come at a time when elderly criminals have been in the news.

Three bank robbing granddads, aged 63, 72 and 74, were recently arrested after a 30 year career.

Since 1995, the number of criminals over 60 in the German criminal justice system has risen by 28 per cent and Lower Saxony alone has 8,000 pending court cases involving over 60s.

Justice Ministry spokeswoman Jutta Rosendahl said ‘We have got to have adequate facilities for elderly convicts.’

She added: ‘Pensioners don’t need weight-training rooms or further education. They need advice on how to spend their free time, so they don’t repeat their crimes.’

The pensioners’ jail would feature cells able to accommodate walking frames and wheelchairs.

The cells would also have special earpieces inside for the hard-of-hearing to tune into prison announcements and a health spa with physiotherapy sessions.

All beds and toilets would have hand-rails and nurses would be on stand-by 24 hours a day, giving bed baths, handing out medicines and responding to health crises.”

Mr. Speaker, “it making meh feel dat up deh might be more comfortable than outside here, yuh know, when you see de kind of facilities.” Only recently I heard someone say that they must introduce conjugal visits. Look at the kind of protection

they get with people who are supervising them 24 hours a day and we are outside here, as law-abiding citizens. With all those facilities some of us may want to go only to enjoy the benefits. With the number of young criminals increasing at an alarming proportion, if they are going to be in and out of jail, we have to start planning for when they become older and they would still be in jail. We need to address that in light of our 2020 vision and onwards.

I want to focus on GAPP. I would like the Minister to tell us how many persons were trained under GAPP and received jobs. They were trained to assist the elderly. I could understand that these pensioners would get \$1,150 per month, but I cannot see them affording to pay a care-giver. The minimum wage would take you to \$1,500 per month. The training is giving pay to party group supporters. This programme is not filling any need.

I move on to persons who qualify for disability benefits. The following policy obtains. A citizen in receipt of income in excess of \$3,600 per year does not qualify. On a monthly basis this is \$300. The old age pensioners are now allowed \$1,150 or less, while a disability recipient is \$300 or less. This comparison is discriminatory. Both citizens are faced with the same cost of living expenses. Both are unable to earn. These people are physically challenged and are unable to gain employment. I did not hear that the Minister moved the ceiling for the disability grants. You cannot keep it there at \$300, even though you are raising the grant to \$800. Many people will not be able to access this grant.

Why is one assessed on an annual basis and another on a monthly basis? I cannot see the rationale for that. This conflict does not stand to reason. The ceiling should be evaluated and both should be increased to \$2,000 for the reasons I offered earlier.

Persons who reside in Trinidad and Tobago for a period of three years and were out of the country for less than six months qualify for disability assistance. Do you know that non-nationals could benefit from this? What safeguards do we have in place to ensure that this does not happen? You are debarring our citizens but non-nationals could access this programme.

I would look at the appeal system for public assistance applications. When applicants are rejected, they are allowed to lodge an appeal at the said district office that processed the applications. The applications are reviewed and a report is forwarded to the Central Public Assistance Board. I suggest that an independent body assess these appeals. It is a case of Caesar to Caesar. You will get nowhere. The board decides if they would conduct further investigations, or if it is necessary to call the applicant for further information. The applicant is not allowed to

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face the board on his or her request. I suggest that the practice of applicants meeting with the National Insurance Appeal Tribunal Board should apply. In this case every applicant has the right to face the board to advance his or her case.

A critical point I would raise is that of public assistance. From what I understand that should be on a temporary basis. Many years ago, I was a social welfare officer. People access this programme in difficult times when they are unable to make ends meet. The policy is that once they find out that you are working, this is cut. Very often the report comes from the neighbour. Sometimes it is true and other times it is not. The ministry should have a policy to allow public assistance recipients to find work so that you can wean them off the programme. If you do not do that there would be a cycle.

There is the School Feeding Programme where they get breakfast and lunch. A negative aspect is that you are removing parental responsibility and people are staying on. You get on to the public assistance cycle then graduate to old age pension. These people are professional in the system. After death, they get their benefits to bury them. We need to find ways to wean them off and the best time to do it is when they are receiving public assistance. If you allow them to work, they will realize that they are in good health and can earn more than they get from public assistance. They would eventually walk off the system.

Some mention was made about the Draft National Policy on Ageing. We have been hearing about this for years and nothing has come forth. Similarly, for years government has been toying with the draft policy on pension reform. I have been reading sections on pension reform for 2004. In 2004, full transferability of pension benefits; harmonization of the NIS retirement pension and the old age pension; administrative integration of the NIS and OAP; a guaranteed level of income maintenance in retirement; an appropriate integrated regulatory framework for the pension industry and integration and consolidation of the various laws and regulations governing the pension industry.

This was in 2004. We came to 2005 and it is the identical wording under Pension Reform. It meant that nothing was done in a whole year. With that trend it is only talk. It is a talk shop. We need to see something tangible. We could come in 2006 and say the same thing.

I want to expand on the retirement age. Between 60 and 65 years of age, we reach the autumn of our lives. The Biblical saying is that we are there for three score and ten. During that short period we should do everything to assist our elderly citizens. I emphasize the importance of bringing the pensionable age to 60

years. We could consider making pension universal like the United Kingdom and Canada. A month or two before you reach the pensionable age they inform you that very soon you would receive your pension. We need to review the system used to pay the pension. Every month we can see the long lines and the problems these people have to get their cheques.

We have been doing things under health care to assist the elderly, such as CDAP. The time has come when we could consider giving assistance for dental care. I am knocking for my colleague who is a dentist. I see you are giving a nod, so I know that it is a golden opportunity to do something.

In his budget presentation, the Minister of Finance failed to provide relief to those persons adversely affected by the current provision of the National Insurance Act. He said that phase 2 which deals with the review and modernization of the National Insurance Scheme will take place upon completion of the seventh actuarial review of NIS and its findings and recommendations thereon. The Minister's response was vague. This is the approach at times and we feel it should be more specific. We have not been given a time frame. A number of years could pass beyond that statutory time before getting that report. We should do something now.

I would address certain critical areas of the NIS operations. Act No. 9 of 2004 failed to include children in legal custody. The court awards custody of children to guardians and in the event of the death of the guardians, no provision is made for those in custody. This is tantamount to discrimination. If you adopt someone out of court that child could get public assistance benefits, but when you get custody through the court that child is debarred under the NIS rules from getting assistance. Provisions are made for children, step children, adopted children, but not those in legal custody.

On May 03, 1999, an Act stipulated that those over 60 years of age in receipt of pension who returned to work must have their pension suspended and made to contribute at regular rates according to their income. In Act No. 9 of 2004, persons who qualified for NIS pension after March 01, 2004, can resume employment; retain NIS pension and pay no contribution. There is a conflict.

On March, 01 2004, the NIS pension was increased to \$1,000 per month on par with the old age pension. I recall that the hon. Prime Minister and Minister of Finance had indicated in his manifesto that if elected his government would bring the NIS pension on par with old age pension.

Mr. Valley: That has been done.

Mr. N. Baksh: The Prime Minister brought NIS on par to enable those pensioners to cope with the cost of living. In the budget of 2005, he has increased old age pension to \$1,150 per month. He needs to bring NIS on par with the old age pension. The precedent has been set. All the NIS pensioners would be looking forward to this being on par with the old age pension. I now look forward to action.

Thank you.

Mr. Chandresh Sharma (Fyzabad): Mr. Speaker, I intend to make a very short intervention. The question has always been asked about the relevance of this Parliament. Today is a classic example of this. In presenting this Bill the Minister spoke for five minutes and said absolutely nothing.

Let us look at what obtained in the last few days as it relates to pensioners. In Tobago, there was massive flood and the Government responded. In South Trinidad, including the constituencies of Point Fortin, La Brea, Fyzabad, Siparia, Oropouche, Naparima and Princes Town, there was flooding. Thousands of pensioners were affected and there was absolutely no assistance. Today, this shameless Government pretends to treat with pensioners. Where is the care for pensioners? What in this Bill has added value to the life of any pensioner? What has the Government done in the last three years to make the living of pensioners easier?

We are told that by 2020, we would lose 25 per cent of our working population. That is a report from the University of the West Indies. It means that the children of those who would be dead by that time would have to depend on the pensioners. *[Interruption]* This Member is disturbing me, Mr. Speaker. Can I get your protection?

Mr. Speaker: I think the Member for Diego Martin West and the Member for Couva South need to exit the Chamber. The Member for Fyzabad is asking for protection.

Dr. Rowley: I thought you were talking to me.

Mr. Speaker: The Member for Fyzabad has asked for protection. He was complaining about the noise emanating from you and your colleague opposite and he asked for protection. I indicated that if you wish to continue, outside the Chamber might be the appropriate place.

Mr. Ramnath: I am afraid to go anywhere with him.

Mr. C. Sharma: Especially when the noise is saying nothing.

More and more children in this country are depending on their grandparents. Unfortunately, that is the making of the PNM. When you want to treat with pensioners

you have to look at it in its holistic state. Who are the pensioners? The pensioners are responsible for us being here. We are the children of the pensioners and we are treating our pensioners in a very sad way. We cannot treat our pensioners only as voters. There is nothing that treats with pensioners.

Let us look at WASA. The administration that I was part of earlier agreed that pensioners would pay lower WASA rates. That obtained under the United National Congress. From the time the PNM came it was gone. The same obtained for T&TEC and public transport. A few days ago you would have seen in the newspaper that a number of public transport vehicles were purchased. I can point your mind to three buses in San Fernando; one serves Cocoyea; another serves Pleasantville and the other serves Embacadere. The Member for San Fernando West is smiling. There is no equal distribution. The little resources do not reach those in need. You are focusing on pension but not a single Member from the Government talked. This is how they treat pensioners. They use them to vote and abuse them at the end of the day.

What does the Ministry of Health have for pensioners? Have you been to a health centre, recently? I was at one yesterday. I walked with the Diabetes Association in Siparia and this morning I walked with the Diabetes Association in Fyzabad. More than 50 per cent of the medication cannot be obtained for one reason or the other. If ten medications are available, on numerous occasions less than 50 per cent is available to the public. My office is next to the Fyzabad Health Centre. Week after week the people say, "MP look at this. They doh have this medicine." They cannot fill their prescriptions. Some of the tablets for a diabetic which were introduced under the United National Congress, cost less than 10 cents for one. They cannot obtain that for 10 cents.

My colleague, the Member for Nariva was part of a protest that came to Port of Spain on Wednesday. Among those protesting was a large number of pensioners. They were saying that a particular school built by the UNC government is not available for their children. How is that affecting the pensioners? They have grandchildren who live with them and are unable to go to school. They made that point very strongly. They cannot afford. Pensioners have to take care of their grandchildren and now have to pay up to \$32 a day to travel to Biche and far distances to attend school. There are pensioners on wheelchairs and those who use walking sticks and they have to come out at 4.00 a.m. to the main road in Biche to wait for bus or taxi to take their kids; go back home and come back at 7.00 p.m. to receive their grandchildren. Is this a caring government? Is this what the PNM Government has reduced this country to? We would be the next group of

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pensioners. I hope that when you become a pensioner the PNM would not be there because it would be a sad day for you and me.

Mr. Manning: The way that the hon. Member and his team are performing it is very likely that we will still be here.

Mr. C. Sharma: Mr. Prime Minister, you were outside four minutes ago. The report from UWI said that by 2020, a number of us would not be here. We would die from AIDS. AIDS is spread through a number of ways. When you travel to those Caricom islands you have to be very careful.

4.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, when the Government brings a Bill to this House there must be some degree of consultation. The hon. Prime Minister had promised that when we come to the House that both sides would have some idea of what is intended, so that there can be contributions and suggestions before the Bill is presented.

Mr. Speaker, when you listen to the Minister talk, there is no guidance and pensioners have nothing to look forward to. The Government has to make policy. Three of my colleagues have spoken for more than three hours; when are those thoughts going to be considered? All that is left for the Minister to do is to say: "I beg to move." He is not going to respond in any meaningful, intelligent way because these things have not been considered.

Under the Ministry of Housing, I have enquired and found that there are absolutely no policies and no programmes to treat with pensioners. More than that, sometimes when a pensioner happens to obtain an apartment, by whatever methods, that apartment might be on the third or fourth floor with no elevators. Have you been to one of those NHA apartments where there is someone on the second, third or fourth floor who has to come down the stairs with a wheelchair? It is a very sad thing. This is the Government of today. This obtains today, in the year 2004. In fact, the apartments that are being built in San Fernando and elsewhere with no elevators are three and four storeys high. The elevators might be installed; I do not know, but the fire risk is there. Mr. Speaker, you know if there is a fire you cannot use the elevators.

Mr. Speaker, how are the pensioners going to be catered for? What is the role of a Member of Parliament when a constituent, who is a pensioner, comes and says to the Member of Parliament: "I have received an apartment on the third floor and I have a concern." The NHA has absolutely no policy to treat with them. This is happening over and over. This is why you need some kind of consultation

to take place and, by the way, that obtains in other Parliaments. We can have a more holistic approach in treating with the issues.

What is the Government's policy for pensioners in this country? Is there a policy? The answer seems to be, no. How are we treating with these persons? We have made the point and, in fact, the Government in opposition also made the point that the demand on the pensioner's income is increasing. In fact, that is one of the reasons moneys paid to pensioners have increased so often.

Mr. Speaker, more and more pensioners are responsible for three and four households today. In the earlier times pensioners lived with their children; that was the culture of this country but that has changed. Today, the children are not there, for one reason or the other, and with the pensioner is a number of grandchildren and they are solely responsible for their upkeep. We have to make sure that when we bring bills here they are really adding value to the lives of the people to whom they are intended.

Is the provision of public assistance only \$1,000-plus per month in the eyes of the Government? Is that what it is intended to be? Well, it should not be. It must not be. It must be much more than that. We must talk housing and we must talk health care.

Mr. Speaker, you would have seen in the print media where a number of pensioners claimed, and rightfully so, that they were given eye appointments—a number of pensioners seem to suffer with cataract—for 2007 and 2008. When you look at the history, Mr. Speaker, you will find that they are told to come back one or two years from the day. There is absolutely no policy and the Government keeps fooling the national community saying this is going to happen. When you look at it, however, nothing has happened.

With respect to the supply of water—I hope the Minister would tell us—in the dry season the water delivery service is not uniform so the pensioners do not know when water will come. A number of them are without pipe borne water but there is a trucking system available. Mr. Speaker, you could well imagine that pensioners have to cause a barrel to be placed at the side of the road because the water truck will not deliver to their houses even if there is a water tank.

It is not all pensioners who live with their families. If they have small grandchildren they cannot be of very much help because they have to leave very early in the morning to go to school and return late in the afternoon, so again that consideration has to be given.

I am going to make a few suggestions. I would even go further and suggest to the hon. Minister not to move the closure of this Bill today. Let us demonstrate to

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the national community and to the pensioners: they have slaved long in this country; they have served us well and we owe them. Let us see it as a form of worship. Let us treat with them. Let the Government say that it is going to deal with the issues raised by my three colleagues and myself. If we have spoken for three or more hours, there must be things that we have raised that need to be treated with. The Government should say: You have raised these issues; we will consider them and we will come back another day.

Mr. Speaker, in the last budget—based on the figures available to us—more than 30 per cent of our population lives under the poverty line. This means that we have a very young population and at the same time a large number of persons do not have adequate funding for their basic needs and they have to depend on their grandparents, who are the pensioners, and there is very little for them there. In addition to that, we have had 10,000 workers at Caroni (1975) Limited being sent home with no income. Mr. Speaker, you would have remembered that one of the Ministers from the Ministry of Finance from the other place indicated that only 500 of those 10,000 persons from Caroni (1975) Limited who were sent home by the Government obtained employment. This means that the 9,500 did not get employment. Who is assisting them to take care of their children? Let us assume that 50 per cent are being taken care of by the grandparents—who are the pensioners—are the moneys given to the pensioners adequate? The answer is no. Mr. Speaker, are you aware that there are sugar workers who are getting \$600 per month? *[Interruption]* No, no, no, pension. *[Interruption]* But they have not yet gotten it! There are a number of persons who are getting less than \$1,000 in this country. There must be some uniformity.

Mr. Valley: Mr. Speaker, to the extent that the person is getting less than \$1,000 a month, the person will qualify for the old age pension. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Ramnath: No, no, no, the national insurance would preclude that. If you get national insurance and you get \$600 per month, you will not qualify for old age pension.

Mr. Valley: Mr. Speaker, in any case the Government has taken a policy decision to increase the pension of the sugar workers to a minimum of \$1,000 per month.

Mr. C. Sharma: Mr. Speaker, there are a number of citizens in Trinidad and Tobago who obtain a pension of less than \$1,000 per month and there is a lot of red tape. All the Government has to do is to declare a policy that all pensioners must receive not less than \$1,000 to start. We have to make sure that obtains almost immediately.

Mr. Speaker, I would be failing in my duty if I did not talk a little about pension for Members of Parliament.

Mr. Manning: Why?

Mr. C. Sharma: Simply because—

Mr. Manning: [*Inaudible*—self-interest.

Mr. C. Sharma: Well, Mr. Prime Minister, if you are talking about self-interest, you are opening a can of worms. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order, please!

Mr. C. Sharma: Mr. Speaker, I have listened to the Prime Minister when he talked about self-interest but that is the same point that was raised by the Member for Siparia, that Members of Parliament should not be treated differently. The office of the Director of Public Prosecutions said that a citizen will be treated differently from a Member of Parliament. That cannot be because the Constitution does not provide for that. In the same way, the Constitution that we subscribe to and the oath of office that both of us have taken says that we must be able to deliver without fear or favour.

When we talk about pension it is across the board. We, too, have families and we, too, have grandchildren and they will come to us sooner or later. [*Crosstalk*] The hon. Prime Minister has made appointments that talk differently.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to see the Government cause to be sent to the national community a policy for older persons in Trinidad and Tobago. We would like to see across the board what facilities and percentages—if that could apply—are available for pensioners.

For example, with respect to the National Housing Authority, I would like to see every year that 10 per cent of our allocations are made available for pensioners.

I would like to see under the Ministry of Public Utilities and the Environment: WASA, T&TEC and TSTT—a telephone is a necessity in a home because of the crime situation—that there is a policy for pensioners where the bills are in their name. For instance, for all pensioners there should be a basic telephone rate available to them so that they could be in contact—in the case of an emergency—with their loved ones who may not live in this country. There must be programmes intended for pensioners that allow them to network and to socialize.

Mr. Speaker, research has shown that if those things are encouraged it would assist them; it would give them a better life; reduce their stress levels; improve

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their quality of life and, by extension, it would reduce their dependency on medication and health care as well. We must encourage it and we must help to establish it.

The other matter I want to raise as it relates to pensioners is this question of pensioners travelling. I want to tell you what obtains when an application is made for pension. As Members of Parliament we would have seen it first-hand. In some areas when an application is made by a person who has reached the age of 65—in some instances no questions are asked, you have reached the age of 65, the application is taken up to 30 days before your 65th birthday, so within a month of your birthday you can start collecting your pension. In south I have observed that a number of embarrassing questions are asked: How much money do you have in the bank? I want to see your bankbook. How many children do you have abroad? I want to see how much money they send to you. I want to see your land deed. I want to see your passport. I want to see how many times you have travelled. If it is indicated in your passport that you have travelled once or twice in two or three years, oftentimes, the ministry claims: that you are travelling; you have plenty money; you do not need this pension.

Mr. Speaker, if you have property in your name it creates another issue. There must be an across-the-board policy. You have reached the age to qualify for pension and these are the basic requirements. Once those requirements are established the pension must be made available.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the sitting of the House is suspended and would be resumed at 5.00 p.m.

4.30 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. C. Sharma: Mr. Speaker, the Leader of Government Business, during the tea break, gave an undertaking that the Government would look into the submissions made by Members on this side. With that undertaking, Mr. Speaker, I thank you very much.

The Minister of Social Development and Acting Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Social Services Delivery) (Sen. The Hon. Mustapha Abdul-Hamid): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin my response by clarifying for the hon. Member for Chaguanas the distinction between the Ministry of Social Development and the rules and responsibilities of the Office of the Prime Minister (Social Services Delivery).

Traditionally, in mega ministries we have found that wherever you have delivery of services combined with the role of research and development that tends to be at the expense of the research and development component. What that has meant over the last few years was that proper and comprehensive research had not been informing government policies and have not been informing—

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Trade and Industry and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Kenneth Valley): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House be now adjourned to Friday, November 26, 2004 at 1.30 p.m.

On that day is Private Members' day. The acting Chief Whip would most likely want to inform the House of the business for that day.

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (Oropouche): Mr. Speaker, I wish to inform the House that we will continue and finish the debate on the RHA Motion.

Mr. Speaker: Continue and finish?

Dr. R. Moonilal: We will continue the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 5.05 p.m.