

**THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

OFFICIAL REPORT

*IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO WHICH OPENED ON DECEMBER 17, 2007*

SESSION 2007—2008

VOLUME 7

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, November 07, 2008

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 following Members requesting leave of absence from sittings of the House: hon. Jack Austin Warner, Member of Parliament for Chaguanas West from today's sitting of the House; hon. Anthony Roberts, Member of Parliament for St. Ann's East from today's sitting of the House; and hon. Kelvin Ramnath, Member of Parliament for Couva South from today's sitting of the House. The leave which these Members seek is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the financial statements of the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority for the year ended December 31, 2001. [*The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the financial statements of the Legal Aid and Advisory Authority for the year ended December 31, 2002. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
Papers 1 and 2 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.
3. The audited annual financial statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Entertainment Company Limited for the year ended September 30, 2007. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. The audited annual financial statements of the Export/Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the year ended December 31, 2007. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
5. The audited annual financial statements of the Business Development Company Limited (BDC) for the year ended September 30, 2007. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

6. The audited annual financial statements of the Community Improvement Services Limited for the year ended September 30, 2006. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
Papers 3 to 6 to be referred to the Public Accounts [Enterprises] Committee.
7. The Excise Duty (Compressed Natural Gas) Order, 2008. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, the Government is in a position to answer questions No. 184 and No. 229 today and ask that the others be deferred for a period of two weeks.

The following questions stood on the Order Paper:

**August Sport for Life Camps
(Details of)**

- 202.** With regard to the August Sport for Life Camps, could the hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs state:
- (a) what was the budget for the project;
 - (b) what were the various categories of sport, the location of the camps, the number of participants and coaches and the number of days of the camp;
 - (c) the quantity and cost of various items purchased for each category of sport; and
 - (d) whether there will be an inventory of the items taken at the end of the camp and where will the items be housed? [*Mr. J. Warner*]

**Trinidad and Tobago Sport Camps
(Project Proposal)**

- 224.** With regard to the Trinidad and Tobago Sport Camps held between August 4—22, 2008, could the hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs:
- (a) state whether there was an approved project proposal;
 - (b) if so, when was this document approved and which unit was assigned to implement it; and
 - (c) provide this House with a copy of the project proposal? [*Mr. J. Warner*]

**Trinidad and Tobago Sport Camps
(Details of Budget)**

- 225.** With regard to the Trinidad and Tobago Sport Camps held between August 4—22, 2008, could the hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs:
- (a) provide this House with a copy of the approved budget; and

- (b) indicate when this budget was approved by the board of SPORTT?
[*Mr. J. Warner*]

**Yolande Pompey Recreation Ground
(Development of)**

- 228.** Could the hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs state:
- (a) what is the status of the development works on the Yolande Pompey Recreation Ground at Princes Town; and
- (b) when the works on the said ground is expected to be completed?
[*Mr. S. Panday*]

**Local Government Reform
(Cost of Hosting Consultations on)**

- 230.** Could the hon. Minister of Local Government give the detailed cost, to date, of the hosting of the current public consultations on Local Government Reform? [*Mr. S. Panday*]

**Publication of Comparative Prices
(Cost of)**

- 234.** Could the hon. Minister of Legal Affairs state the total cost of publication of comparative prices in each daily newspaper for the period October 01, 2007 to September 30, 2008 in respect of:
- (a) Fruits, vegetables and provisions;
- (b) Live poultry; and
- (c) Hardware materials? [*Mr. H. Partap*]

**Publication in Daily Newspapers
(Details of Costing)**

- 235. Mr. Harry Partap** (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*) asked the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources:

Could the hon. Minister state the total cost of the publication in each daily newspaper for the period October 01, 2007 to September 30, 2008 of “Market Watch on Market Prices”. [*Mr. H. Partap*]

**National Agricultural Entrepreneurs Award Ceremony
(Details of)**

- 236.** Could the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources provide the total cost of advertisements of the 2008 National Agricultural Entrepreneurs Award Ceremony in each daily newspaper? [*Mr. H. Partap*]
Questions, by leave, deferred.

**Performing Arts Centre
(Details of Approval for 60-Room Hotel)**

- 184. Mr. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj SC** (*Tabaquite*) on behalf of Mr. Jack Warner (*Chaguanas West*) asked the hon. Minister of Local Government:
With respect to the Performing Arts Centre, could the Minister state:
- (a) did the Public Health Inspectorate give approval for the construction of the 60-room hotel as forming part of the centre, and if so on what date; and
 - (b) did his Worship the Mayor of Port-of-Spain give approval for the 60-room hotel, and if so, on what date?

The Minister of Local Government (Sen. The Hon. Hazel Manning): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to be here today to reply to question No. 184.

In accordance with section 11 of the Town and Country Planning Act, Chap. 35:10, it is the Minister with responsibility for physical planning who grants permission for the development of land, including the construction of buildings. Accordingly, neither the public health inspectorate nor the Mayor of Port of Spain has any role to play before the Minister grants approval for the construction of a building such as the Performing Arts Center. Thank you.

**Recreation Grounds
(Details of)**

- 229. Mr. Subhas Panday** (*Princes Town North*) asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:
Could the Minister state why the lights have not yet been installed on the following grounds:
- (a) Maurice Gobin Ground, Garth Road, Princes Town;
 - (b) Brothers Recreation Ground, Garth Road;

- (c) Brothers Road Recreation Road, Brickfield; and
- (d) Robin Singh Recreation Ground, Perry Young Road?

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Mustapha Abdul-Hamid): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Ministry of Public Utilities, through the National Social Development Programme, has received a request from the Princes Town Regional Corporation by letter dated April 09, 2008, for the illumination of the Maurice Gobin Ground, Garth Road, Princes Town. This ground is now being considered for illumination. No request, not even from the Member of Parliament for Princes Town/North, has been received in respect of the Brothers Recreation Ground, the Brothers Road Recreation Ground and the Robin Singh Recreation Ground. However, lighting of these grounds will be considered, together with the requirements for lighting of all other recreation grounds throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much.

Mr. S. Panday: Supplemental, please. My friend said that these grounds would be considered, can I kindly ask him when can the people expect lights to be on the grounds?

Hon. M. Abdul-Hamid: Mr. Speaker, as you would understand and imagine, we do have limits, in terms of our budgetary allocations and we have hundreds of grounds throughout the country for which we have demands that they be lit. We are considering all the grounds and making a very serious effort to ensure that as many grounds as possible are lit during the course of this year. For those grounds that are not illuminated this year, we are hoping to have them done as soon as possible.

FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS BILL

Bill to provide for the regulation of banks and other financial institutions which engage in the business of banking and business of a financial nature, for matters incidental thereto and for the repeal of the Financial Institutions Act, 1993 [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

EXCISE DUTY (COMPRESSED NATURAL GAS) ORDER

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Karen Nunez-Tesheira): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas it is provided by section 13(2) of the Excise (General Provisions) Act, Chap. 78:50 that the Minister may by Order impose any new excise duty or increase any excise duty and from the date of publication of the Order in the *Gazette* and until the expiry thereof the duties specified in the Order shall be payable in lieu of the duties payable prior thereto:

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And whereas it is provided by the said subsection that every Order issued under that subsection shall, after four days and within twenty-one days from the date of its first publication, be submitted to the Senate and the House of Representatives and the Senate and the House of Representatives may by Resolution confirm, amend or revoke such Order, and upon publication of the Resolution of the Senate and the House of Representatives in the *Gazette* the Resolution shall have effect and the Order shall then expire:

And whereas the Excise Duty (Compressed Natural Gas) Order, 2008 was made under section 13(2) of the Excise (General Provisions) Act, and first published in the *Gazette* on the 24th day of October, 2008:

And whereas it is expedient to confirm the said Order:

Be it resolved that the Excise Duty (Compressed Natural Gas) Order, 2008, be confirmed.

Mr. Speaker, the Order which is before this House was made by the Minister of Finance, pursuant to section 13(2) of the Excise (General Provisions) Act, Chap. 78:50. By that section, the Minister of Finance is empowered to: “impose any new excise duty or increase any excise duty” by way of an Order. The Order, which is the subject of this Motion, imposes a new excise duty on compressed natural gas at the price of 5 cents per litre and revokes the earlier 1999 Order by which the higher price of 20.414 cents per litre had been imposed.

When an Order is made under section 13 of the Excise (General Provisions) Act, that Order must, after four days and within 21 days from the date of the first publication of the Order, be submitted to Parliament. Moreover, where the Order is submitted to Parliament within the specified time, Parliament may by resolution confirm, amend or revoke the Order upon publication of the resolution of Parliament. The resolution shall have effect and the Ministerial Order shall expire.

On the other hand, where the published Order is not presented to Parliament within the specified time, the Order shall cease to have effect and any excise duty paid by a consumer after the expiration of the Order shall be refunded to the consumer.

The Order which is before this honourable House was published in the *Gazette* on the 24th day of October 2008 and is presented to Parliament on this 7th day of November, 2008; this latter date being more than four days after and within 21 days of the date of the first publication of the Order. The Order has therefore satisfied the procedural requirements of the law. The decision to reduce the excise duty on compressed natural gas is part of Government’s plan to promote and expand the distribution and usage of compressed natural gas.

The advantages of compressed natural gas usage, as opposed to gasoline usage are myriad and include the following:

- environmental benefits arising out of fewer emissions as hydrocarbons are virtually eliminated;
- improvement in engine wear and tear as the engine runs cleaner and lasts longer with the elimination of carbon deposits, which creates friction and promotes engine wear;
- cleaner and longer lasting emissions of spark plugs and catalytic converters, also again arising out of the elimination of carbon deposits, which clog and dirty the plugs and converters;
- fewer oil changes as carbon deposits, which dirty the engine's oil are eliminated;
- reduction of engine noise due to the high octane rating of natural gas; and finally
- biofuel option, which allows the motorist to change to either fuel with the flip of a switch.

1.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the price the National Gas Company charges the National Petroleum Marketing Company for compressed natural gas has remained unchanged since 1994 while the other marketer, Automotive Components Limited, pays a commercial or market rate which escalates at 4 per cent per annum.

The ex-National Gas Company price currently paid by Automotive Components Limited to the National Gas Company is 40.465 cents per litre. Mr. Speaker, the 107 cents per litre retail price for compressed natural gas comprises several components which are as follows:

- (1) The price ex-NGC which is the price that NGC charges for its gas.
- (2) The Excise Duty which is a tax on fuels paid by the users of CNG.
- (3) Amortization cost which is a charge allowed to gas retailers to recoup the capital expenditure incurred in establishing service stations.
- (4) The wholesaler margin which in this case is applicable only to the National Petroleum Marketing Company as the sole wholesaler of CNG and represents their profit margin for sale of CNG.

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- (5) The refueller margin which is allowed to entities which purchase CNG directly from the National Gas Company. Currently, Automotive Components Limited is the sole refueller in the industry and this margin applies only to them.
- (6) The dealer margin which is allowed to retailers of compressed natural gas.
- (7) The Road Improvement Tax which is currently set at 5 cents per litre.

Mr. Speaker, the current pricing structure for compressed natural gas is as follows:

Margin/Profit	NPMG (cents per litre)	Refillers and other Marketers (2008) (cents per litre)
Price Ex-NGC	23.386	40.465
Excise Duty	20.414	20.414
Amortization	19.200	19.200
Wholesaler Margin	19.000	0.000
Refueller Margin	0.000	1.921
Dealer Margin	20.000	20.000
Road Tax	5.000	5.000
Retail Price	107.000	107.000

Mr. Speaker, it is proposed that the excise duty be reduced by 15.414 cents per litre in line with the adjusted excise duty on diesel and kerosene. Accordingly, the excise duty on compressed natural gas would decline from 20.414 cents per litre to 5 cents per litre. This means that maintaining the current price for CNG at 107 cents per litre, we now have 15.414 cents to be allocated differently. In this regard, the Ministry of Finance on the basis of consultation with the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries proposes a reallocation as follows:

- (i) The ex-NGC price to the National Petroleum Marketing Company would be increased by 7.714 cents per litre from 23.386 cents per litre to 31.1 cents per litre. The remaining 7.7 cents per litre savings would be reflected in the National Petroleum Marketing Company's margins. This would reduce the National Gas Company subsidy to the National Petroleum Marketing Company by approximately one-half to \$450,000 in 2008. The increased margins would assist the National Petroleum Marketing Company in meeting the increased cost in the upgrade of dispensing equipment and in overheads such as electricity.

- (ii) Automotive Components Limited which pays the full market price of 40.465 cents per litre for compressed natural gas and which controls 20 per cent of the market will be allowed the full 15.414 cents per litre to facilitate the upgrade of its plant and equipment. Automotive Components Limited is currently the sole installer of CNG units and also fulfils the role of tester and certifier of all CNG kits.

Mr. Speaker, consequent on these proposed adjustments, the new CNG pricing structure will be as follows:

Margins	NPMC Proposed (cents per litre)	Refullers and other Marketers Proposed (cents per litre)
Price Ex-NGC	31.100	40.465
Excise Duty	5.000	5.000
Amortization	19.200	19.200
Wholesaler/Dealer Margin	26.700	--
Refueller Margin	--	17.335
Dealer Margin	--	25.000
Road Tax	5.000	5.000
Retail Price	107.000	107.000

Mr. Speaker, the Government has noted that the estimated annual sales of CNG amount to approximately six million litres with the National Petroleum Marketing Company controlling 80 per cent of the market and Automotive Components Limited the remaining 20 per cent. The estimated reduction in revenue to the Government in respect of excise duty is estimated at \$925,000. Such an adjustment to the excise duty pertaining to CNG requires amendment to the Excise Duty (Compressed Natural Gas) Order, 1999 to be effected by the Excise Duty (Compressed Natural Gas) Order, 2008 now before this honourable House.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to conclude by advising that the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries in conjunction with the Ministry of Planning, Housing and the Environment, the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago and the National Petroleum Marketing Company Limited are jointly developing proposals for the further stimulation of compressed natural gas usage in the domestic transportation industry.

Mr. Speaker, I beg to move.

Mr. Speaker: Before I put the question for debate, let me remind Members to switch off their mobiles.

Question proposed.

Mr. Vasant Bharath (*St. Augustine*): Mr. Speaker, thank you. The whole issue of the use and exploitation of this country's natural gas resources continues to be cloaked in an aura of secrecy, an aura of innuendo and misdirection by this Government. Indeed, this Order before us, the Excise Duty (Compressed Natural Gas) Order, 2008 is certainly no different.

Mr. Speaker, you would recall that during the budget debate a couple of months ago, the Minister of Finance declared and I quote:

“...the Government is in the process of expanding the distribution of Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) as we move to a cheaper, economically efficient and environmental friendly fuel system.

As a consequence, we propose to remove the Customs Duty and Value Added Tax on the conversion kits for modifying from gas to CNG kits. Further to this measure the Government proposes to convert all public service vehicles to CNG usage... The Government will also put measures in place to increase the number of service stations and geographic distribution of these stations offering CNG. This will be achieved over the next two years and begin a progressive move to reduce the fuel subsidy which now amounts to \$2.4 billion.”

Mr. Speaker, what this would have suggested to us was that the Government was taking a step in the right direction with regard to the promotion and the use of CNG, something that the UNC had actively pursued during the six-year stint that we were in government. [*Interruption*] However, when it comes to the actual implementation—actually putting plans into place and plans into action—this Government has proven, once again, that it has absolutely no respect for the people of this country, in terms of the commitment it makes in this House on a weekly basis. The so-called promotion of CNG is really nothing but a red herring. It is ad hoc at best, and at worst it is probably deceptive and misleading.

Mr. Speaker, in trying to understand the effect that this proposed removal would have on the income of the Government and the country, I looked at the Draft Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2008 and other years supplied by the Ministry of Finance during the budget debate. I want to refer a particular item to the Minister of Finance and, of course, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. The Minister may not have this document with her now, but she is free to go and get it to respond in her winding up.

Under “Head 3—Taxes of Goods and Services” —this is under the heading “Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries”, I noted that the initial 2008 estimate for revenue from application fees for CNG licences due under the Petroleum Act, Chap. 62:01 was a mere \$7,000. The application fee relates to a sum of \$500 that is payable when the application is made with a refund of \$250 if the application is successful.

The fee refers to three types of licences that are granted: the CNG service licence relating to the installation, maintenance and repairing of the CNG systems; the CNG marketing licence which allows a licence holder to actually supply CNG to a motor vehicle; and CNG customer refuelling licences which allows a person to dispense CNG, as would be the case in a fleet like PTSC or a large organization.

So, for 2008, the preliminary estimate of revenues from applications for these licences was only \$7,000. The revised estimate which is supposed to give a better forecast of where we are and what the anticipated revenue for fiscal 2008 is—according to the Draft Estimate of Revenues, 2009—actually zero. So, we have a situation where the original estimate was \$7,000 in terms of the amount of fees for applications, but the revised estimate for 2008 is actually zero.

According to petroleum regulation No. 8 of the Petroleum Act under which the procedure for awarding licences fall—each licence is awarded for a period of one year and thereafter it is renewable—regulation 13 provides that a new application is thereby required on an annual basis. So, can the Minister advise whether any licences were awarded for the 2008 period or are these figures that were presented and which the Minister laid in the House completely and totally wrong? As I said, it indicates that no applications were made for the period 2008 for these licences and, of course, it shows that no revenues were received.

This is very important for several reasons, not least of which it could mean, therefore, that every single supplier of CNG to vehicles in this country and every single installer of CNG kits to motor cars in this country are actually operating outside of the law.

2.00 p.m.

They are actually operating illegally including all of the NP stations that the Minister just talked about. In going through the 2009 Draft Estimates I also noted that the actual revenues from applications for CNG licences for 2007 was also zero.

So, we have a situation where in 2007 it is zero; in 2008, it is zero. By way of comparison, let me just let this honourable House know that in 2003 the revenues

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collected for these application fees was actually \$7,000. So, is it a question that the licences have not been applied for; or is it a question of the fact that the moneys have been misplaced; or is it that the moneys have been placed in some other account? I am almost tempted to ask, like the Prime Minister did the other day, "Where the money gone?", but I would not ask.

We need to know whether this Government has been sleeping on the issue of revenue collection or is it really that these operators and installers have been operating illegally and outside the ambit of the law. It gets a little more complicated, because the 2007 estimates of revenue reveals that the Government earned \$29,500 in fees for the actual compressed natural gas marketing licence—this is not the application—to supply CNG to vehicles. If it is that they earned \$29,500 in marketing fees, how could they have earned zero as far as the applications for these marketing licences were concerned, because for every licence granted there is an application fee that must be paid.

It says here that the marketing licence fees generated was \$29,500 and each licence costs \$1,000, that insinuates that—well in this case there must be, again I am not sure how they arrived at \$29,500—29½ licences have been granted; so I am not sure where the extra 500 is from. I do not know if that is a typo or some misnomer there in the figures.

The fact is there would have been at least 29 marketing licences that were granted, but there are no applicable fees for applications that would have been made for these licences. If we do the arithmetic at \$250, if initially \$500 is paid and \$250 is refunded for a successful licence, \$250 is left, times 29, it means that the Government should account for \$7,250 for these applications, but of course it is not in the accounts.

There is a question—although the figures are small—where have these application fees been accounted for. Again, the preliminary estimates for marketing fees for 2008 was \$13,000 according to the 2009 Draft Estimates here, which means that if it is \$13,000 for 2008, it means that the Government is expected to supply less of these CNG marketing licences than they did in 2007, when they collected \$29,500. So, does this mean that the Government is expecting to receive less revenue from CNG for marketing licences and application fees this year? It certainly appears so, as the revised estimates states that the Government expects to get no money, as I told you, in 2008 from these marketing licences.

Mr. Speaker, a similar problem occurs in 2009, where it is estimated that the Government is only expecting to issue nine of these licences, and the income from

that is \$4,500. So, in 2007, they awarded 29 licences, but in 2009, a year in which they are looking to encourage the industry and the sector, they are only budgeting to give out nine licences. I could only imagine what number they would have estimated had they not been trying to encourage the industry and the sector.

What is shocking to me is that these estimates would have been developed only a few short months ago. Did the Government not know at that time, before the Minister presented the budget, that they were going to encourage the sector, or is it something that was done on such an ad hoc basis? They got up one morning and suddenly decided that this is our policy we wish to pursue, which is very strange? As I said, there seems to be no long term thinking about this, or not much thought would have gone into the actual penning of this document and this order.

This really is a classic case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing, as far as this Government is concerned. I really would have liked to have stood here before this honourable House this afternoon, hand on heart, and say that this really is an exception to the rule, but I cannot, because I think the country knows that this is not an exception to the rule, rather than an exception. This is effectively the story of this Government's CNG policy over the last seven years. The fact is that this industry has been contracting under this Government's watch and direction.

Moreover, based on the available statistics, it would appear that something is also obviously amiss at the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, in terms of revenue collection from the application of these licence fees, the award of these licences, and the policing of CNG filling stations to ensure compliance with the law. I hate to think that the Government is taking an unprecedented position of deliberately allowing the industry to operate under these unregulated and unlawful conditions. The House is reminded that the law makes very clear provisions for dealing with breaches, including the revocation of licences and very severe penalties and fines. We have to ask ourselves, why have none of these been pursued?

You see, Mr. Speaker, we live in a country where every single day that goes by we are encouraging more and more lawlessness in our society, again under the watch of this Government. Therefore, it is now expanding into every facet of our society, and it is little wonder that we are unable, as a people and as a Government, to control the levels of crime in Trinidad and Tobago. Clearly, like everything else in Trinidad and Tobago, the issue with roads, water, hospitals, crime, agriculture, the CNG industry under the PNM Government, is in a downward spiral heading, like everything else, for collapse.

This tailspin should be compared to the situation regarding other uses of our country's natural gas resources, and which, of course, appears to be the

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Government's sole purpose in life, its sole raison d'être, its sole focus about everything that it does. This Government's blunt and absolute refusal on a continuous basis to provide information regarding the concessions provided to very large organizations operating in Trinidad and Tobago is well documented.

This nation has absolutely no way of knowing if this country is subsidizing these mega companies that are operating in Trinidad and Tobago. We do not know how much revenue we are being deprived of on a regular basis, from a sale of natural gas. Much in the same way, as we do not know who the allocation of the 26,000 houses built by the PNM has gone to. Much in the same way, we do not know who those million dollar scholarships were presented to.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Forty-two.

Mr. V. Bharath: Forty-two million my colleague from Caroni East tells me. Much in the same way, we do not know how much moneys are being paid to certain attorneys for state briefs. What we do know, of course, is that our hospitals do not have beds to cope with pregnant women, children and the elderly. What we do know is that babies are allowed to die in our hospitals, where Government does not have the money to fund operations, but they have millions and millions of dollars to spend on glossy advertisements to promote themselves. What we do know is that 70 per cent of this population does not have running water on a 24-hour, seven days a week basis. What we do know is that many of our citizens will not know where their next meal is coming from. These are the things that we do know and these are the things that the population has to suffer on a daily basis, ordinary members of our society who really are not very much concerned with the reduction of duties on CNG, but more concerned about their everyday lives.

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries boasts that this Government is reducing the excise duty on CNG from 20.41 cents per litre in 1999—that was Legal Notice 43—to 5 cents per litre under the current legislation before the House. Of course, over the next few days and few weeks great mileage will be made by the Government in the promotion of CNG as the preferred fuel, the conversion of petrol to CNG and so on. Advertising companies, television stations, radio stations will be rubbing their hands in anticipation and in great glee, as the Government, I am sure, will be looking to spend lavishly millions and millions of dollars on an advertising campaign to highlight the advantages of conversion to CNG.

Mr. Speaker, this is really nothing but a red herring. As mentioned before, the commercial use of CNG is an alternative to gas and diesel, and is it not popular because the Government has failed to provide the necessary infrastructure and

they failed to provide the necessary environment to allow the private sector to get involved on a widespread basis, with the exploitation of CNG. To this should be coupled the concerns about our natural gas reserves and our levels of natural gas. According to information that was gleaned from a recent Ryder Scott presentation earlier this year, our proven reserves of natural gas has fallen consistently from 20 million cubic feet in 2002, to 17 million cubic feet in 2007. Falls have also been recorded in our probable and possible categories leading to an overall reduction in what is known as the “three Ps” over the short term.

Trinidad and Tobago, as we all know, is a rent collector as far as natural gas is concerned, and despite what this Government says, and the false confidence that this Government exudes, production is not under the control of this Government. This is very important in the context of the revision of the taxation regime that we currently have before us, because we need to ensure we get the maximum benefit from the exploitation of this nation's limited and diminishing resources.

Mr. Speaker, the fact that the Government refuses to advise the nation of the price at which gas is being sold to these mega companies, is in itself disconcerting, but given the confused and muddled state of affairs I discussed earlier with regard to the licensing structure for CNG, one wonders whether the appropriate structures are actually in place to collect revenues from these international companies as far as natural gas is concerned.

The people of this country do not have a clue as to whether we are collecting the appropriate taxes from this sector, and I suspect neither does the Government. So, we on this side do believe that the reduction of the excise duty on CNG is nothing but a cosmetic gesture by this Government, and I think we all know that they know that. The Government claims that by reducing the end cost of the CNG they may prompt increased demand. The reality is that the demand for CNG is a factor of many things, of which the final price of the CNG itself is only but a small part. Given the existing relatively low cost of CNG vis-à-vis premium gas and other unleaded fuel, and even by comparison to diesel, I think we all know that the conversion rate to CNG has been very minimal.

2.15 p.m.

In fact, less than 1 per cent of vehicles in Trinidad and Tobago today have been converted to work with CNG. From my studies I do not believe that there is a single vehicle in Trinidad and Tobago that is operating solely on CNG, they all have to have a petrol tank operating side by side. That is because, if you set off on a trip from Tunapuna to Toco, when you reach Sangre Grande you would have to

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push the car because you will run out of fuel and there would actually be no service stations available to be able to refill. That is one of the major problems.

The fact is we just do not have the infrastructure available to give the consumer the level of confidence to actually use the product. It does not really matter what the end price is, the fact is, you just do not have the level of infrastructure and the necessary filling stations available to be in a position to lend that level of confidence for someone to convert. Even those stations that do have the facility there are very long lines. There are very long lines to fill up CNG. In fact, not just long lines, it takes an inordinate amount of time to fill a tank of CNG and therefore it creates these long lines. In fact, from the filling station's perspective—the owner of the gas station—it is actually a more costly exercise to administer CNG than petrol or diesel simply because of the time and space constraints. So, all round we need to be in a position to have a better solution. When we talk about reducing the price of CNG, we cannot just reduce the price of CNG in isolation and hope the demand will pick up; there is a multitude of things that we must put in place to go with that.

As the Minister stated earlier on and according to the information I had previously, there is actually only one company licensed to install CNG units in vehicles in Trinidad and Tobago and that is the Neal & Massy subsidiary Automotive Components Limited. This company over the last five years has installed on average about 60 CNG kits per year. Sixty per year, Mr. Speaker, and from what I gather you have to make an appointment, sometimes weeks and months in advance to have this kit installed. Even if the consumer decides that this is something he wishes to do and he decides to make the switch, the capacity to be able to do it is simply not there. There is simply not enough conversion taking place in Trinidad and Tobago and there are certainly not enough people involved in the conversion process that would make a serious impact on the vehicular population of Trinidad and Tobago. So, reducing the price of CNG, really, is just cosmetic and like everything else this Government does it is to mamaguy the population.

If this Government really wanted to help the people of Trinidad and Tobago it would reduce the price of premium gasoline, which is environmentally friendly, it is clean, it can be used on any gasoline engine, you do not need to have any conversion cost and it would result in an immediate conversion by the vast majority of vehicles in Trinidad and Tobago. Most converted cars worldwide still retain fuel tanks and are actually still dual fuel. Therefore, what that tells us is that it is unlikely in Trinidad and Tobago that you are going to—in the near future—

make a full conversion to CNG without still having a fuel tank to use with gas or with diesel. As a result, the benefits of CNG are greatly reduced because the compression ratios and the engine efficiencies of dual fuel cars cannot be increased to take advantage of CNG's higher octane ratings, so there is a disadvantage there. There is another disadvantage—of course of CNG—that storage is a problem. Because of its very low boiling point, natural gas has to be stored in very high pressure tanks and these high pressure tanks are very heavy reducing what is called the “payload” in smaller vehicles.

Mr. Speaker, just to give you an example, a CNG fuel car with a 75 litre tank carrying CNG is about 150 kilogrammes heavier to a similar car of its own size that is driven by petrol. This Government continues, through its several Ministers, to state that this country has perhaps the lowest price of fuel in the Caribbean. We must ask ourselves, is that really a bad thing? Trinidad and Tobago produces fuel here. It is our natural resource. Why should the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago not benefit from its own natural resource? Is that not the case in many other countries? Is that not the case in Venezuela nearby, in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and all of these oil producing countries so citizens of its country benefit from its natural resource?

Further, the Government continues to complain that the subsidy which, of course—they are threatening to remove as I read in the excerpt from the Minister's budget presentation—is too high, it is saying that the people of Trinidad and Tobago are using far more fuel than is absolutely necessary, we are consuming too much fuel, but do you know when the average citizen has to spend three and four hours in traffic jams all over the country they are not asking to burn more fuel, they do not have a choice. It costs them much more money to get from A to B because of the traffic jams on the road because of the lack of infrastructure. This is not something that they enjoy doing I am sure.

This situation has come about because the Government really does not seem to have a plan and is really not appreciated—or the need for developing any level of competence—as far as infrastructure is concerned. So, the poor suffering population continues on a daily basis to set out morning, taking three and four hours to get into Port of Spain and back in the afternoon, particularly if they live in South, another three and four hours. Some people actually burn a tank of gas in two days just coming and going to work. These are the issues that we need to look at. These are some of the peripheral issues that we must consider rather than some of the knee-jerk reactions that we certainly get, which appears to—as my colleague from Princes Town North said earlier on—just come about by "vaps".

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These knee-jerk solutions that I am talking about, kneejerk solutions like the water taxis which are going to cost us hundreds of millions of dollars, again, without the benefit of any feasibility study that we are aware of. The \$15 billion that we are told is going to be spent on the rapid rail project, again, for which we are being told there is no feasibility study done, and the millions of dollars that have been spent continually on poorly constructed and unfinished highways across the country shows this Government's inability to grasp the need for proper infrastructural planning and development. But then, as many people say, if they did not get involved in these mega projects, how will the kickbacks be materialized? That is the general conception—a perception outside—that the Government is getting involved in these mega projects, because, as in many other countries what is happening is there are people in the system who are creaming off millions of dollars by the granting of these large projects. But, do you know, Mr. Speaker, in the final analysis, we as the population of Trinidad really must accept some of the blame, because we as a population are never sufficiently outraged by the actions of this Government.

One of the other issues that will be a constraint and a deterrent for conversion to CNG is the cost of the conversion kits, which, to a large number of people would be unacceptably high. The Government continues to still have duty and VAT on these kits despite, of course, the Minister's promises in her budget presentation that these would be removed. Mr. Speaker, \$10,000 is really outside of the reach of a number of citizens in this country. Therefore, we must really pose the question as to who will benefit by the lowering of CNG prices in Trinidad and Tobago. Who is it really designed for? It is certainly not designed for the middle and lower income groups. They, of course, have already been sacrificed at the Government's altar of political expediency. Is the Government really leading by example? Has the Minister of Finance for example, converted her vehicle to CNG? What about the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, has he converted his vehicle to CNG?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Has any one of them?

Mr. V. Bharath: Has any Minister converted his vehicle to CNG?

Mr. Maharaj SC: The Prime Minister.

Mr. Sharma: The Minister had one.

[The Minister of Education nods head]

Mr. V. Bharath: The Minister of Education is telling me she has converted to diesel. *[Interruption]* Mr. Speaker, through you, I did not realize—Minister—that you had to convert to diesel.

Miss Le Gendre: Was an informed choice.

Mr. V. Bharath: But nevertheless, I want to let this Government know that setting an example is not the main means of influencing another. It is the only means of influencing others and we must lead by example. If we expect people to do things and if we expect this country to follow us, we must, as politicians and as leaders ask them to do, not as we say, but as we do also.

We are here today discussing this matter, which as I just said, impacts or appears to impact at the outset, only a very small percentage of our population. Yet, this Government has chosen to bring this discussion forward and has deemed it extremely urgent obviously, that we discuss it today, and so what they have done is, they have displaced other—in my opinion and I am sure our opinion on this side—far more important debates, for example, the Children legislation that we were in the midst of discussing two weeks ago; the Integrity Commission issue that we have on the Order Paper; the issue of crime, which of course as you know, Mr. Speaker, has been on the Order Paper now for almost a year and of course the issue of food prices. So, all of the issues that are critical to the population who are reeling under all of these issues on a daily basis, we have put aside all of those issues to talk about CNG that may affect, maybe, 200 or 300 people over the next few years.

In drafting my contribution, I came to the conclusion that it would appear to me certainly that this Government would obviously think that the majority of people in this country are stupid—as the Minister of Works and Transport likes to say, “dotish”, but I would not use that word of course—because it would appear that they continue to push them deeper and deeper into a hole and deeper and deeper into a corner, because they believe that there is not going to be any sort of legitimate response from the people at this point in time. So I come back and I ask the Minister, who really does this concession—as proposed in this Order—benefit? I want to also ask the Government, was there any consultation at all with the population with regard to that? Who did they consult before they came up with this Order to reduce CNG? Have they considered, for example, what effects it will have on the population? Have they considered the possible repercussions? Have they considered—as I discussed before—the infrastructure that needs to be put in place to allow people to actually use CNG?

I want to remind Members of this House and the general public of the effect that the increased price of premium gas had on this population, because if you remember, the Government said that raising premium gas by \$1, from \$3 to \$4 would actually have very little effect on the population because the majority of

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cars could run on “super”. Well, they also went on to say effectively that the only cars, generally, that would need to run on “premium” were, I think, BMWs, Mercedes and cars of that nature. I want to remind or even inform—if they do not already know—this Government that there are a number of farm implements that actually work with premium gas. A lot of the brush cutters and so on that you see these gardeners using actually run on premium gas, believe it or not.

Some of them run on diesel—but they use premium gas. Well, anyway, but many of them do. Taxi fares as we all know have gone up across the country, for whatever reason, validly or not, but taxi fares—[*Interruption*]

2.30 p.m.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: It is inconsequential.

Mr. V. Bharath: It is not inconsequential.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: That is what you are saying.

Mr. V. Bharath: No, no, I am saying taxi fares have gone up. You may infer that it has nothing to do with the fact that premium gas has gone up, but that is what taxi drivers are saying. They are saying hon. Prime Minister, through you, Mr. Speaker, it is because premium gas has gone up that their taxi fares have gone up. That may or may not be the case, but the fact is, that is what they are saying, premium gas has gone up and taxi fares have gone up.

Mr. Manning: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. V. Bharath: Mr. Speaker, through you, hon. Prime Minister, all I can say is, this is what these taxi drivers are saying, that taxi fares have gone up. They have actually put up the taxi fares, so it is a reality. It is not something they are saying that they are likely to do, if you put up the price. They have actually put up the price. So I am saying that at the end of the day, whether it is wrong or it is right, the poor people in this country are the ones who are suffering as a result of a flawed policy. That is all I am saying and the point I am making is that it was not thought through properly.

That is the point I am making and I am tying that back to the CNG discussion we are talking about today. It was not thought through properly because you did not understand or you did not understand what the possible repercussions could have been, and you did not take all of the factors into account. Really, that just shows—and it indicates again, how out of touch this Government is with the realities of everyday living in Trinidad and Tobago. Because had they understood

that, they would have thought through this process in greater detail and would have taken those factors into account.

Mr. Speaker, in my 2009 budget response, I warned the Government that they needed to act a little more responsibly with a certain degree of constraint with regard to their expenditure, particularly in light of course, at that time of the international financial meltdown and the recession that was brewing in the United States of America. At that time, I cautioned them on the reckless spending and the imprudent management of the economy on their mishandling of our country's finite resources. I asked that they be more judicious and more circumspect in determining spending priorities at the time and certainly over the next fiscal period.

I also asked as many did, that they review the price at which oil was pitched and estimated to be at \$70. I asked that they review the budget and possibly cut back on our spending to relieve our inflationary pressures. Well of course, we all know what happened. In fact, the Minister of Finance and her colleagues were very flippant about the issue. They were adamant that our position in Trinidad and Tobago would not be affected by the global financial meltdown and that we were in some way, or they insinuated that we were in some way cocooned, isolated and protected from the rest of the world. In fact, not that they said this, but it is the common parlance that Trinidad is God's country and God is a Trini, so we are not likely to be affected.

Mr. Speaker, look at where we are today. Oil is at I believe \$61 a barrel. Correct, Minister? Sixty dollars a barrel?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Fifty-seven dollars a barrel.

Mr. V. Bharath: Fifty-seven dollars? I wrote this last night. So it is \$57 a barrel, today, Mr. Speaker. If it hypothetically remains at \$57, what that means of course, is that we are going to have a shortfall of \$13 a barrel, which I suspect if the Government does not curtail its expenditure, will have to come out—as the Member for Diego Martin North/East stated the other day—of our Revenue and Stabilisation Fund. Correct?

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

Mr. V. Bharath: Come out of our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. What else has happened since then, Mr. Speaker? Inflation has shot up to almost 15 per cent. Last night, I heard the Prime Minister saying that inflation is likely to be on a downward turn from here on because the price of international grains have now been reduced, and therefore, commodity prices in general have been reduced

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Therefore, we expect—I hope for the population sake, hon. Prime Minister, you are correct that inflation will in fact recede to an acceptable level. But I have to remind this honourable House, hon. Prime Minister, that it was you who in 2006, said that by the end of 2007, you would have inflation down to a figure of 5 per cent. So, I am more hopeful this time around on behalf of an anguished population, that the Prime Minister has got his sums right.

Mr. Speaker, I hope I am not saying this out of turn, but I notice that the Minister of Finance did say—she can correct me if I am wrong—that in light of what is taking place in the international financial sector, that there is a possibility that the Government may relook at the budget numbers. I am heartened that the Minister and the Government have finally taken some advice, both from the Opposition, as well from all the experts, international and national over the last few months and have adopted what would appear at the outset to be a more responsible approach to this country's finances. Because you see, unless this Government puts in place—and I come back to what I was saying, that I am heartened that they have taken this advice and I hope they take similar advice with regard to the CNG issue—the necessary infrastructure: more installation facilities for example, you would have more agencies which are responsible for installation and not just the one doing the current 60 per year; more and wider coverage for cars to be able to refuel; lower cost of kits, perhaps by having some kind of a tax concession for individuals and organizations converting to CNG, lowering CNG prices is unlikely to have any positive effect whatsoever and it is likely to be seen in the context of what it is really, just another red herring designed to take away attention from really all the ills that this Government has perpetrated on an unsuspecting citizenry over the last few years.

Mr. Speaker, I sat in this Parliament last week and listened to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources whom I know quite well. I know him well socially and I have always liked him, but to sit in the Parliament here and to listen to him make moronic comments that farmers are planting in flood prone areas and are planting deliberately on the banks of a river or rivers so that they can claim compensation from the Government, whatever little pittance that may be—\$300 and \$400, and sometimes the \$40 and \$60—is testimony when you listen to a Government Minister speaking in that tone—a very insulting and humiliating tone to the farmers of this country—it is a testimony to the fact that this Government has absolutely lost its way and it is now totally oblivious to the realities of what is taking place in Trinidad and Tobago at the ground level.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. V. Bharath: Thank you colleagues and thank you, Mr. Speaker. When one looks at one of the reasons for promoting lower CNG prices, one would assume also that in that mix is the necessity to reduce transportation cost, which obviously as we all know is a factor of production, and of course, as a factor production, transportation cost would aid in the reduction of inflationary pressures in the economy.

Monetization, therefore, of our natural gas to the benefit of the citizens of this country and to the business community as a whole, in regard to this matter therefore, would be commendable if in fact that is what the Government's intention were. I suspect it is not, because had it been that they wanted to reduce that factor of production which is actually transportation, they would have made sure that they put in place other prerequisites as far as infrastructure is concerned—and I talked about it earlier on in terms of proper roads and other facilities that would allow free flow of traffic on a regular basis. But Government's policy appears to have been completely the opposite of encouraging efficient transportation.

Mr. Speaker, we all are very familiar with the Global Competitiveness report published annually by the World Economic Forum, which sets out the rank that a country sits in out of 131 countries that are assessed on an annual basis, and improvements in transportation obviously which should be one of the reasons for promoting the use of CNG by lowering its price, would directly impact obviously on our competitiveness, productivity and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, according to an article of Tuesday, October 28, 2008 in the *Guardian*, headlined, "Trinidad and Tobago continues to slide in competitiveness stakes", the article basically says that Trinidad and Tobago has fallen from a position of 38 in 2001—that was the time when we were best poised as a country for growth, 2001—to a position today, in 2008, to 92nd. Out of 131, we are now ranked 92nd, having fallen from 38th to 92nd in the short space of seven years. Let me read very briefly some of the—in fact, let me just say that in the last year alone, we have fallen eight places. It says here that the global competitive index, GCI, is based on 12 pillars of competitiveness and this is the reason why we have fallen. This is something I would expect that the Government would be looking at very keenly, to try and understand why this country continues to slip and what we can actually do about moving our position north rather than south.

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The GCI is based on 12 pillars of competitiveness: institutions; infrastructure; macroeconomic stability; health and primary education; higher education and training; good market efficiency; labour market efficiency; financial market efficiency; financial market sophistication; technological readiness; market size; business sophistication and innovation. When they take all of those 12 factors into consideration, we have now slipped another eight places on the ladder in the last year, having moved as I said from 38th to 92nd.

There are two countries in the Caribbean region which have consistently been above us. One, of course, is Barbados ranking at 47, and the other is Jamaica, with its high murder rate even though they are at No. 85. So they are seven places above us as far as competitiveness is concerned, despite the fact that they have one of the highest murder rates per capita in the world. In fact, there is a similar situation with regard to Trinidad and Tobago's business competitiveness, and that is the actual ease of being able to do business in Trinidad and Tobago.

2.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago has slipped considerably in the last seven years. In fact, from pride of place of being number 35 in the world in 2001, this country has now slipped to No. 80 in 2008. What that means for the uninitiated is that there are 79 places in the world where it is easier to do business than it is in Trinidad and Tobago. In fact, Jamaica started off in a worse position than Trinidad and Tobago at 43, when we were 35 in 2001, and today it ranks substantially higher in terms of ease of doing business than in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, we need to be very careful about where we are heading when we develop policies which appear to be ad hoc and appear to have very little relevance to the population as a whole. In promoting CNG I am not sure whether the Government has done any homework at all.

I want to cast the House's mind back to January 18, 2007, to a *Guardian* report. The caption I do not have with me here, but I extracted the information; it was January 18, 2007. The caption was:

“Ministry/NP probe CNG cylinder explosion”

Members would recall that this incident took place at a Chaguanas filling station where a CNG cylinder exploded while being filled. In this article, Mr. Wayne Morton Gittens, the Automotive Components Limited Technical Manager, advised that, as a result of deterioration, CNG tanks should be retested every five

years. This at the time was done by a company called Industrial Gases Limited for a fee of \$250. I heard the Minister say in her opening that all this retesting was going to be done by HCL, but I am not sure if Industrial Gases is also going to be doing some testing.

What was startling with regard to Mr. Morton's disclosure, was when he said that only 20 or 30 per cent of customers actually bring their tanks back for retesting during the required time frame, to ensure that there was no corrosion, to ensure that the walls were not thinning and as a result were not presenting any hazards to the users or consumers of CNG. That translates to the fact that 70 per cent of the people who have or use CNG do not have their tanks tested at all. So there are cars driving around Trinidad and Tobago today, many of them taxis carrying large numbers of people, that have not had their kits tested over the last five years, presenting, what one would assume, only to be an accident waiting to happen.

What is the Government doing about it? What have they done about it? It appears that they have done nothing from what I gather, with regard to enforcing the laws. If they cannot enforce the laws on the application fees being paid, I am not sure how they are going to enforce the law to ensure that these cylinders are tested on a timely basis. What is going to happen, God forbid, is that it may very well be that we may not take action unless there is horrible accident and a life or lives are lost. That is the normal way that this Government operates. It is only when we reach a catastrophic stage of affairs it appears that any action is forthcoming.

So clearly from what I have said this afternoon, this Government is really not serious about promoting the use of CNG and, as usual, has come to this Parliament to use its majority position to foist what is really a relatively useless piece of legislation on the population; one that really would have very little impact on the majority of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Reducing the cost of CNG is a waste of time without the provision of the appropriate infrastructure or the implementation of the law ensuring that the facilities engaged in the supply of CNG kits and the CNG itself are licensed and that they are safe. What is required is a clear and transparent policy from this Government, not just in terms of compressed natural gas, but in terms of natural gas itself. There is need for this Government to put its house in order.

There is cogent evidence that the taxation laws are being flouted and violated with impunity and, obviously, with Government's complicity and complacency. Without these measures, Government's token gesture of reducing CNG costs is

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doomed to fail to accomplish any of its objectives, be it a reduction in transportation costs, increased conversion to CNG or simply as a distraction from the myriad of crises facing this country. The Minister of Finance and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries need to get their acts together before they bring legislation of this nature to this House.

I conclude by adding my words of congratulation to the voices of many hundreds of millions across the globe to President elect, Barack Obama, [*Desk thumping*] in wishing him God speed and the best wishes for a successful term, as he grapples with the financial, economic and social issues and crises of the world that he has inherited. I do so, not only because of the joy and inspiration and the hope that he has brought to the people of the United States of America, but also because we believe on this side, unlike those on the Government Benches, that our future, our successes, our failures, are inextricably bound to those of the wider world.

I thank you. [*Interruption*]

The Minister of Information (Hon. Neil Parsanlal): Mr. Speaker, I thank my good friend from Fyzabad for his own graciousness.

As I sat and listened to the contribution of the Member for St. Augustine, with his usual erudite and eloquent contributions in this House, I wondered whether we were, in fact, talking about the Excise Duty (Compressed Natural Gas) Order, because my friend took us on a trip all around the world. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Bharath: Not with CNG!

Hon. N. Parsanlal: Perhaps you should have, it would have cost this House less.

The Member took us on a trip around the world; he took us through practically every ministry in Government and ended up by paying compliments to the President elect of the United States. [*Crosstalk*] It is in this context that I want to join my good friend—[*Interruption*]

Mr. S. Panday: You want to follow fashion!

Hon. N. Parsanlal:—in wishing God's riches blessings and the prayers of an entire nation on President elect, Barack Obama. [*Desk thumping*]

As I listened over the last couple days and, certainly, on the night of that history defining victory, I listened to two men give speeches; one, an acceptance speech that in my estimation certainly was the next instalment of the Martin Luther King's speech, and the other one was a concession speech by the person

who had for 22 months galvanized all kinds of support, including Fox News, against President elect, Barack Obama. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister of Information, unless you could link President Barack Obama to some use with CNG, I think you are on the wrong debate. [*Laughter*] [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. N. Parsanlal: Mr. Speaker, I draw the point because my friend raised the issue of the Presidential election. I was making the point that as we debate in this House, there are manners and styles which we would do well to emulate; one of those was the concession speech of Mr. McCain, one which I am sure every local politician would have listened to with great joy and anticipation and with a sense of optimism that there is, indeed, hope that when concession speeches are made by local politicians, they would be made with the same degree of maturity. It is only in that context.

When I listened to the Member for St. Augustine as he rambled on and on and on—[*Interruption*]

Mr. S. Panday: "Yuh forcing me to speak."

Hon. N. Parsanlal: That will just give us more rambling, Member for Princes Town North.

It is a question I felt of, damned if you do and damned if you do not, because, on the one hand, if you do, you are criticized by everybody for it, and if you do not, then you are criticized as well. I am still trying to understand the Member for St. Augustine, because I heard someone say once that if anybody on this side walks on water, the next thing they would say is that we cannot swim. Nothing that this side does, nothing that this Government does, is ever of any consequence to Members of the Opposition. There is nothing that they would support.

I listened to his contribution when he spoke of the profligacy of this Government, and he spoke about water taxis being a knee-jerk reaction and the rapid rail being a knee-jerk reaction and the many highways that were being built. Yet still he asked who was going to benefit. He linked it and said, "Who will benefit from the lower cost of the conversion kits that the Government has put on the table?"

We see, time and time again, in this House, Members on the opposite side, Members of the Opposition on the opposite side—I have to make it clear—taking every single offer, everything, and really insulting the people of Trinidad and Tobago. To suggest that only 300 persons would benefit from the reduction, was

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even to trivialize the importance of that measure to even 300 persons. While those on the other side would trivialize the lives of 300 persons, we will not. We will continue to do whatever it takes for every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago; we do not do it for a select few.

He spoke about this side and the Government dispensing with the legislative agenda and bringing forward this particular bit of legislation at the expense of the children legislation and at the expense of the integrity legislation. That is disingenuous at best. The Minister of Finance was very painstaking in her contribution to indicate to this honourable House and the nation that there was a particular time frame in which this Order must be brought to the House, that once it was gazetted then it must be brought to the House within a particular time frame. It is not that it could not be brought to the House. To suggest that we were doing this at the expense of other legislation was, at best, trying to be disingenuous to the population of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, the more we listen to the other side, the more we are left to wonder what the role of the Opposition is. This is a simple order; it has about five lines and it is to confirm an order that has been made. Yet we were treated to what the Opposition described as this Order being an example of PNM corruption—I cannot understand this—and that this was what would lead to corruption, because who was going to benefit; certainly not the small man. They asked who was going to benefit from the lower cost of the conversion kits, certainly not the small man. Then they accused us of bringing in the corruption bogey and "where de money gone?"

3.00 p.m.

Remember the words? You probably forgot it after long ramblings.

This is no red herring; this is no attempt to mislead the public. This is an attempt, through a comprehensive package, to convince the population, again, of the necessity of converting to a cleaner, more economical type of fuel. That is all that this legislation seeks to do. Yet we have the Member for St. Augustine taking us round and round the mulberry bush, trying to convince this population that this Government is about corruption.

We heard about his friendship with the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources; we heard of all kinds of things, except to say that he is in agreement with the Order. Let us confirm the Order. That is all that was required. But we realize that one budget speech, perhaps, was not enough, so you had two and, perhaps, two was not enough so you needed to make it a third time in the

hope that someone would listen and hear you. But I give you the assurance that as wide as the gulf is north of you, so, too, shall be your time ascending to that portion of the bench.

What did the budget say about this CNG? The Minister of Finance was very, very clear, you know.

“The Government is in the process of expanding the distribution of compressed natural gas as we move to a cheaper, more economically efficient and environmentally-friendly fuel system. As a consequence, we propose to remove the customs duty and Value Added Tax on the conversion kits for modifying from gas to CNG kits. Further to this measure, the Government proposes to convert all public service vehicles to CNG usage. The Government will also put measures in place to increase a number of service stations and geographic distribution of these stations offering CNG. This will be achieved over the next two years and begin a progressive move to reduce the fuel subsidy which now amounts to \$2.4 billion.”

The Government knows what it is doing. It is very clear in its understanding of the problem. One of the problems—and the Member for St. Augustine spoke of it—is the geographic distribution of these CNG stations.

[MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

At the moment we were advised by National Petroleum that there are seven NP service stations supplying CNG. Automotive Components Limited (ACL) is operating a dedicated CNG site. But they also advise us—and it is consonant with the Minister of Finance's position in the budget—that there are two additional service stations to be commissioned soon: Beetham Highway;—and I know that the one on the Beetham Highway has, in fact, been commissioned—and the O'Meara station which is due in about six months' time.

So that there is movement within the sector to increase the very infrastructural supply that would allow for greater usage of CNG; greater access; greater availability. Perhaps we might even move to Mayaro where I know my good friend, “Gypsy” could use some CNG. I am sure, certainly, as NP expands its service stations, the Member for Mayaro might be yet another beneficiary of Government's forward-thinking in the Mayaro constituency.

Mr. Peters: Would the Member give way?

Hon. N. Parsanlal: Certainly.

Mr. Peters: Thank you very much, hon. Member. I am so happy that you brought up that about Mayaro. Forget about CNG. We could do with regular gas right now in Mayaro. *[Laughter]* Mayaro has one gas station and there is one gas station that services Guayaguayare, Mayaro and anywhere between Rio Claro and Mayaro, quite apart from the fact that Rio Claro itself has two operational gas stations. So I am glad that you brought that up and I hope that you would hasten to bring all of them to Mayaro quickly.

Hon. N. Parsanlal: Certainly, Member for Mayaro. As we sat here and listened to some of the questions that have been asked and answered, certainly in THE constituency of Mayaro you seem to be benefitting quite a lot from the services that have been provided in Mayaro. So one of the things we could probably do is, instead of giving you the four additional community centres, we will put in a gas station. What do you think? Do not answer.

Mr. Peters: I want all of them and the gas station.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Why is it either/or?

Hon. N. Parsanlal: Strangers in the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker, NP has advised that there are two additional service stations to be commissioned. One of the other points that the Member for St. Augustine made was the inordinately long time that it was taking to fill the CNG tanks. NP has advised that they are upgrading their stations; they are putting in additional infrastructure. What we refer to as a slow fill site, normally takes about 10 minutes to fill a vehicle while a fast fill site represents the upgraded station and that will fill a vehicle in five minutes.

So that NP has embarked upon a plan to reduce the filling time of their stations from 10 minutes to five minutes. So that you are looking at the comprehensive package—the infrastructure—not just in expanding the numbers of service stations, but certainly improving the infrastructure at the service stations so that the filling time will also be reduced. National Petroleum, as I said, has advised us—and we have been in contact with them—that it has plans to accelerate the delivery capacity of CNG by installing two additional, dedicated sites. So apart from ACL as a dedicated site, they will be installing two new dedicated sites and several other fast fill sites within the next two years in the first instance.

So that the National Petroleum Company is fully aware of the constraints under which CNG users currently operate and it is in that context and as we seek to expand this, as we seek to encourage more and more vehicle owners to convert to

CNG, to use the compressed natural gas, that all of this is being put in place and the Order before us today is another part of ensuring that the entire compendium is, in fact, in place.

There is nothing sinister about the Government's motives in any of this. It is because we have a plan that this is here today. One of the constraints that vehicle owners face—and it is a fact—is the number of stations that were in existence and the geographic spread and it is because of that that the numbers of persons using CNG has fallen over the last number of years. That is why the figures will also be reduced. It is not because anybody is pocketing any money anywhere; it is not because the money is being used or diverted for anything else; it is not because of that. The very numbers have gone down.

Mr. Bharath: Thank you, Minister. I just wanted to clarify. Really, it was not a question of money been pocketed; it was simply a situation where marketing licences were granted; it is accounted for, but the application fees—licences—were not accounted for and they should tally with each other. That is all I was saying.

Hon. N. Parsanlal: Thank you for the clarification. You have made a very tenuous link between all of that and Government corruption and I am saying to you that there is no such thing involved in this particular case. This CNG usage—my good friend from Fyzabad—is increasing worldwide. Argentina and Brazil are the countries with the largest number of CNG vehicles. You might be happy to hear even in New Delhi—

Mr. Sharma: Why would I be happy for India?

Hon. N. Parsanlal: Because we like to be as expansive as we can. We go all over the world. In New Delhi, the Delhi Transport Corporation operates the world's largest fleet of CNG buses and all public transportation vehicles in Punjab, Pakistan are mandated by the government to use CNG. That is why the Government can say as well, that the plan is to convert all the public service vehicles to use CNG, because we understand very well that the increase is all over the world and certainly with respect to public vehicles.

Through the entire measure that we are talking about, the Government recognizes the need to move to a more environmentally-friendly fuel system that is also economical. You know, as the Member for St. Augustine went on, one of the questions I want to ask is: What price do you pay for clean air? What price would you pay for less pollution? If this Order, along with everything that was

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outlined in the budget, is designed to give us that, what price do we pay for that?
[*Interruption*] You see, empty vessels, perhaps.

Mr. S. Panday: Like you are looking in a mirror.

Hon. N. Parsanlal: The point is that when we come to this Order it is simply to confirm what all of us know. CNG burns much cleaner and has much less toxic emissions than gasoline. We know that. So why attempt to say otherwise to this House? In particular, CNG burns very low particulate emissions, lower carbon monoxide, nitrous oxide and all of that.

Mr. S. Panday: We know that.

Hon. N. Parsanlal: If you know that, Member for Princes Town North, then perhaps, as the senior Member on that side, allow me to speak.

Mr. S. Panday: It is the implementation.

Hon. N. Parsanlal: Perhaps you need to just advise—we could have been on to the next Bill by now—

Mr. S. Panday: I will show you. [*Interruption*]

Mr. N. Parsanlal: I just want to turn simply—because my friend asked who is going to benefit from all of this.

Mr. S. Panday: Everybody who breathes the air.

Mr. N. Parsanlal: Therefore he ought not to have asked the question then. But the cheaper price of CNG compared to gasoline is something that we all have to consider. For one, this country would benefit because the CNG is produced here, so that must be a benefit to the economy. And the more CNG that is used in Trinidad and Tobago, it means there is more of the other fuel that we could export. It is as simple as that. Some people will argue that, perhaps, the subsidy on gas should, in fact, be removed to make the price of gasoline so prohibitive that people would then turn to CNG, because the price at the pump now is \$1.07 per equivalent litre. Do you want to know who benefits? That works out to \$18.19 to fill a 100-pound tank or the equivalent of 17 litres. So when you ask who benefits, 17 litres of CNG will cost \$18.19. I am using a 100-pound equivalent.

I am using a hundred pound equivalent. The equivalent in super—a driver filling 17 litres of super will pay \$45.90. A driver using premium will pay \$68. Remember the equivalent is \$18.19. A driver using diesel will pay \$25.50. Anyhow you turn this it is cheaper to use CNG. [*Interruption*]

3.15 p.m.

The distance one can travel, the mileage is a lot more than if you are using the other. Those who argue—the owners of vehicles operating with CNG also boast of lower maintenance cost. Less maintenance on the exhaust system, for instance, you change the oil less frequently. Some CNG owners report that the service of their vehicles lasts two to three times longer than gasoline or diesel vehicles. We ask: Who is going to benefit from this? [*Interruption*] The little blue ones that you take? [*Laughter*] The little blue ones Fyzabad that you take? I do not know.

I think that it is important for us to understand that in all of this what the Government is seeking with this Order is extremely safe. We lower the cost of the compressed natural gas; remove customs duty and VAT on the conversion kits; expand the fleet of stations available to the travelling public and improve the machinery and infrastructure in the stations so as to improve or drastically reduce the filling times for the owners. All this is to ensure greater benefits to the ordinary citizen of Trinidad and Tobago.

In light of this, the Excise Duty (Compressed Natural Gas) Order, 2008, before us, is something that this side asks the Members opposite to simply say yes to and let us move on to the next Bill that is before us.

With these few words, I thank you.

Mr. Chandresh Sharma (*Fyzabad*): Madam Deputy Speaker, this is the first sitting since that historic event 48 hours ago in the United States. One of the things that emerged from the election of President Barack Obama is the hope that he communicated to the international community. In Trinidad and Tobago, many of us celebrated his victory in different ways. One of the influences that came out of it, you would have obtained from the presentation of the Member for St. Augustine. He presented clearly the shortfalls and challenges that we are facing. Like many of us, I am saddened to hear my very good friend, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West. Whilst he identified with Obama, he has learnt absolutely nothing. He sounded like a radio disc jockey (DJ) jockeying all over the place with nothing to say, looking for a free ride.

In today's world when information is available it is not right for a government minister to go on a website and download a set of irrelevant information and reproduce it in the House as the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West. I alerted him two minutes ago that the website information he was using is outdated. When he identified what was taking place in India, I would tell him. I know that he did not mean it in a bad way when he said I would like what obtains in India. He did not

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say the same for the other countries as Italy and Brazil. I know why you said it. I know that you mean well. You are dougla.

He also spoke about clean air. This Government is a shameless government for the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West to say that. They are talking about a smelter plant that the international community has said would endanger the lives of people in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] How could this Minister talk about clean air? He has no idea about that. It is so unkind of him? Does he know the cancer risk that would take? Which website did you go on? I will have to point you to the correct one.

Let me tell you what they talked about in Trinidad with that smelter plant. The very distinguished Member for Caroni East can meet you privately to brief you. He is a gynaecologist. On the smelter plant we are talking about clean air will increase. [*Interruption*] Walk with many gloves. Prostate cancer, the pancreas, bladder problems, stomach, breast cancer, lung cancer, ovaries, are you aware of that? Is the Government aware of this? Member for Tunapuna, are you aware of this? Because of that smelter, our school children run the risk of this. You cannot come here and mislead the national community. Not any more! This information is available to all of us. I did not hear your comment. Say it loudly.

Miss Le Gendre: It is irrelevant.

Mr. C. Sharma: It is very important to listen to the Members opposite when they make their comments because they speak from their PNM hearts. She said that it is irrelevant. The children in this country getting cancer is irrelevant. The children in Bien Venue are unable to go to school because you would not pay the electrical bill for the repairs. I am so ashamed that the Government will say this after the election of Barack Obama. When a minister, you are like a salesman. Where is the hope?

When a government minister presents in the House—[*Interruption*] It depends on what you are presenting. You were reading like a salesman. You came to sell something. When you listen to the distinguished Member who looks very nice coming back from Dubai, you can see that she did some shopping. [*Laughter*] I hope that the hon. Minister did not shop with a credit card issued by the State, as a previous minister did.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: You “doh” worry about that.

Mr. C. Sharma: When you look at what obtains now, information is available to all of us. One cannot come here and say anything that he or she

wants. The Member was speaking about India but they are using a large number of vehicles with CNG. He is not aware that they are using a higher version, a higher quality of diesel.

Recently, there was an accident in Delhi where four people died. They revisited it. It was in the court in India. It is no longer CNG. CNG is not a clean fuel. It is environmentally friendly. CNG releases small particles that go into the stomach. *[Interruption]* Do you want to say something? You run the risk of that and it leads to lung cancer. Do not come here and paint that picture.

Five years ago, the then minister of finance who was also the prime minister, in his 2003 budget speech, he talked about removing heavy lead fuel to go to CNG. Five years later we have produced absolutely nothing. You have become a government of non-performance and shame because you do not care what you say. This is what your government said in 2003. You have just confirmed in this House that your service stations have not increased. You still have five service stations.

Do you know of what you remind? “A boy meet ah girl and he want to get married. He tell de girl, ‘Sweetheart, ah want to get married to yuh.’ She said, ‘Sure. Come and meet meh fadder and let us discuss it.’ He go an meet de fadder. De fadder say, ‘Whey yuh wukin?’ ‘Ah sign up in CEPEP. Ah go geh ah wuk nex week.’ ‘Whey yuh livin?’ ‘Ah sign up wid HDC. Ah hope to geh ah house nex year.’” That is what you are saying. You want to introduce this thing but you have nothing in place. *[Laughter and desk thumping]* You have to make up your mind how you are dealing with the national community.

Hon. Member: Perfect analogy.

Mr. C. Sharma: Come back to the CNG. What are some of the problems that the country is facing with the CNG? Madam Minister, as you were presenting and you do not seem to be familiar, one of the complaints is that natural gas is pumped or applied at 3,000 psi. It is too low. The international standard is now 3,600 psi and some are going to 10,000 psi. If your car is filled with less than 3,000 psi the performance would drop, as the Member for Princes Town will say. You have to be very careful.

There are only five service stations and they do not wish to treat with the CNG customer because they are not earning revenue in meaningful ways. They block the other vehicles from purchasing gas. When the Minister said that it reduces the cost, the CNG buyer is only purchasing CNG at the service station. The person who has diesel or gas would purchase other additives from which they would make more money. Dedicated service stations are required across the country. That is the first consideration.

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The other thing that I want to propose as an incentive is that you make the CNG available for free to all car owners because you want a high conversion rate. That would give them an incentive. At a later point you can introduce it. You know how this country runs. Everything is for the PNM friends. On one occasion, a minister delivering a budget contribution indicated to a close friend to buy some CNG kits because they were going to introduce CNG.

Hon. Member: Ross.

Mr. C. Sharma: I think it was Ross. That is correct. A guy in Claxton Bay.

You want to change that. You want the market to get involved. In this way you would be able to provide a better service. I suggest that you instruct employed persons at NEDCO to make loans available to all taxi-drivers who wish to install CNG, in the first instance, interest free. What do you think, Tobago East? Say something. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Dumas: I am quite willing to take the instruction, if I knew that you supported NEDCO.

Mr. C. Sharma: Only because I remember your ministry. You did such a poor job at the other place. I thought that you might improve here.

I was making the point that if we encourage NEDCO to make loans available to all taxi-drivers, in the first instance, so we can see the kits coming. The Government must intervene.

I was discussing this with my Chief Whip. I hope that the Chief Whip is listening. I was telling him that the tanks in the cars are very heavy. Since you mentioned India, I thought that you would have brought the learning from India. In India they use an alloy of aluminium, canvas and other fabrics. The tanks are stronger and they are less than one half of the weight. A car with heavy weight takes more energy to go forward. You will increase the CNG use.

The hon. Minister indicated that the rate of the National Gas Company has been since 1994. Since the rate has been in existence since 1994 and people are not moving, we need to ensure that the ministry provides some degree of incentives to encourage owners to move to natural gas. From what we have heard from the hon. Minister, she has said absolutely nothing in that regard.

There are safety concerns. Recently, in many countries, in New York, there was an explosion and three persons were injured and hospitalized. The testing garages in Trinidad which were approved by the Ministry of Works and Transport

to inspect vehicles do not have any facilities to test the CNG kits. While you may see them taking a 2008 or 2009 sticker, they are not equipped so to test.

3.30 p.m.

You would have thought that the Government, being aware of all this, would have done its homework. You know what it cost this country to send you to Dubai? Do you know how many CNG kits we could have bought? Do you know how many roads we could have fixed? You came back with nothing at the end of the day. The point is that the information that obtains in the international marketplace must be made available to us here if you want to encourage CNG users.

In London, for instance, they are moving away from CNG. Did you ride the bus there recently? It is not the most cost effective. They are going to this superior quality diesel that is almost half price and the emissions less than the CNG. So when you go to the website, you have to update the request. That is the only way you can deliver some degree of intelligence in the presentation here.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will recall the hon. Prime Minister, in July 2002, having addressed the Heads of Government, indicated, about this gas line to be run up the Caribbean—I hope that the Government is no longer considering it because the Inter-American Development Bank hired three specialists from the Caribbean and they said it would cost about US \$500 million in the first instance—that they would make sure that in Trinidad and Tobago in particular, as in other parts of the Caribbean, the fuel and the cost of reducing operating maintenance for public vehicles would be reduced. We have not seen that at all. When the Minister presents, he is really selling to the national community. The Government has really lost its way with the people; they do not believe the Government any more.

On the last occasion, the mover of this Motion, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, said that taxi fares will not go up. Immediately taxi fares went up. As a matter of fact, soon after the reading of the budget so many things went up, including murder. There were increases in food prices, rent and property. When you stand here, hon. Minister, you are really a salesperson; you are selling to Trinidad and Tobago to go this way and you have not given them any incentives; you have not attracted them. The average taxi driver listening to you will not know what you are talking about and will switch to 94.1FM.

You need to make sure—and the Opposition wants to help you in this because we want to make sure we have environmentally-friendly fuels available in Trinidad and Tobago—that the cost of travelling by public transport vehicles is reduced.

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I congratulate my colleague, the Member for Caroni East. On one occasion when he identified where the insurance was going to government agencies, the PNM went to town with personal and other things. I saw in the Senate papers laid last day that insurance was going to that agency. You must stand strong and remain firm and fight the evils of this Government. You must make sure that Trinidad and Tobago benefits. You must not be afraid to speak the truth even if it involves a colleague. I would certainly tell that to the colleague personally, as I have done with a few colleagues.

When you do things that take away moneys from this country—we are talking about revenue here—look at the revenue we are losing daily. Look at the delivery of this Government in terms of goods and services. I cannot recall a Government doing worse.

Thank you, Member for Mayaro.

“Officials have also become concerned about the hazards of natural gas after a series of small explosions forced a station in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, to shut down last November. Three workers received injuries and were hospitalized.”

In another place, Upper West Side to La Guardia Airport, they are moving away from the CNG buses. In fact, they have ordered another 125 which are expected to be in service in the next few months, using the biofuel.

Again, do not give the impression that CNG is the future and would save this country because you have not brought a single piece of legislation that has brought value to anybody's life since you have come into office. The Opposition must make sure we do our work.

One of the concerns in talking with some of the users—they are concerned about the bulky and heavy cylinders—is that having them in the buses and taxis increases the maintenance cost. On the one hand, the Minister is saying that if you use the CNG fuel it will reduce one area of cost, but the heavy tanks put a price on your shocks and springs and again the heavier the vehicle the more fuel it takes and applying the CNG at 3,000 psi is not helping.

I hope that the Government will take note of the Opposition's very detailed information. I think the Member for St. Augustine did a very good job in presenting the global picture. We need to make sure that the CNG kits are available at nominal cost; that Government's funding institutions, in this instance NEDCO and perhaps the National Gas Company, can consider making this available over a period of time.

I want to thank the management of National Petroleum Company. I hope they will get involved in the CNG kits and the upgrade of the gas stations. Recently, I went late at night to fill up diesel at one of the service stations at the Beetham Estate, and the pump malfunctioned and the diesel spilled into the interior of my vehicle. It was drawn to the management's attention and within 48 hours they agreed to restore the vehicle with respect to the damage to the carpet, et cetera.

I say that simply because I would like to congratulate the management of National Petroleum. I do not recall the name of the manager who called. I say this to make sure that other persons who are affected at gas stations from time to time are treated with by the managers of those service stations. I know that my good friend, the Member for Mayaro, is a member of Unipet, the other service provider. We want to make sure those things become available.

I was making the point about safety at the stations. All the other fuels that we use, gas and diesel, if it escapes, spills on the ground. In the case of CNG it goes upwards and runs the risk of fire and we would want to consider safety measures.

Many gas stations, for some reason, the fire extinguishers are hardly in place in the first instance and very often there is little maintenance. Recently, in talking with some of the people who work at these gas stations, very few if any are trained in how to treat with a fire and first aid application. The Minister may want to take note of that to make sure that the service station plays a very important role. Some are 24 hours per day service and people go there from time to time to obtain other areas of service and we want to make sure it is available.

Many gas stations also are not available at different times. What happens to a vehicle that goes to a gas station to fill up with CNG and the pressure is so low that he has to move to fuel, most times gas? I use the example of a taxi driver who, because he is on CNG in the first place, and has agreed to reduce his taxi fare, now has to purchase gas and to raise his fare. So the passenger who travelled in the morning and paid \$X, later, in coming back from Port of Spain, has to pay a different fare. That is very unfair to the taxi driver and very unfair to the passenger.

I suggest that the Government explore some payment incentive to such taxi drivers, so the service station will be able to certify that the taxi was unable to fill up for two or three days and as a result he must not be embarrassed and the passengers must not have to pay for the government's failure to provide those goods and services.

Similarly, WASA. Many times they are unable to deliver water. The Minister of Public Utilities in the UNC government was discussing in the Cabinet that

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citizens unable to receive water should not have to pay for that period. The same should apply to T&TEC and to any other service. Of late, the Government is failing in so many areas and the taxpayers have to pay and pay. You may want to consider that.

In arriving at the use of CNG, the Government recently purchased a number of buses and not one of them came CNG equipped. How is this Government demonstrating to the national community that it wants it to go to CNG? Here we are purchasing vehicles on a daily basis and not a single vehicle has CNG kits engaged. They have the opportunity, when they order these vehicles—the hon. Prime Minister was saying that he and the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara went to the BMW plant somewhere in Germany. There were no discussions of CNG.

That is why I say when they come here they do not influence anybody. They turn people off. You spend millions of dollars to purchase buses, most of them running in PNM constituencies—while we in the rural communities have to beg to get one—but you do not buy CNG equipment which is available. You do not have to buy the kits and install them. They are available. You can buy the buses in India, Brazil and Italy. They come with CNG. In fact, the first area of use was in Italy many years ago, so it is available. You would want to demonstrate that to the national community as well.

The Minister indicated that there is a lower cost, but he is misleading the House. A vehicle with CNG is a higher cost. In Trinidad and Tobago it is between \$10,000 and \$20,000. In talking with the suppliers of cars in this country; all pre-owned car owners have to be registered with the Ministry of Trade and Industry and they meet on a frequent basis. Not a single pre-owned dealer or new car dealer was asked to explore the possibility of bringing CNG-equipped cars into this country. Here the Government is granting the licence but no consideration. This Government is a government of falsehood.

3.45 p.m.

The conversion of a vehicle to natural gas increases the price by the cost of installation and the certification of an additional fuel system. The Minister and the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West got up and they did not tell that to the national community. CNG vehicles are more expensive, because there is a small destruction run. It is not that the world is suddenly going on a CNG rush; it is not happening. The cost of fuel stations is also higher and the fuel systems are more expensive. *[Interruption]* I wanted to make that point. I am glad you are listening, Member for Diego Martin Central. Thank you very much.

Vehicles powered by natural gas are not widespread, are manufactured in a limited range and the cost is higher. However, as the use of natural gas in transportation becomes widespread, the cost is expected to go down. If you want to reduce the cost in Trinidad, you need to start at the Government's level. Perhaps, at the Ministry you may want to manage or have policy direction. I was asking the Member for Barataria/San Juan what can the tourists coming to Trinidad and Tobago expect. He said, perhaps, they can expect CNG-powered cars. That is a massive achievement for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

I am concerned about the safety of these things. I would like the Minister to indicate how often these fuel systems are inspected and what the procedure is. How will a passenger travelling in a CNG taxi or public transport know that the vehicle has met the requirements and has the required testing? There is a global standard.

The Member for Lopinot/ Bon Air West indicated Brazil, Italy and India. In most of these public transport vehicles, the gas bottles are the roof. That is for a very good reason. They are not put under the vehicles so that in the event of an explosion, it will not destroy the vehicle in the first instance and harm the passengers inside. *[Interruption]* I am not hearing you Minister. You could sew the bags to put the CNG? Okay, that is a very good contribution. Thank you for bringing your expertise. Is that what you said? I did not hear you, sorry. What did he say? *[Interruption]*

Mr. Hunte: Are you insinuating from that postulation that one should put their gas tanks on the roof of the car as well?

Mr. C. Sharma: We would have a cup of tea and I would give you some intelligence in asking questions.

Talking with some of the mechanics, they are very concerned about the weight of these tanks, which I mentioned earlier. They indicated that the total weight of the vehicle has reduced the maximum load due to the installation of the pressure tanks holding the natural gas. Again, you want to look into that.

CNG vehicles have a shorter travelling distance compared to traditional vehicles. We made that point over and over. When the Prime Minister spoke in 2003 in this House, in the budget debate, he said that we were going to increase the number of CNG gas stations. Today there are still five. You are posing a disadvantage to the users again.

I think it is a good time for me to conclude. In closing, I want to suggest that—*[Interruption]* I must thank the Member for Mayaro again, for making this

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information available. He has a portable Internet access gadget. Four people were killed when a CNG cylinder exploded during refuelling of a taxi in Mumbai, India. Do not think that CNG is a free-for-all and it is the safest way of transport. We need to explore—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Manning: I thank the hon. Member for giving way. Are you aware of the conditions under which that vehicle might have been refuelling with CNG? Do you know if there was an open flame somewhere or somebody was smoking a cigarette? Are you aware of the circumstances?

Mr. S. Panday: That is speculation.

Mr. C. Sharma: I thank the Prime Minister very much. One of the things I have always asked for is a constituency fund. I would love to go to India and investigate this.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you very much.

Mr. Subhas Panday (*Princes Town North*): Thank you very much. Like the Members on both sides of this House, I take this opportunity to congratulate President-elect Barack Obama, as the President of the United States of America. In that spirit, I am certain that when I make that statement I not only make it on behalf of all the Members of this House, but all the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago and the whole region: Africa and the Pacific region and all Third World countries and developing countries, which will hope that God gives Barack Obama the strength to deal with the problems in the United States of America so that all of us would benefit from that.

On that conciliatory note I start my contribution. As my friends on both sides of the House have indicated, the idea of using CNG has a threefold purpose. It is cheaper, nobody doubts that; it is economically efficient, nobody doubts that; and it is environmentally friendly; nobody doubts that. Therefore, what is the argument? The argument is looking for the sting in the tail. This is an afterthought by the Government, because in the budget, they raised the price of premium gas by 33 per cent or \$1. Look how many persons use premium gas. With CNG, very few persons use it and they have given a decrease. This decrease came as an afterthought to the budget, because when one looks at the budget statement, one does not see anything about the reduction in the price of CNG. What we saw in the budget is:

“As a consequence, we propose to remove the customs duty and value added tax on the conversion kits for modifying from gas to CNG...”

That was the extent of the thinking and concession which the Government has in relation to CNG. There was never any idea or thought of also reducing the excise duty on CNG. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Manning: Thank you very much. Are you suggesting, therefore, on that account, you will not support the resolution before the House; is that what you are saying?

Mr. S. Panday: How could anybody who wants to become the next government not support such a resolution? I want to show you the sting in the tail. That is what I want to show you. This was not mentioned in the budget and we say that it is an afterthought. Having said that, you raised the price of premium, you decided to give the impression that you are doing something on the other side and you decreased the price of CNG. I want to show you how it is an afterthought, with the aim and objective of putting the dagger in the back of the population.

One would have thought if they had really intended to encourage people to use CNG, one would have seen a plan to educate and sensitize the population. One would have seen a plan about the use of CNG; telescoping the population that we are coming to CNG, look at the advantages and the pros and cons.

Most of all, CNG—the Prime Minister had an old car with CNG and he pelted away the CNG kit.

Mr. Manning: Sorry?

Mr. S. Panday: The CNG kit you had in your car, you do not have it any longer?

Mr. Manning: No.

Mr. S. Panday: You sold the car and gave away the CNG kit. You did not want it.

Mr. Manning: I would like my friend from Princes Town North to know that the price at which I sold the car was an all-inclusive price; it included the CNG kit.

Mr. S. Panday: It sounds as though it was a good fete. One would have thought that you have UTT—With respect to the first incarnation of CNG, the experience has been a bad one. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Manning: I do not.

Mr. S. Panday: I am telling you that it was bad. The reason it was bad was that there were no competent technicians, first of all, to install the CNG kit.

Mr. Manning: Not correct.

Mr. S. Panday: As a result of that, many persons who installed CNG experienced problems in the operation of their cars.

Mr. Manning: Not correct, again.

Mr. S. Panday: Okay. I am telling from firsthand—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Manning: Do you have one?

Mr. S. Panday: When I saw you pelt away yours, I decided not to go. I wanted to go for one. When I see you throw away yours, I say I could not go for one. I have relatives who have had and they also gave them away. Take that, I do not want to see it any longer because of the system. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Manning: I am going to have to speak.

Mr. S. Panday: Also there was not the expertise at the gas stations to have those compressors and the whole system working properly. For example, I thought if we were going CNG, you would have set up UTT and would have given scholarships, bursaries or invite UTT to have special courses in gas technology, CNG and things like that, so that there would be expertise in the society. *[Interruption]* It is coming. That is why I am saying that one would have thought that you would have done that before you bring this measure, which is an afterthought to put a knife in the back of the population. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Manning: What knife?

Mr. S. Panday: Coming to come. You do not have any scholarships or programmes at the University of Trinidad and Tobago to develop this technology so that people could attain maximum efficiency and benefits from this system.

Look at the number of gas stations, what we call filling stations, in Trinidad and Tobago. Since you had your car with CNG there were five filling stations. Do you remember when you went to Ross' in Claxton Bay and the payload was very short? By the time you got to Claxton Bay and came back on the highway, half of your gas was used up. Do you remember that? *[Interruption]*

Mr. Manning: That is not true.

Mr. S. Panday: Mr. Prime Minister, the system did not work. If we admit that the system did not work, then we can look for solutions. First of all, the system did not work because we did not develop the expertise and the technology to introduce CNG in Trinidad and Tobago. For example, you remember—you had

privilege, of course, if you reached last you would go first in the line. Do you remember at Ross' there would be long lines and you would bypass everybody and go to the beginning and take it?

Mr. Manning: Madam Deputy Speaker, my friend is really going a little too far. He knows what he is saying is not true.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in fact, I do not think he ever went to that gas station; Ross & Sons.

4.00 p.m.

Mr. S. Panday: I did.

Mr. Manning: To get CNG in what car?

Mr. S. Panday: In PAK 1056. [*Laughter*] The point I am making is that if you did not jump the line you would have waited there for hours to get CNG. That is the point I am making. These are problems that people have experienced. For example, the gas station at Rushworth Street, San Fernando, sometimes you have to line up there for an hour to get CNG. After the cars in front of you are filled, by the time you get to the pump the pressure in the cylinder would be so low that you cannot even get enough CNG to come out of the gas station. We should deal with those problems before we bring this measure, because bringing this measure under the prevailing circumstances would not encourage people to use CNG.

As the Member said, apart from the technology which we must introduce, we need more filling stations throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Prime Minister, you were in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and I am certain that you would have seen the position of some of the gas stations. There is a gas station in San Fernando West on Sutton Street, and if you want to put a filling station there you cannot put it.

Mr. Manning: That gas station is no longer there.

Mr. S. Panday: At least, you know San Fernando. There is a gas station at Cross Crossing and if you want to put a CNG filling station there, you cannot do it. Gas stations were developed as a small unit and, as such, they do not have the space for expansion.

Mr. Manning: There are some.

Mr. S. Panday: You are saying that there are some, but that number is insufficient to encourage people to convert to CNG. Do you agree with that?

Mr. Manning: Yes.

Mr. S. Panday: At least, we have agreed on one thing. One would expect designated service stations, probably on the highways, at intermittent points, so that in the event the payload or the distance for the CNG—if you are going from point A to point B and the CNG is diminishing, you could stop on the highway and get CNG or at any gas station close to the highway. As it stands, at this present time, I am predicting that this would have very little effect on the motoring public.

Madam Deputy Speaker, my colleagues have spoken about the distances, but who are the people that use the most gasoline? Basically, they are taxi drivers who ply up and down. A tank of CNG could take you from San Fernando to Port of Spain and then it would finish. So, therefore, after every trip you have to go to a gas station and wait for hours in order to get you tank filled. If you have to wait in a gas station for hours then people cannot make a living. So, the people this benefit is directed to, it is hardly possible that they would achieve anything in the present circumstances. So, we need to look at that matter. Madam Deputy Speaker, my colleagues have touched on that matter and I want to move on to another point.

We must be innovative; we must have real changes and not cosmetic changes like the ones you are trying to create here. The trick in this Motion today is to aim at a reduction in the \$2.4 billion subsidy. That is the objective. That is no secret. I want to tell the population that you are coming for them. This PNM Government is coming for them sooner than they think.

If that is one of the objectives, why were you not a little more proactive in the budget? If you are saying that we are subsidizing the gas bill to the tune of \$2.4 billion—bigger cars use more gasoline and, therefore, the subsidy is higher for the rich people with bigger cars and people who use gas guzzlers. They are benefiting more from these subsidies than the small man. *[Interruption]* That is old time PNM thinking, and I want to give you new thinking. Why did you not say that you are going to lower the motor vehicle tax on motor cars with 1100 cc? *[Interruption]* You have the March vehicle which is less than 1000. *[Interruption]* Are you saying that there are no cars in Trinidad and Tobago or on the world market that have 1000 cc or less? Are you saying that? Mr. Prime Minister, with the greatest of respect, we are trivializing the issue.

Mr. Manning: I am not trivializing the issue. I am going to answer you.

Mr. S. Panday: The point I am making is that you could look around in the world and see where there are cars with 1000 cc, because those cars would use

less fuel than the bigger cars. If you say that there will be no motor vehicle taxes on cars below 1100 cc, you are going to encourage people to use smaller cars and, as such, the subsidy would be reduced. That is forward thinking. It seems to me that when the PNM drafted the budget, they did not do the research or they did it by vaps.

Why did you not say that cars that are hybrid; that is, cars that produce both electricity and gasoline, depending upon the power of the car, there will be no motor vehicle taxes, for example on a 1500 cc or an 1800 cc? We must be forward thinking; we must be innovative; we must give the people hope; and we must tell the people that we are thinking about them. This hodgepodge that you are putting there is not helping.

We have CNG and our boilers at the power stations are powered by CNG. If there is a 90 per cent efficiency in producing electricity, then the electricity produced from CNG could then be transferred to hybrid cars. So, when somebody uses an electric car that person will be using a car with electricity that was generated from CNG. So, it is the same cheap energy that will be producing electricity. Do you want to tell us the price that companies pay for CNG? By so doing, you would be innovative and you would be in a position to tell the country that you are thinking about them. With these mechanisms and these increases, you give the public the impression that you are out to brutalize them. This is really a little “toolum” in their hands after you have brutalized them with the increase in premium gas.

Madam Deputy Speaker, my colleagues on this side of the House went into great details about all the current problems with respect to CNG, so I do not want to further engage the House with the tedious repetition. I am seeing Sen. The Hon. Enill here, and it seems to me that he knows why he came here. About two years ago, the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, Sen. The Hon. Conrad Enill, indicated that the subsidy on gas and petroleum was too high and that the Government was merely looking at it, but they did not intend to touch it. That was at that time. What is happening is that they are looking in the budget, in that direction, to reduce the subsidy. So, because you are not adopting all the other strategies, you are going to hurt the poor people. If you are encouraging people to use smaller cars and give them some assistance—hybrid cars that use CNG to power up electricity—you are going to get that benefit from electricity from CNG into the cars in order to cut cost, and by cutting cost by that method, we will also be eating into the subsidy. Mr. Prime Minister, do you agree with that?

So, the first step was to send a signal to the people that they have raised premium gasoline from \$2 to \$3, by \$1 per litre. That is approximately \$4 to \$5 a gallon. They were afraid to do it and that is why in the budget debate you said that

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is for high-end cars. You gave the people the assurance that the low-end cars would not be affected, but what has happened? To show that you are really testing the waters and to show how much the population of Trinidad and Tobago could bear—with a subsidy of \$2.4 billion, how much revenue do you expect to gain by increasing the price of premium gas?

On page 47 of the budget statement, the hon. Minister of Finance indicated that the savings from this measure would be an estimated \$200 million. So, you know, as a matter of fact, that it is not going to affect many people because \$200 million is really nothing. You are really telescoping to the nation that there is where you are going, but you were afraid that the population would go up in flames. Why did you not tell the population that you were going to make that move?

4.15 p.m.

Our Minister said:

"The Government proposes to increase the price of premium gasoline from \$3 per litre to \$4 per litre.

This measure will affect the high end of the market and will take immediate effect. The price for other grades of fuel will be retained."

You see how you are playing it? You are playing the population, stay calm, stay calm, it is only a few persons I am hitting, and you tried to comfort them in that process. The Minister said:

"We envisage that there would be no increase in the cost of transportation charged by maxi-taxis, buses, the majority of taxis and other transport vehicles that use diesel and super unleaded fuel for which the prices have been maintained."

So, what you were really doing by that measure was really testing the population, or sending a message to them, that if things get a little bad we are coming for you, and hear what I "tell ya", we are looking for the sting in the tail. The reason they were afraid to do it is clear; inflation rate was at 14.5 per cent at the time, and people were complaining about inflation; the high food prices, the high price of building materials; that people were being pauperized by inflation, caused by the PNM of course. You were giving them that kind of hope that although there is inflation I am trying to take care of you.

Now what has happened? Oil prices have begun to dip. We are going to tell the nation, although you speak from both sides of your mouth, you say that oil production at this time is 115,000 barrels per day, down from 240,000 and hence

our export in oil. Our revenue from the export of oil is not really significant in relation to the revenues from gas. Yet the expert commentators are hitting you and telling you revisit the budget.

[Light bulb blows]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I suggest we take the tea break at this time, and resume at 5.00 p.m.

4.18 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

[MR. SPEAKER in the Chair]

Mr. Speaker: I gathered you all had a very exciting pre-tea session. *[Interruption]* And I call upon him to continue.

Mr. S. Panday: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We are very happy that no one was injured in that process, and maybe thank God because our sister from Port of Spain South, it almost fell on her head, then spill over on the hon. Prime Minister. We thank God that no one was hurt or damaged.

I want to recommend to the Prime Minister that we should have a drill in this Parliament to see who could reach under the desk the fastest. *[Laughter]* In all my contortion I could not have gotten under the desk. We should really have some sort of security measures. I have total confidence in the police, but as a large group of persons in such an enclosed place, maybe it is time for us to think about a drill process for all Members of Parliament, because we have some of the most important persons here in Parliament and persons who need to be protected. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We would not say, Mr. Speaker, you know what was going to happen that is why you were not here. *[Laughter]*

I was at that point in which I had indicated that the Government did not attack the other types of gases—super and diesel—because the inflation rate was high, about 14.5 per cent, and as a result of that, they do not want the population to become agitated. However, the hon. Prime Minister and Members, other persons are saying that the oil prices are falling, therefore commodity prices will reduce and hence, it is hoped that that external factor will cause a reduction in inflation. *[Interruption]* Fair enough point, Mr. Prime Minister.

Therefore, it is expected to be a reduction in inflation. The point that you are saying, hon. Prime Minister, that you are expecting a reduction in the inflation and hence a reduction in the cost of living, agreed. My humble view is, when that

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time comes is then you will drop it on them and raise the price of gasoline. That is the point. What we are saying, hon. Prime Minister, is that the commentators do not know or they forgot what the Government has up its sleeves. The commentators are shouting, all the economists we have, Government we would like you to revisit the budget in such a way so as to curb your spending. In one breath you are saying, we are insulated, that the fall in oil price would not affect us, but these people are saying, stop your crazy and wanton spending.

What the society seems to have forgotten is that last year this Government collected \$52 billion in revenue. Remember when they came with the Supplementary Appropriation Act they took the budget up to \$42 billion? So, you spend \$42 billion and you collected \$52 billion in revenue, so you have \$10 billion in your back pocket. That \$10 billion that you have, you are not telling the population you have that at all. You did not let it go into the Consolidated Fund so you could dip your hand in it, so that you need to come to Parliament to obtain parliamentary approval before you enter into the Consolidated Fund.

Instead what did you do with that \$10 billion? You took that \$10 billion and put it in various funds, for example, the Infrastructure Development Fund. It means that when you so desire you could go into that fund and continue the wild spending, the mad spending, going into all those mega projects; you do not have to come back to Parliament; you could do that quietly by yourself. It is in those circumstances we are calling upon all the commentators to remember and to look at that \$10 billion you have, which you have hidden from the population. That is why you are saying the reduction in oil price will not affect the budget, because you know what you did in the last fiscal year.

Mr. Manning: What did we do?

Mr. S. Panday: You were not listening, Mr. Prime Minister, but out of respect I will repeat. Last year the Government spent \$42 billion, that is when you came with the Supplementary Appropriation Act; agreed, but the Government collected \$52 billion. What did you do with the difference? Remember when you came here you told us you put it in the Infrastructure Development Fund?

Mr. Manning: No, we put some there.

Mr. S. Panday: Okay, some there, and some in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund? Right.

Mr. Manning: And some in the Central Bank.

Mr. S. Panday: Okay, and some in the Central Bank. The point about it is you had that money to spend; it did go into the Consolidated Fund, so therefore you do not have to come back to Parliament to tell the nation—

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, just for the benefit of my hon. friend, all revenues go to the Consolidated Fund, except in the case of the Green Fund and one or two other special funds, and not many of them, but there is not much money involved. What happens is this; savings is considered an item of expenditure under the system of accounting that we use.

Therefore, the \$6.58 billion that went into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in the last fiscal year, in fact, was accounted for as an expenditure. Well, in fact it was a savings pushing up the ultimate size of the budget when the actual expenditure was considerably less than that. We tried to explain it in the debate, but clearly you did not want to take us on, on the matter.

Mr. S. Panday: The point I am making is, you had savings of \$10 billion. The question is, do you need parliamentary approval to take that money out, to spend it?

Mr. Manning: Yes.

Mr. S. Panday: Okay, if you say so.

Mr. Manning: What I am saying is this, that to transfer money from the Consolidated Fund to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, or to the IDF, there is an appropriation attained. In the Appropriation Bill it is done, correct?

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: For the IDF.

Mr. Manning: For the IDF it is appropriation, for the Heritage and Stabilisation, it is a transfer.

Mr. S. Panday: The money in the IDF, you do not have to come back to Parliament in order to spend that.

Mr. Manning: Yes.

Mr. S. Panday: That is already appropriated, Mr. Prime Minister.

Mr. Manning: Agreed.

Mr. S. Panday: That is the point I am making, it was appropriated. The point I am making is, although oil prices are falling, this is a buffer that you have, but you continue spending money in these mega projects, and what happened is, this \$2.4 billion in subsidy, you are telescoping to the people that because oil price is

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falling and we may not realize our budgetary projection we have to cut somewhere. You have indicated the budget when it was presented was a balanced budget, agreed. So, having regard to the fact that it was a balanced budget, and if your revenues now begin to decrease, that means in order to keep the budget balanced you will have to cut expenditure in certain areas.

What the Government is doing, they are spreading rumours in the population—

5.10 p.m.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Panday: Yes, of course—that they may be looking at subsidies and transfers as an item in the budget to save or to make up for the shortfall.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: I do not understand.

Mr. S. Panday: You do not understand that? The point I am making is—

Hon. Member: I am not understanding that.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: No, I want to hear.

Mr. S. Panday: I told her today that she would have made a better Attorney General.

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: No, you did not say better. You did not say that, you did not say a better—[*Laughter*]

Mr. S. Panday: A good Attorney General. [*Interruption*] The point I am making is, if you want to keep the budget balanced—you estimate a certain amount of revenue and you have a certain amount of expenditure—if there is a reduction in the revenue, then you would have to cut the expenditure. Agree? Simple!

Therefore, the Government is telescoping to the country—[*Interruption*] yes, certain Ministers have made certain statements, that look, we may have to look at subsidies and transfers, so you are telling the people expect, something might be coming, but you are not saying that they have \$10 billion in their back pocket that they could use, that they already have to supplement the budget.

Mr. Manning: That is not true!

Mr. S. Panday: Okay, you will talk after me. Now, having regard to that statement that certain Ministers are making that they may be targeting subsidies

and transfers—and it is not the Member for Point Fortin said that hon. Prime Minister, so you cannot come and say, “Where you all get that from?” The point about it is that senior Government Ministers—

[The Member for Siparia motions to Mr. S. Panday]

Mrs. Nunez-Tesheira: The Member wants to know what is the point. *[Laughter]*

Mr. S. Panday: The point is, she made a statement and then they cut her throat down. *[Interruption]*

The point is they are telescoping to the society that you are going for subsidies and transfers and the point I am making is, that you have been complaining in the past that one of the heavy areas of subsidy is the gas subsidy which is tantamount to \$2.4 billion. Therefore, if you look at the whole package you will see that you are going to deal with the price of gasoline soon.

Mr. Manning: I will answer you.

Mr. S. Panday: You are going for gasoline soon and I do not know—I have never been in Government—the mechanism.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: And you never will.

Mr. S. Panday: No, no. But today when I look at the Motion it refers to an Order and the Order says:

“Order cited under the hand of the Minister of Finance that they vary the Excise Duty on natural gas.”

I do not know if by an order you reduced it, if by a similar order you can increase the excise duty. That is the point I was trying to make. If that is so, I want to forewarn the population that they are coming for you sooner than you think. That is the point. They are coming for you to cut the subsidy on gas because—and you will use the argument:

1. That oil prices falling, therefore budgetary revenues have not been realized; and
2. Inflation has gone down, so therefore, now the population can bear it.

This is—what the French-Creole say—the **lacasche peche** you have.

Hon. Member: What?

Mr. S. Panday: This is the lacasche peche. *[Crosstalk]* This is the politics—what I am trying to explain to the population today—in this thing here, so all

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these technicalities and thing, you forego those technicalities, but to tell you and to tell the population that the Government intends, very soon, to raise the prices in gasoline—

Mr. Manning: Spell it for the *Hansard*.

Mr. S. Panday: Pardon?

Mr. Bharath: *Hansard* wants to know how to spell it. [*Laughter*]

Mr. S. Panday: Sooner or later this population will be faced with a reduction in subsidy and a consequent increase in gas prices. This is the “ketch”, they give you a little “toolum” today and tomorrow they come at you with the dagger.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Patrick Manning): Mr. Speaker, it is was not my intention at all to intervene in this debate but having listened to the machinations of a very fertile mind coming from the Member for Princes Town North, I thought that we ought to put some balance into this discourse and to bring the debate back on track.

The Government has made no secret of the fact that it believes that a significant amount of national resources has been expended on petroleum subsidies, in fact, to a disproportionate extent. When our prices hit \$147 a barrel in the month of July, we calculated that the subsidy at that rate would have been of the order of \$6 billion per year. That is a lot of money, and the question that we had to ask ourselves is whether, even, with the social conscience exhibited by the PNM Government of Trinidad and Tobago, we could continue in this country to use petroleum or to allow a policy to prevail that facilitates the use of petroleum in a manner that does not reflect its value in the international community.

That is the question we had to answer, that our price of petroleum today is one of the lowest in the world. There is no question about that, I think everybody accepts that, and at a subsidy rate of \$6 billion per year we had to ask ourselves the other question. If we had \$6 billion, whether expending it on petroleum subsidy was the best use of that national resource? That is the other question we had to ask ourselves.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has made no secret of the fact that we believe that the subsidies are too extensive and that a time is coming when we are going to have to price petroleum products at a level that is more realistic and which appropriately reflects the value of the fuel and what the fuel is able to gain

for the country by way of resources, so that we could expend these resources on other aspects of national development. We have to build schools, we have to build roads, we have to build water infrastructure, we have to build street infrastructure, we have to build hospitals and so on. All of these things are a legitimate call on the Exchequer of Trinidad and Tobago through the Consolidated Fund, and therefore you have to balance expending the money on subsidy or expending it on the essential elements of national development. That is the issue that faces a government.

The Member for Princes Town North lamented the fact that he was never in government. That was very clear you know. [*Interruption*] In your contribution that was very clear that you were never in government, because you do not seem to understand these nuances, but we understand. We could fix that if you want, you know, but perhaps in another incarnation. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Speaker, I was privileged enough to hold the portfolio of Minister of Energy in the government of George Michael Chambers, between the years 1981 and 1986, and in 1983 there was a significant increase in the price of gasoline and petroleum products. A significant increase and we in the Ministry of Energy sat down and asked ourselves what are the implications of this? What are the implications, because the price of petroleum products had already increased worldwide, but in Trinidad and Tobago we had kept it at a level that made it much more accessible to the average person at prices that they could easily afford, but at the same time incurring significant levels of subsidy as a legitimate call on the Exchequer, what are the implications of this?

The Ministry of Energy at the time concluded that the value of the fuel was not reflected in the price, because, even in 1983 there was a subsidy left. The value of the fuel was not reflected in the price at which the fuel was being sold, and that the time would come when we are going to have to look around for alternatives to gasoline for use as a motor fuel. And it is then that the idea of CNG was born, because we also said that having regard to where we had put the price of petroleum products at that time, one of the consequences would have been a move to the use of smaller cars in Trinidad and Tobago. I remember at the time I had owned a Royal Salon. I sold that car—

Mr. S. Panday: PAN 11.

Hon. P. Manning: PAN 1010.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: That was CNG.

Hon. P. Manning: No, that was not the CNG one. That car was sold and I bought a much smaller four-cylinder car at the time, reflecting the thinking of the Ministry of Energy that this was the direction in which the country had to go, and as the Minister at the time I thought that we should lead by example and that is what I did. It was a Mazda 626.

We also decided at the time that in the face of significant reserves of natural gas, and that really, when you look at the cost of natural gas in its use as a motor fuel in relation to the cost of gasoline, that the price of natural gas was so low. I refer to the international price of natural gas; at the time we did not have LNG but we used the gas to make ammonia methanol—in relation to the cost of the fuel appropriately priced or even with the subsidy, that it was an option that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago had to consider.

In fact, when we looked at the price of compressed natural gas (CNG), the administrative charges were disproportionate in relation to the cost of the fuel itself and we had to consider a number of options because we felt that what we could do is just sell it at a standard price, because the administrative charges in relation to the fuel cost were disproportionate and so on. The economists would be in a much better position to explain the details of that than I would be. The fact of the matter is, that was the birth of the idea of the use of natural gas as a motor fuel.

We decided at the time to do a pilot project and we established one CNG station in Claxton Bay. Ross and Sons operated that station and the Minister of Energy at the time—myself—decided that perhaps what I ought to do is to be part of a pilot project that we were instituting, to make an assessment myself of the use of CNG and its viability as a motor fuel. I changed my car then—1985—bought a six-cylinder car, a Laurel, and installed a conversion kit in it. This involved at the time two metal cylinders, which were placed in the trunk of the vehicle—in the boot as some people describe it—and over the next two years, in fact I kept the car for a long time because we went into Opposition, but we were able to test how that felt. I did it myself.

I myself was part of it and I am in a position to say that it worked well. There were some disadvantages, for example, the weight of the tanks was very heavy and it affected the rear suspension of the vehicle. You had to be careful how you drove because you could oversteer the vehicle. You had that kind of problem, and there were other kinds of problems, the engine had to be fairly reasonably tuned so you would not get hard starting from the use of the natural gas and so on. Technical issues that need not detain us at that time. But the overall assessment of the experiment was that it worked and it worked well.

The other problem was the cost, because the cost of the conversion was significant which, without some kind of incentive to convert, the average citizen would have been reluctant to do so even though we felt at the time that the disproportionate difference in the prices between liquid fuel and the gaseous fuel would have been attractive enough to start movement towards the conversion.

There was a third problem, the cascade which is the storage facility at the filling station had to be of a certain capacity and at a certain pressure to ensure that the rate at which the vehicles were filled was acceptable. That was not the case with the initial station that was put in. That was not the case. But all of these things were part of the experiment. We were learning. The experiment was being done to determine all of this, and there is an aspect of it with which the Member for Princes Town North may not have been familiar. That aspect was that there was some resistance by those who were wedded to liquid fuels, there was a resistance to the introduction of the gaseous fuel. I do not want to go into the details of that either.

5.25 p.m.

Mr. S. Panday: People complain that they spend too much money in electricity bills and they are not well compensated in the sale of CNG.

Hon. P. Manning: Mr. Speaker, oilmen are oilmen and oilmen by and large, are liquid fuel men. For those who are not exposed to it, you will not understand it. There is an outlook of oilmen that does not change easily, and therefore, when the attempt was made to introduce the gaseous fuel, suffice it to say that there was resistance from the liquid fuel oilmen. Let us leave it at that. You have it also when you look at alternative sources of energy. When you look at the renewable sources of energy, oilmen by and large, resist that. By and large they resist it—and that is why what Brazil has done was so commendable, where they introduced ethanol into the fuel and brought a fuel mix that uses a petroleum fuel, together with a vegetable-based fuel. It is a most unusual thing especially for oilmen, but that need not detain us.

Suffice it to say, that the experiment discovered these disabilities and that if we wanted to introduce an alternative fuel, then the advantages to the citizen of Trinidad and Tobago who would have been called upon to use that fuel, would have had to be significant in certain areas. One area would have had to be price. It must be a significant advantage. A second area would have had to be as we discovered, the time taken to refuel your vehicle. Because in the experimental stage in 1985—which began in 1985—the time that it took to fuel a CNG vehicle,

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was significantly longer than the time that it would have taken to fuel a liquid fuel vehicle, and that was part of the problem. So it did not catch on.

We left government shortly thereafter, but in 1991, when we came back in, we sought to take the experiment further. My hon. friends of which the Member for Princes Town North was a part, if not in the Parliament, but he was a part between 1986 and 1990—[*Interruption*]

Mr. S. Panday: Deputy Speaker.

Hon. P. Manning: You were Deputy Speaker? That is what it was. Between 1986 and 1991, they did not take it on. I am sorry? [*Interruption*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: That was after that.

Mr. S. Panday: That was after that.

Hon. P. Manning: But they did not take it on. So when we came back in 1991, we sought to take it further. We took a decision to install in a number of stations around the country, the gaseous fuel option compressed natural gas.

Dr. Gopeesingh: You had the line already?

Hon. P. Manning: But we could only do it in areas where we had lines run. Of necessity, we would have to be fairly restricted because we did not have as extensive a gas system as we have today, it is very different. But we ran into another problem, the design of the cascade. The design of the storage capacity and the refuelling capability of the station would have been critical in getting the citizen to convert from liquid to gaseous fuel and the design was flawed. The design turned out to be flawed, and therefore, CNG has never caught on in the country.

But now that we know all of this and in the face of oil prices rising and jumping—in fact, in April, oil prices were approximately \$30 a barrel and it has gone to \$147. In the face of oil prices jumping in the way they have and that the price and value of the fuel going as high as it has, and the subsidy levels now going to an anticipated \$6 billion a year at an oil price of \$147 per barrel, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago thought that the time had come to reconsider the CNG option. The Government has made no secret of the fact that we believe the subsidy is too high. We made no secret of that fact.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Thank you very much, hon. Prime Minister. Would you be able to give us an idea of what would be the subsidy based on the price of oil at \$70?

Hon. P. Manning: I am afraid I do not have the figures at hand. Mr. Speaker, we discussed this matter at length in the Standing Committee on Energy and we

decided that in preparation for the budget, fiscal year 2009, we had to reexamine the compressed natural gas option. We had to do that because the time had come to begin to look at the fuel price, and when we raised the price of the premium fuel from \$3.00 to \$4.00 per litre, we deliberately moved the fuel that is used by only a small category of persons in the country.

There were other categories of persons who used it, but who did not have to use it, because the engines of the cars that they use could not maximize the value of the fuel, and that many people were realizing that they were using an expensive fuel for which they had no need and which really was only wasteful of financial resources. They could easily have used the super fuel. In fact, the engines of their car would have been able to maximize the value of the super fuel, when in fact if you had gone to a higher octane fuel, there is no additional benefit that you— In fact, it could be downright dangerous.

Mr. S. Panday: Ninety-two to 94.

Hon. P. Manning: Ninety-two to what?

Mr. S. Panday: The super was 92 octane and the premium is only two more, 94 octane.

Hon. P. Manning: Now he is trying to start me off in a different direction. [*Laughter*] He is wrong, Mr. Speaker. He is wrong. It is 95 and I think it is 91. Ninety-five and 91, and it is RON. Again, we do not want to get involved in all of that.

Mr. Speaker, the point we were making therefore was this, that there are certain persons who use a premium fuel, who did not need to use a premium fuel because the engine of the car that they use could not maximize the value of the fuel. There was no greater efficiency as a result. And as we raised the price therefore, from \$3.00 to \$4.00, persons would have had to reexamine whether they needed the super or the premium fuel. And in most instances except in the case of certain premium vehicles of a new variety, they would have had to use the proper fuel, and therefore, move from premium to super.

If you want to get technical about it, the difference is the compression ratios of the engines. The engines with a higher compression ratio use a higher value fuel, the engines with a lower compression ratio use a lower value fuel. But more than that, whatever fuel you use in your car, modern engines are completely computerized, and therefore, they will automatically adjust the engine timing to avoid the engine knocking on acceleration.

Mr. S. Panday: You will make a good mechanic.

Hon. P. Manning: And many other things, Sir. Just stay tuned. But that is the reality of it. So, the point that we made to the national community therefore, is to examine what fuel you use, see what fuel you really need to use and just go to that. We have found out and many people found out that they could easily have gotten by on a fuel, the price of which was not the subject of a price increase, and therefore, we also made the point that since most of the taxis used in this country—nearly all the maxi-taxis virtually use a diesel fuel which was not touched.

Mr. Imbert: All, not nearly all.

Hon. P. Manning: Diesel fuel was not touched. All maxi-taxis which use diesel fuel were not touched. And that to the extent that there are gasoline vehicles that are pressed legally into taxi service, they would realize that they do not need to use a premium fuel if that is what they were using; they could easily get away with a super fuel, the price of which was not the subject of a price increase. And therefore, the Government made it clear that there was absolutely no justification for any increase in taxi fares. That is the reality. None whatsoever. But of course, you know it is not an exact science and there are those who will try to use the pertinacity of some, to put misinformation into the system and to give the impression that because the fuel price has gone up, I have to raise my taxi fare. In the same way, Mr. Speaker, listening to a newscast in a barber shop in San Fernando recently, I heard two announcers on a station—*[Interruption]*

Mr. S. Panday: Oh yes, 94.1.

Hon. P. Manning: 94.1 is the station. I heard two announcers giving a report on a statement that I had made on the night that all of us visited a particular constituency and giving an indication of what was in the budget, that is how PNM did our business—and talking about CNG. They raised that issue and editorializing in the reading of the news, commenting in the reading of the news and one comment that was made afterwards was, "CNG, is this not de thing that has the two tanks in the trunk? But that dangerous."

Mr. Speaker, a complete disservice to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Check your cars and tell me where your gasoline tank is. Check your cars ladies and gentlemen and tell me where your gasoline tank is, and you will find out that in many of your cars, if you get hit from behind, you will meet a gasoline tank before you meet a CNG tank. That is the reality of that. And the other point that has to be made in that regard is that gasoline is far more volatile and explosive than CNG could ever be, than natural gas could ever be. That is the second point, and therefore, it is much misinformation that was being put into the system and being put as fact coming as part of the news—*[Interruption]*

Mr. S. Panday: So you went for them. You do not want them to attack your Government—

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. P. Manning:—and being the subject of editorializing at the same time, which means it was completely unprofessional behaviour.

Mr. Speaker, the Government also decided that if we are now to exercise the CNG option, we are going to have to correct the problems. We are going to have to correct the problem of the filling time, so we have taken a decision on that. The station design must be such, that the pressures and cascade size must be enough to be able to fill a significant number of cars in a time frame, that causes them to fill quicker than if they had to go purely for a liquid fuel. That was the first decision we took.

The second decision we took is that we are going to have to have more people or more facilities in the country able to convert cars for dual use, liquid and gaseous fuels. So if there is one today, steps are going to be taken to ensure that there is more than one. We are going to have to do that.

The third thing is that the price must now be much more within the reach of the average person, and therefore, we are going to have to review the cost of conversion in relation to the Government take from that entire thing. So we are going to review that also.

The fourth point I want to make, is that there have been technological developments in the use of compressed natural gas as a motor fuel, and no longer do you have to use the heavy metal tanks. They now have tanks made out of composite material.

Mr. S. Panday: Somebody said canvas.

Hon. P. Manning: It is not canvas, it is composite materials. Let us use the proper technical term. Proper technical material is not canvas. Mr. Speaker, the Member for Fyzabad believes it is a mattress he is talking about. [*Laughter*] They are making tanks now—and the shapes do not have to be cylindrical either—from materials that are much lighter in weight, and therefore, the technology has been able to eliminate one of the biggest problems that the whole system had experienced, which was the weight of the tanks in the trunk and the weight affected the driving capabilities of the car. So there you have it, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the Government also said this, that we are going to put in place a system in the country, and when that system is in place and when there are

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enough stations all over the country so that people can just as easily get a gaseous fuel as they get a liquid fuel. When that is in place, then we are going to begin to progressively increase the price of the liquid fuel. That is the Government's strategy and it is not a secret.

Mr. S. Panday: Minister, are you giving the country the undertaking that there will be no reduction in the subsidy of gas until CNG has taken off to the satisfaction offer?

Hon. P. Manning: Our strategy anticipates that it will take us about two years to come to that point.

Mr. S. Panday: No subsidy reduction for two years?

Hon. P. Manning: No subsidy reduction for two years. That is the Government's plan at this time. We plan no increase in petroleum fuel prices until such time as we give a proper alternative to the citizens by way of compressed natural gas. We anticipate it will take us two years to do that. [*Desk thumping*] And therefore, the Member for Princes Town North and indeed the Member for Fyzabad need not worry, there is no sting in the tail, there is no surreptitious intent of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, but that our cards are all on the table. We have made it quite clear that this is the strategy we are pursuing and it is reasonable strategy.

It is a reasonable strategy, because it then means that we can use a fuel that is lower in cost, that is just as efficient. You do experience a slight power loss with the use of natural gas, but that is fine, but it is just as efficient a fuel.

5.40 p.m.

People would be able to use a cheaper fuel, get around, and the Government would be able, as a result of that, to reduce the level of subsidy, and the people of Trinidad and Tobago are able to benefit by that, to the extent that we will now be able to apply those savings to expenditure on essential elements of infrastructure like building 600 pre-schools between now and 2012 or ensuring that the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) is able to expand its offerings to a larger number of people, and so on, and so on, so that we reach 60 per cent of the secondary school cohort by 2015 exposed to tertiary education.

All these things cost money, and the Government of Trinidad is trying to ensure that we have a much more efficient expenditure of the resources of the country in the context of our total developmental objective.

Thank you.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar (*Siparia*): Mr. Speaker, I had planned to speak sometime before the tea break, and up to that point I was in my mind contemplating my opening statements. I had thought of saying to this House that I had really expected an explosion in this debate because of what happened at that radio station, and, thus far, there had been no explosion. Lo and behold, we got the explosion prior to the tea break. I am glad the Prime Minister mentioned, of his own volition, that incident which took him from the barber shop to the radio station on that day, when the topic of discussion was about CNG, inter alia. That was the topic, whether it was being done by way of newscast, whether it was being done by way of a call-in programme, whichever way it was being done, that was the topic that inspired the Prime Minister to leave his barbershop and go to Port of Spain to visit this radio station. [*Crosstalk*]

I will come back to that in a moment, because I had planned, in some way, that we should discuss that incident. The Prime Minister has discussed it in this debate. The Prime Minister has himself voluntarily placed it into the *Hansard* record and has made it an open topic for us to talk about.

Mr. Speaker: It will not be lengthy? [*Laughter*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: No, it will not be lengthy. In fact, I will say it before I go there, because I do not intend to spend my whole contribution on that at all.

Before I go there, I do want us to acknowledge, and I think the Government has, on many occasions, acknowledged that our economy has moved from being an oil based economy to a gas based economy, because the Government's policy has been, over the past seven years, rapid monetization of the natural gas resource. We have seen from the documents presented by the Minister of Finance recently in this Parliament that the production of oil has been falling and, with that, an increase we have been seeing in natural gas.

Whilst we acknowledge that, I think we also acknowledge that our revenues are heavily dependent on the revenues from the energy sector. We are very much skewed in terms of where the revenue comes from, and that is from the revenue sector versus the other sectors of the economy. The Government too has committed, from time to time, that it will grow the other sectors of the economy and not just keep us with our dependency on this one sector.

The hon. Prime Minister reminded us that he was the Minister of Energy at a very crucial time in the history of this nation, and at that time took certain decisions. I must, with due respect say, that in that time of an oil boom, the

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decisions taken then are now in a way being copied or being followed through in another kind of boom, the gas boom. The same mistakes we made then, we seem to be making them all over again.

I talk of the whole Dutch Disease phenomenon that we experienced in the oil boom, where we had very high revenues coming into this country from that boom, and we ended up with nothing because of the economic shocks. We talked about the price shocks, and this country went from reeling in a boom to a total bust. You remember the famous phrase that it went through like a dose of salts. The Prime Minister reminded us that he was there at the time.

Therefore, policies that were taken by his Government, of which he was a part, policies which they carried through, they implemented, ended up with this country in serious bust. You will recall when COLA was taken away; it was found that it was done illegally. You will recall all the structural adjustments that took place, falling upon that bust which we saw after the boom of the 1983 period. The same old errors that we made then, we are making those again. [*Interruption*] [*Mr. Manning raises his hand*]

Mr. Manning: I thank the Member for Siparia for giving way.

I want to remind her and the national community that there was an oil price collapse in 1983 and, therefore, the policies which were the subject of discussion in this debate came not in the boom, but in the bust. In fact, by 1986, oil prices had collapsed to \$8 a barrel.

The problems, therefore, of which you speak, between 1987 and 1991, were caused, not by profligate spending as some would say, but, indeed, they were caused by a significant reduction in the price of the major revenue earner, which was oil, and the need for structural adjustment.

I want to remind the hon. Member that unemployment went from 9.8 per cent in 1980 to 17 per cent in 1986, and the Government fell.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I thank the hon. Prime Minister for giving the time lines. The point is that during that period of time when the bust came, that was the time of his government. You were not the Minister of Energy at that time, and that is what you have just clarified for us. You were there in the days of the bust; therefore, I will come back to your policies then.

The policies which were carried through when the boom was there, are the policies we are pursuing once again, without putting aside sufficiently and without planning the economy and growing the economy in a way that would

sustain us, should we go through those kinds of price shocks once again. It was the price shocks; the Prime Minister has just said that; it was the drastic fall in the revenues because of price shocks related to oil.

I remember when I stood in this Parliament during the budget debate and spoke. I said this two weeks ago and I will repeat it, because each time we come back here we are seeing further decreases. I said then that pegging our budget on a price of oil of \$70 would not be feasible. Economists were saying it was not feasible. The Member for Diego Martin East, 17 times or 21 times, said "dotish, dotish, dotish".

When I spoke two weeks ago, the price of oil had dropped from \$70 to about \$66. As we speak today, Reuters reporting this morning said:

"U.S. light crude for December delivery fell...to \$60.68 a barrel...having earlier fallen to \$59.97, its lowest since March 22, 2007. London Brent Crude shed 18 cents to \$57.25 a barrel."

My understanding is, and I stand to be corrected—in both of these it is bad enough—that the oil we produce is closer to the London Brent Crude price. So I stand to be corrected, whether it is the London Brent Crude or the US light crude, whichever one of those prices, the point is prices have been tumbling. This is for the December deliveries. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Manning: Again I thank the hon. Member for Siparia for giving way. I have to tell her that I am enjoying this debate. This is what the Parliament is all about.

When the budget was delivered in this Parliament in September of 2008, there was no collapse of the financial markets in sight; nobody was predicting that, or those who were predicting might have been very few. Indeed, the outlook for oil prices, all the experts would tell you, was very good. In fact, we took a conservative figure of \$70 a barrel. Just for the record, what makes this one different from the others is that of the two occasions in the past where you had oil price shocks, they were occasioned by political actions. This is the first time that an oil price shock has been occasioned by economic action; very different and entirely unforeseen. When the hon. Member for Siparia said that, "We were cautioning you", cautioning us against what background? I could caution the next government that in the year 2530 the oil price will be \$80 a barrel, and they could do all kinds of things. If it turns out to be \$80 a barrel in 2530, then they would say what a prophet I was. It is that kind of thing. The fact of the matter is that at the time the budget was predicated, our assumptions were very sound indeed.

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Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I beg to disagree. I do not agree that at the time the budget was presented in this House there were no signs or there was nothing showing that there was this economic crisis. I do not agree with that, because the budget was presented within how many days we were here in this House, and we were speaking about the economic crisis in the United States. In fact, I talked about it, that this was the first time the world was facing a three-way kind of economic shock, because you were seeing on three fronts what was happening in terms of that crisis.

The hon. Prime Minister has said that the price shocks were for a different reason. The point is that the price shocks were predictable then and, therefore, I do not agree that the assumption, at that point in time, did not take into account what was happening in the US financial markets.

We said that if there was a drawing down in those financial markets, not just in the US, but it was happening around the world, if there was that shrinking of economies elsewhere, then it must impact, not only on the demand for oil, but also on the demand for natural gas, because those economies were shrinking; they were slowing down.

It is a very interesting phenomenon that after an election where you have a popular leader, as has happened in the US—and everyone has given their praise; I also add my congratulations to President elect, Barack Obama, who has really blazed a trail and brought all the good that is great, when you see there is equality of opportunity, that each man and each person can do his best; I congratulate him—what has been very interesting in such a scenario is that following upon that election the markets slumped further and has continued to slump.

If you check Bloomberg today in its reporting today of the US crisis, it said that the markets have continued on this slump; the lowest it has been since last year some time; since 1987. I read here from the Bloomberg report:

"Wall Street plunged for a second day, triggered by computer gear maker Cisco Systems warning of slumping demand and retailers reporting weak sales for October. Concerns about widespread economic weakness sent the major stock indexes down more than 4 percent Thursday, including the Dow Jones Industrial average, which tumbled more than 440 points.

Major indexes have lost about 10 percent since Barack Obama was elected president...a vote preceded by a steep rally...and the losses represent the Dow's worst two-day percentage decline since the October 1987 crash."

That was 21 years ago. A crash so deep, it is the worst since 1987.

So even with that boost and hope and confidence in the political system in the United States, it did not engender, it did not trigger a likewise boosting in confidence in the economic sectors. That slump, Mr. Speaker, is going to impact, as the whole crisis, not just here, but what is happening around the world.

If you put on Bloomberg and you see the ticker tapes going underneath, you can see the reds, where markets are just dropping. They are not going up into the blues, they are just dropping down.

The Prime Minister says, "Well, look, our assumptions were correct then, when we did the budget", but if we now acknowledge that things have changed and things are changing, then you must say so. Tell us what we are going to be doing about it. We must know that, because people are extremely worried. This is like an economic tsunami.

We talk about CNG, but that is only one form of our gas, the other form is LNG. Our major buyer of LNG is the United States. I think I have the numbers here somewhere.

"Trinidad and Tobago is currently the largest supplier of LNG to the United States and we are in fact one of the largest LNG exporters in the world. In 2007, Trinidad and Tobago exported 455 Bcf of natural gas to the United States which represents about 60 percent of total U.S. LNG net imports but only about 2 percent of total U.S. natural gas supply."

So here we are, heavily dependent on that market for our natural gas—the LNG aspect of it. We are talking about CNG today, but the LNG aspect of it. I know that the Prime Minister may have things in his back pocket that I do not know about, but please tell us and tell the nation. Because if we are dependent on that market for our LNG exports, which is now our gas-based economy, I am saying we are so dependent on the gas now that the revenue must be assured. That stream of revenue, is it going to be the same? I am reading that the natural gas prices are also falling. So whilst you talk about price shocks in oil, there are shocks also that could come from that natural gas which we are so heavily dependent upon.

The second issue is that the three "P"s when you talk about reserves. We have fallen in those three "P"s as well and I have those numbers here somewhere, with respect to, what you call: proven reserves, probable reserves and possible reserves. The net effect is that from the last presentation of the Ryder Scott report we have fallen on all three of those. That is information I have from their

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presentation. Again, we do not have access to these documents so we can only rely on what we get from time to time in the media and what the Government chooses to tell us. Whether we believe or not, only time will tell.

This is the point I am making. When you have this meltdown going on in the US, which is one of our major markets for LNG, but around this world you are seeing this meltdown—and I had said it in my budget response; this is what happens—their demand for these products is also going to be shrinking because their economy is contracting; they are not growing. Therefore, we who are so dependent on the revenue that would come from our sales of these items will be in for trouble. Tell us if it is different; tell us that you have a contract with the US; that they will take for the next 10, 15, 20 years, our LNG at a certain price; that they will not cut it; that it will remain the same; that those revenues will be assured.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, again, I thank the hon. Member for Siparia for giving way, and I will offer to initiate a debate in this House on the matters that the Member for Siparia is raising. We could have a full debate on it if you wish, but just let me say this. The Ryder Scott Report for 2007 brought a reserve-to-production ratio of 13 as opposed to 12 for 2006. Secondly, since the Ryder Scott Report was published for 2007, we have had two gas discoveries. So contrary to what the hon. Minister has been saying, our reserves position has been improving rather than getting worse. [*Desk thumping*]

The second point I wanted to make is in terms of our dependence on the US market. What the Member for Siparia may not be aware of is recently we initiated gas exports to Brazil. In fact, the whole market situation has changed considerably. We have exported to Tokyo; we have exported to Brazil; to Argentina; to Mexico. All these are new markets. In fact, I have been saying it quite clearly and you did not hear it, that Trinidad and Tobago has been too dependent on the US market and, in fact, the time has come for us to begin to diversify our market position. That is exactly what we are doing. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: As I say, it is good that we have these debates, otherwise we would never find out any of these things. [*Interruption*] How will we know? This is why the hon. Prime Minister himself has said perhaps we should initiate a whole discussion. The Prime Minister said that himself, that perhaps the time may come for us to have such a discussion in this House. My colleague from St. Augustine said that this whole natural gas issue was being so shrouded in secrecy when he opened on this side.

Mr. Manning: Only the contracts.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: One moment please. I have been very accommodating and I will continue so to be, because we are learning as we go. Some of it I will believe it when I see it. It is not to say that I am saying the Prime Minister is not telling the truth, but it is that sometimes information is given here that turns out to be the total opposite from what we hear.

But I want to come back to the point and the point is this—two issues. *[Interruption]* No, no, we are talking about LNG at the moment and the Prime Minister has just clarified certain issues on the LNG. I am talking about revenue earners. The Prime Minister appreciates that, I think. The Minister is asking me to get back to CNG and I think the hon. Prime Minister is very happy to talk about LNG at this point.

Let me just remind this House that the Motion before the House has to do with revenue; it is about revenue. What you are doing, you are decreasing revenue from CNG; you have taken it away from 20 cents to 5 cents. That is what this is about, so I am entitled, with due respect, to talk about revenue in this country, and I started off by saying that our revenues are very heavily dependent on the energy sector and, in particular, on the LNG. You are giving away 15 cents on CNG and at the moment I do not know if it is 1 per cent of the vehicles in the country, I believe, that utilizes CNG. So we are giving away absolutely nothing, really. My colleague from St. Augustine talked about the licence applications, zero revenue coming from it. So the real revenue earner is from the LNG.

To get back to the point, there were two points and one had to do with the fact of the dependency on the US market. The Prime Minister has now said that we are diversifying into these other economies, but the issue still remains the same. The meltdown I mentioned, yes, it is in the US, but it is happening globally; it is happening around the world. It is not just in the US. So to tell me we are selling to Tokyo and Brazil, may help you with a diversification point, but it does not tell us at what price; it does not tell us that the price is going to remain, because that price is also dropping; the LNG prices as well. Because of the demand dropping with the shrinking in the world economies, that is also being affected.

So, yes, you are attempting to diversify. We do not know to what extent; we do not know how much and, perhaps, one day we will be told in the debate you have said that you may want to initiate. But at the moment even that diversification, I am saying that we are still open to shocks because of the global situation and the global shrinking with respect to the economy.

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When we talked about what happened on the last occasion, I was making the point that we are repeating the same mistakes. That is the point I was getting at. This high revenue dependency from the energy sector, we are still not growing the other sectors and when we look at the GDP amounts from the other sectors which we had done during the budget debates from various persons here; agriculture, and so on, had fallen—if my colleague from Caroni Central would confirm the percentage to GDP from agriculture. Those things have fallen; manufacturing, and so on. We really need to take this money that we now have and grow the other sectors. And with due respect, I do not believe that that is happening in the manner that we want it to happen, especially now where we are seeing the economic shocks running through the world.

So we could well end up by like the “dise of salts” period, the Dutch Disease from the period which took place in 1983 where you came up with what you saw as alternatives at that point in time. What are we doing now? We are saying, all right, we want to go in CNG. That was a solution in 1983, 25 years ago. Twenty-five years ago the Government then saw as a solution, CNG. Is that still viable and feasible today?

When the hon. Prime Minister talked about an “oil man is an oil man and they are very resistant to change”, I saw my colleague from Pointe-a-Pierre smiling because Pointe-a-Pierre is the land of oil; that is the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery, and so on. Then he said, even with the renewable energy there is resistance to change, and so on. Well, let me say then that oil and gas men are oil and gas men and they are still resistant to change when it comes to renewable energy.

We had an opportunity in this country to have alternative energy—green energy, renewable energy, which none of this LNG is; none of this CNG is; which none of the gasoline is; none of those things: the oil fuel and the gas-based fuel, none of those are renewable. We had what Brazil did—the sugar cane; what they did to get green energy, which is clean and efficient. But what is more vital about that green energy, it is renewable; it will not be finished; it will not be depleted.

I am saying the 1983 solution is fine 25 years ago; today’s solutions are in renewable energy, in green energy. Those are the solutions and we had the chance in this country with Caroni (1975) Limited, with thousands of acres of sugar cane, which you closed down when we could have utilized that. That would have been alternative energy. That would have been a solution to this, which is the third millennium of mankind; the 21st Century we are in now. That is what we should have done.

So to talk about CNG which was a solution that was in 1983, 25 years ago, with due respect, we have to move forward and look at what is happening in the world today. That is why, when the Prime Minister talked about the explosions, and so on, I think it was the Member for St. Augustine and the Member for Fyzabad who talked about the dangers and the Prime Minister said, “Well, look, the technology has changed and it is not so dangerous”. I will give way before I come to the explosion of those CNG tanks.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Member for Siparia for giving way. The use of sugar cane for the manufacture of ethanol, it is easy to be convinced by what the Member for Siparia is saying when she is talking purely in qualitative terms, but when you begin to talk in quantitative terms about that approach, you will find out that the acreage of sugar cane in Trinidad and Tobago just was not enough to make the approach economically viable. In countries like Guyana where you have significantly larger acreage and which lend themselves to more mechanized harvesting and planting, it might be an option. In countries like Belize where you have a similar situation, that might be an option. But we examined it in Trinidad and Tobago. In Trinidad and Tobago it is not economically viable and therefore not an option for us.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, whose judgment call was that? Was a feasibility study done in this country? Who made that decision? Did we sit down and say, “Oh, this thing is too small; this country is too small; poor Trinidad and Tobago, we are too small, we cannot do this?” Was a feasibility study done to determine that we could not do that here? As I said, we cannot do it, I remember Barack Obama: “Yes, we can.” [*Desk thumping*]

This nation of ours is small but there are resourceful people in this country. They say God is a Trini; our climate; the lands that we have, yes, we could have done it. There was no feasibility study and so the Government made a judgment call. It is similar to the CNG. Was there a feasibility study? Or was it: “Oh boy, I had this bright idea in 1983”? Look, this is now 2008—

Mr. Manning: There was a feasibility study.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: For CNG?

Mr. Manning: Yes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: When, in 1983?

Mr. Manning: In 1983.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Some 25 years ago!

Hon. Member: A pilot project.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I want to come back to that pilot; I glad you reminded me. So the pilot project was done. And look at that, the pilot project was done in 1985, 23 years ago, and up to today, 1 per cent of vehicles—we are still on pilot! It never got anywhere. And if we examine thereafter, why this went nowhere? Why 23 or 25 years later, this has gone nowhere country?

Mr. Manning: Resistance from the oil men.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Resistance from the oil people, okay. And you may still have that resistance. That is why I come to this tank explosion.

Mr. Manning: The tanks in the trunk.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: No, explosion from my colleague from Fyzabad and my colleague from St. Augustine. If you had listened to them, they were reading stories and examples. I think one was here in Trinidad just last year—

Mr. Manning: One in India.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Yes, and one was in Trinidad, 2007 quoted from a newspaper article from one of my colleagues; January 18, 2007; the safety of this whole system.

6.10 p.m.

There is one other point I want to add about the economic meltdown and I will come back to that. How will things affect us? My colleague, the Member for St. Augustine, mentioned some of this. The attitude of the Government is that we are insulated and this would not affect us. Today, I read a story by Asha Javeed in the *Guardian*. It talks about the methanol plants that we have at Point Lisas and they have cut back. Page A7 says:

“Idle Pt Lisas plants could hurt revenues

However, three companies in Point Lisas: Yara, PCS Nitrogen and Caribbean Nitrogen Company’s Nitrogen 2000, who had benefitted from the high prices, were now taking a blow.

Yara will take down its ammonia plant No 2 for 20 to 30 days, while PCS will do likewise with both its No 1 and No 2 ammonia plants.

Caribbean Nitrogen Company’s Nitrogen 2000 plant is already down for maintenance.

Methanol Holding's M5000 facility is out of operation because of a mechanical problem.

'These four plants represent a combined capacity of well over two million tonnes a year, and with all of the plants out of production, there will be an appreciable impact on T&T's exports,' said South Chamber's chief executive Dax Driver...

...during the past three months, all of the major commodities exported by T&T experienced price declines.

'As methanol is an important raw material in many building products, the downturn in the housing market in the US and Europe is expected to feed directly into decreased demand for methanol in the medium term.'

This world crisis will affect all our exports. Methanol is a major exporter and revenue earner for us. Now the Government said that at that time its assumption was correct and those assumptions are now showing to be different. I ask the Government to tell us what it would be doing differently with respect to those assumptions that have turned out now to be no longer the reality. I made the point very clearly that I did not believe that those assumptions were fundamental at that point. I do not believe that at that point we could not have seen what is happening here. As the lawyers say, assuming but not admitting that at that point in time, you believed the fundamental and now you have seen the changes. Directly in Trinidad and Tobago, we are seeing what will happen with the methanol production, the exports and revenue of methanol. What is your plan? What would you be doing?

Both of my colleagues mentioned explosions and the fact that these may be unsafe in vehicles and which may be a disincentive for persons who want to buy and come on board with CNG tanks in their cars. This is what was being talked about in the radio station. From information that we got, I believe that this is what was being discussed by the broadcasters. It was about explosions from CNG tanks. The Prime Minister has told us that he listened to this programme in the barber shop. We have confirmed that because I read different stories in the news headlines where the Prime Minister is reported to have said that he does not listen to those stations or the radio. That day he was listening. He was in the barber shop and he listened. He heard it in the barber shop.

They were talking about CNG and the unsafety. The Prime Minister said that they were editorializing the news that CNG tanks in the trunks were dangerous. That was misinformation being put into the public domain. The Prime Minister saw it fit on the basis of that—

Mr. Manning: No, no, no, no.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar:—to go into the radio station. I will give way again in a few minutes if you will allow me to finish what I have copied here as your words. The hon. Prime Minister said that they were editorializing the news; CNG tanks in the trunks are dangerous and that was misinformation being put into the station. The Prime Minister called that unprofessional behaviour by the media.

Mr. Speaker, with due respect, it is my view that the behaviour of the Prime Minister was totally unprofessional in going down there to that radio station. [*Desk thumping*] Totally unprofessional! If you disagreed with what they were saying, the remedy is not to go down to that station with your full security detail. I know that there are differing reports. Some have said whether or not you locked down the street or what happened there. It cannot be right. With due respect it does not give the right to the Prime Minister to go down to that radio station. Whatever he went in there and said, we do not know. That is between him and the persons in that station. He may be brave enough to come out and tell us. Not brave, but he may be open and transparent enough to tell us. The point is that it is my respectful view that was totally unprofessional behaviour.

If there is a different view that the Prime Minister holds, the Prime Minister has his forum with which to deal with that. If it is that they were breaking the law the Prime Minister also has his remedies to deal with those issues. The Constitution is very clear when it comes to freedom of the press. We also understand that there is a balance in exercising the Constitution that rights come with responsibilities. There is no absolute right. You know the famous dictum where it is said that absolute power corrupts absolutely. There is no absolute right. We admit and accept that. There is this balancing of rights with the responsibilities in all the Westminster constitutions. If someone has overstepped his right and breached other persons' rights, there is a remedy. There is the criminal law that you can have recourse to or the civil law for defamation, libel and slander.

You cannot go to the telecommunications complaints whatever because I understand that they do not have the broadcast code in place. I do not know who is to set up the code for the Telecommunications Authority, if it is not the Government. It is a remedy but a dysfunctional or non-functional remedy because you do not have a broadcast code and it cannot be done. Certainly, you have recourse. You have what we call pre-action protocol letters which could have been sent. You could have sent it to the station.

It does not give the Prime Minister the right to go to that station with his full security detail to make a complaint. One may say, “I could go. I am John Public. I am going. I am an honorary citizen.” The point is that the Prime Minister is not an honorary citizen. He is *primus inter pares*, first among equals.

Mr. Manning: *Primus inter pares* in the Cabinet.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: First among equals in the Cabinet. He is also the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Manning: What that means?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: When the Prime Minister talks about respecting institutions, he gave as part of his explanation that the media should respect institutions. They have no respect for institutions. Tell me in this country how can you have pot calling kettle black? How can you say that the media has no respect for institutions when you have no respect for the institutions of this land?

If it is inappropriate and unprofessional behaviour, I think that the hon. Prime Minister may consider taking up the remedies that are at his disposal, as the Office of the Prime Minister and John Public, but should further apologize for that unprofessional and inappropriate behaviour. I can only say what is my view. If your view is different it is not to shut me up or intimidate me, but you will espouse your view if it is different. Your behaviour was unprofessional and inappropriate in the circumstances.

Mr. S. Panday: “Wajank.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: My colleague is saying “wajank”. I will not go that far. Do you know why I will not go that far? To call it “wajank” is to trivialize and make a joke out of it. This was totally inappropriate behaviour. Out of order for a prime minister! I will not go into that. That is the issue about 94.1.

I have stated my view. I know that the Government has had a passion for dubbing everything that is different from their voice and view and has treated those things in a certain way which I believe needs to be reconsidered. Where voices are saying things different from you and that is not a breaking of the law—because if it is a breaking of the law you have your remedy or recourse—all you do is espouse your views. You do not attempt to intimidate people. Some people call it thuggery. It is a kind of thuggery.

Any time you interfere with the Fourth Estate—you say ask the hon. Member for Tabaquite. He has his experiences. The Member for Couva North had his

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experiences too. That is why I am saying what I am saying today. I do recall when you interfere with the Fourth Estate and the rights of the Fourth Estate, you would pay the penalty. [*Interruption*]

I have no reporters in my back pocket, Madam. It is totally disrespectful for us in this House to talk who has reporter in back pocket. I remember the Member for Diego Martin North/East was jumping up about who was and was not in his pocket. I have no one in my back pocket in the media and I had no one in loco parentis in the media.

Mr. Manning: “Your back pocket full anyway.” [*Laughter*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: This is a very serious issue. I move back to CNG. As I say, those are my views. They may be different from yours. They are not illegal and not to be shut up. When the views are different not only on this, but also other issues—that is why in this House we had the experience hon. Speaker, where you were asking some of our Members to desist from saying anything to the Member for Diego Martin North/East during the budget debate. You were saying that if we spend more time on our contributions and less time on the Member for Diego Martin North/East, we would get through with our points. Because we expressed a different view it was dubbed “dotish” and foolish. I do not know if the Member for Diego Martin North/East got that from his leader. I recall when the people were protesting about the aluminium smelter that was the reported remark. They were “dotish”. Not only the Government, but also all of us need to consider when a view is different from ours, we can say that we disagree with it and place a different view that we have. Do you want to say something?

Mr. Speaker: Before I recognize the next Member—are you finished?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: No.

Mr. Speaker: Sorry. You have time.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I will not take more of your time. I thought that you were intervening to move the extension. I do not have much more to say. How many, Sir?

Mr. Speaker: You have two minutes of original speaking time.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I thank you very much.

There is another issue that is some cause for concern. It has to do with the 200 hundred luxury cars. I ask through you whether these luxury vehicles—yes, I want to know—are coming ready made fixed with CNG kits.

6.25 p.m.

I have a very serious concern. Here we are in this House extolling the virtues of CNG, so when the Prime Minister held discussions with these officials, was it a part of the condition of any leasing that they must come with CNG? If they do not, we are wasting time here. Why are we dealing with this issue when the 200 vehicles we will be getting at \$35 million—it is reported at that amount; Government will have to tell us; we may have to file questions which they will not answer. That is what I read in the newspaper today—\$35 million. Is this normal? Proposals have been put out for tendering. How can the Prime Minister then say to forget that; he is going to talk to BMW?

Mr. Manning: Who said that?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: That is carried in the newspaper today.

Mr. Imbert: Do not believe what they say?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I do not believe everything. I will let the Prime Minister tell us that the newspaper is lying.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. Manning: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and Member for Siparia. We have a tender out and we saw what came in. There are a number of issues that preceded that. Being well aware of what was emerging while in Germany, I met with BMW officials on other issues and I raised that with them. They said to us that when the APEC conference was taking place in South East Asia, those people came to BMW, they made a proposal to them, not only to provide cars, but also to train drivers and all that. The cars were made available and taken back after the engagement on terms and conditions that were acceptable to them. In fact, it was the preferred course of action. We therefore wanted to examine that course of action before we took a final decision. That is the position. We are asking them what it will cost us and what will the arrangements be to make cars available and then we will compare that with what we have before us.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Then these newspaper reports are totally misleading. [*Interruption*] I should not say that. I should be saying: from what the Prime Minister is saying today, as compared to what he said yesterday, as

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reported in these newspapers, it would appear that the newspapers were misleading. It would be for the reporters Ria Taitt, “PM goes for BMW car lease”; Ria Taitt in the *Express*, “Dealers Dumped”. [Interruption] The *Express* is scandal? Wow!

Mr. Manning: I never thought I would live to say this, but the most accurate report is in the *Newsday*.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: The *Express* is a tabloid. The Member for Diego Martin North/East says that the *Express* is a tabloid. The Prime Minister says it is inaccurate. Does that mean that you plan to take a trip to Express House as well?

Mr. Manning: As the spirit moves me. [Laughter]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: The *Guardian*:

“Manning fed up with media

I run the country”

I do not want the Member for Diego Martin North/East to answer. These are allegations about the Prime Minister. It is for the Prime Minister to answer. Headline: “Manning mad at media; Prime Minister goes to the court”. Calysle Jeremiah. Then they carry the report on the vehicles. Is their report also inaccurate?

Mr. Manning: Read the *Newsday*.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I read all three. Then you come to the *Newsday* where they carry a story. [Interruption]

Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister always tells me that hurry dog—I am looking for the page; I will read it—hurry dog do not get the curry.

First of all, the Prime Minister likes the *Newsday* report and it appears to be the shortest of the three reports.

“Government may turn to German luxury car manufacturer BMW to provide 200 VIP vehicles for...Summit...

Addressing the post-Cabinet news conference at the...Residence...Prime Minister ...revealed that during his visit to Munich, Germany, last week he had a discussion with officials of BMW about leasing the vehicles.”

[Interruption] I have to ask the questions. Do you want me to read the whole thing and ask 10 questions? I have been told that this is the most accurate, so I am asking questions.

Was this trip to BMW part of the official itinerary of the Prime Minister?

Mr. Manning: The answer is yes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Before you left Trinidad, you knew you were going to visit BMW.

Mr. Manning: Yes.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Okay, I am not saying no. I am taking it step by step. Remember “hurry”. Secondly, there was a discussion with these officials.

““What we might well do is go directly to the car manufacturers. I visited the showroom in Munich, we had discussions on the matter and I have to discuss it with our people here’...”

Mr. Manning said that the officials told him that the APEC conference had asked to lease vehicles from the company and APEC members, including US, Canada and so on had done this.

He quoted:

““They went directly to BMW and BMW put a proposal and a package in place and supplied cars for temporary use in the...summit...”

The Prime Minister said the problem with the proposals from the local car dealers to lease vehicles is that they ‘have priced...at such a level driving you in the direction to buy cars.’”

These people have now come out and spoken as well. That story is not carried in the *Newsday*, the story of these dealers reported by the Prime Minister to have priced the alternative structures at such a level driving them in the direction of buying cars. The *Express* carries the story from the local dealers on page 2 of today’s *Express*.

“President of the Trinidad and Tobago Automobile Association, Philip Knaggs is confused over Prime Minister...moving to lease 200 luxury vehicles from a foreign dealer.

He claimed that it will cost \$35 million.”

We do not know so I will ask the Prime Minister to tell us.

Mr. Manning: Not only that. What is the proposal on computation of taxes? Check that.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar:

“The dealers chose the third option, which was this—let us bring in the 200 vehicles free of tax, the Government uses them and returns them when the conference ends, Knaggs explained.”

That was one of the options.

Mr. Manning: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Those are the things you will have to tell us because we do not know.

Mr. Manning: What is the value? You have tax and duties. Do not make a judgment on it.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Why BMW? Why not Mercedes-Benz or Audi? And then the Prime Minister tells us today that he made the decision to go there before he left Trinidad and Tobago. So what prompted the Prime Minister or, more appropriately, who told the Prime Minister to put it on his itinerary when he goes to Germany?

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I went to Germany, Munich, at the invitation of a business organization to address German and Latin American businessmen who operate in the Latin American area. There was a one-day conference on energy. I addressed the opening of the conference in the morning and a dinner in the evening. That organization put together a programme of visits they would have liked me to make while in Munich and one of the things listed was the BMW factory because I do not think there is an equivalent factory to Mercedes-Benz in Munich. That was the programme they put together, to which I agreed.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: This is not appropriate. It gets “curiouser” by the minute. When we come to the expenditure of public finances, it will be Government revenues that will be utilized. [*Interruption*]. We are talking about the process.

Mr. Speaker, we talk about “hurry” again. These gentlemen are hurry.

Mr. Speaker: I think I blame myself for all this. We are going off track. I allowed it because Members seem to be enjoying themselves. I appeal to Members following, since the Prime Minister has introduced it and the Member for Siparia is responding, I hope Members following will desist from engaging in what obviously is a little off mark.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: I suggest we may want to consider the process. It cannot be that John or Mary told him that these people did a good job and to check them out. That is not the job of the Prime Minister. That is why we have the Minister of Finance. That is why there is a process for contracting whether by lease or by buying.

If the Prime Minister got good reports from these people and decided to check them out, whoever is putting out the proposals for people to come in; not visit and that is the point. You put out documents for people to tender. Has the deadline passed? Has BMW tendered? What has happened with this? Is it a “pappyshow”, this tendering procedure? I have serious concerns with respect to what happens next.

I remember when the Minister of Foreign Affairs said we were going to buy these vehicles and the Prime Minister said we were not going to buy; we would have another kind of arrangement, which placated people. This has brought up the issue again and I ask for further disclosure with respect to the process. Thus far the process appears to be flawed.

Mr. Manning: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: With due respect, it cannot be when you decide. There is a process for the expenditure of public funds. There are people who have tendered. They have put in their proposals and you bring others who have not tendered. The deadline may have passed. We are talking about all kinds of court cases now for those people who are going to be by-passed if you go to this one person. So, Mr. Speaker, I say that in government expenditure there is a procedure and that has not been followed in terms of what is happening.

Just before I take any seat, I will summarize our concerns with respect to the economic meltdown globally and the impact on Trinidad and Tobago and our dependence on the energy sector, gas, now that we are more gas based. What are the proposals and protections that have been put in place to ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago continue to enjoy the level of prosperity to which they are entitled from these very high revenues?

I thank you.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, I had intended, just like the Member opposite, to be brief, but regrettably the Member for Siparia has raised some issues that require me to speak a little longer than I had originally intended. I will try to deal with the matters in reverse order. I promise I will not use the word “dotish” at any time today.

6.40 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the Member indicated, with respect to the vehicles that are to be acquired for the Summit of the Americas and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference, that the Government has engaged in a process and has invited tenders and if we suddenly scrap or abort the process or whatever, there would be a court case. The Member for Siparia is a distinguished legal luminary and is very well aware that an invitation to tender is merely an invitation to treat. That is trite law and it does not create any binding contractual obligation. There are so many cases. Case law is replete with examples that an invitation to tender is merely an invitation to treat and, therefore, there shall be no court case. Nobody with any grain of common sense, not even legal sense, would—[*Interruption*] I said I would not use those words—take good money and waste it in a case of this matter.

As a matter of fact, there is case law in our jurisdiction. There have been many recent decisions in the local Court of Appeal and our High Court, with respect to this matter. For the edification of the Member, I would refer her to the case of *Century Elson v UDeCott*, where a judgment was rendered a short while ago by the Justice Mark Mohammed, which dealt with the whole question of the creation of contractual obligations in the competitive tendering process. There is also a Court of Appeal judgment. The Members of that panel were hon. Justice Warner, Justice Kangaloo and the former Chief Justice, Sat Sharma. That was the case of *NH (International) v UDeCott*. [*Interruption*] Yes. By majority vote, Mr. Speaker, the Court of Appeal ruled that, again, in that case no contractual obligation was formed. They were simply following a case in New Zealand; a Privy Council ruling, *Pratt Contractors v New Zealand Transit*. That was a Privy Council case which dealt with this matter extensively. I would refer those cases to the hon. Member and you would get a better understanding of the fact that an invitation to tender does not create contractual obligations. Let us move on.

The Member also referred to newspaper reports. I have some association—I would give the Member the references and citation. Those newspaper reports are inaccurate; they are. If you read—of all the newspapers; I agree with the Prime Minister. I am astonished. I am shocked. There were papers today that dealt with the Prime Minister’s statement, with respect to the visit of the BMW factory in Germany. Of all the newspapers, the one that was accurate, I am astonished, was the *Newsday*. What the *Newsday* said—the Member glossed over it and mumbled through it, because it did not suit the Member’s purposes—is what we might well do is to ask BMW to supply the vehicles, as they did with the Apex Conference. “I have to discuss this with the people here”. What does that say? It says there is a

potential alternative solution for the acquisition of the vehicles. That is all. As I said, I was astonished that of all the newspapers, the *Newsday* managed to capture the statement of the Prime Minister accurately.

The *Express*, as I have said, has now become a tabloid with a big headline: “Dealers dumped.” I am advised also that the headline in the *Guardian* is quite inaccurate. I have that on good authority that the headline on the *Guardian* and some of the statements made in the *Guardian* are quite inaccurate.

The fact of the matter is, with respect to these vehicles, I will be brief, the Government did invite tenders for the supply of 200 vehicles. There is another fallacy. These are not 200 luxury vehicles. It is a group of vehicles. There are about 120 mid-range vehicles and 80 high-end vehicles. It is not 200 luxury vehicles. [*Interruption*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Which of the BMW vehicles would fall in the mid-range and high-range?

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, I had no intention of belabouring this point, but you understand what is going on here. I would now have to educate the Member.

For the Summit of the Americas and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Conference, three classes of vehicles are required. You have vehicles for Heads of State, which, obviously would have to be high-end vehicles; vehicles for spouses of Heads of State, which is a mid-range vehicle, and then you have vehicles for delegates, which is medium to low. The 200 vehicles comprise three categories of vehicles. I hope that has dealt with that issue.

When we invited tenders—she knows that. I do not need to tell her that there is a range of vehicles. All car manufactures have a range of vehicles, including BMW. The fact of the matter is that we invited tenders and we received quotations or tenders for purchase, lease and rental; all three. When we examined the prices submitted for the lease and the rental option, the lease is for one year, two years and the rental for three weeks in April and three weeks in November. The Summit of the Americas is in April and the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting is in November. It would be three weeks in April and three weeks in November. When we examined the prices that were submitted, with respect to the lease and rental, it was almost the same as the purchase option; unbelievable. When you look especially at the rental option, the prices that the suppliers had submitted to supply vehicles for three weeks in April and three weeks in November is almost the same as the cost of the vehicles. Therefore, that solution

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is not a cost-effective solution. The submissions coming from the local suppliers, with respect to the rental options or the lease, are not cost-effective solutions. Because, as the Prime Minister said, the inescapable conclusion that you would draw, when you look at the prices submitted, is that the dealers were pushing you in the direction of purchasing the vehicle.

Nobody is getting into a fight with anybody with this. We are dealing with facts. Bids come in, \$X million for purchase, a little less for lease and almost the same for rental. The inescapable conclusion was that the rental option was being made so unattractive that the Government was almost compelled to purchase the vehicles. It is because the rental option was so uneconomical; the Government has started to examine all sorts of approaches to this matter. We are not profligate. We are not going to squander money on these conferences, so we are looking at it very, very carefully.

The Prime Minister's intervention, in terms of taking advantage of the opportunity while visiting a BMW factory in Germany to ask them whether they would be capable of providing a viable option, is all geared towards saving money for this country. That is what it is all about.

Sometimes, when I listen to the hon. Members opposite and sometimes when I hear people speaking in this country, I wonder whether schizophrenia is rampant. I do not mean any disrespect and if any disrespect was conveyed, I withdraw that and apologize, but the fact of the matter is—[Desk thumping] yes, I meant no disrespect—I am saying to myself: I wonder if schizophrenia is rampant. The Government has been condemned for the last two months because of the very thought of purchasing 200 high-end vehicles. The very idea has attracted such universal condemnation from all and sundry. When the Prime Minister says: okay, we are exploring another solution to this situation that would result in substantial savings, look at the headline on the *Express*: “Dealers dumped.” It is a big hue and cry that you are taking money out of their pockets, the poor dealers, how could you do them that.

The Member for Siparia talks about a court case. That is schizophrenia. You cannot be right and wrong at the same time. If it is wrong to spend \$100 million, \$50 million or \$75 million on buying 200 vehicles, it cannot also be right when the dealers complain that you are dumping them and treating them badly. Which one is correct? If we had bought it we would have treated the dealers well and now that we are thinking of another alternative, we are treating them bad? It is schizophrenia. People in this country have to start debating issues rationally.

It is entirely irrational for a newspaper to be carrying on a campaign against the Government, because it is mistreating these poor, underprivileged motor car dealers. That is wrong. Last month they carried a campaign because the squandermania Government is daring to contemplate buying the vehicles from the same dealers. This is wrong and I think it is about time people of this country have to say these things. That is why I completely endorse the Prime Minister's visit at the radio station. *[Interruption]*

Mr. S. Panday: Singing for your supper?

Hon. C. Imbert: No, I would do it too. All of us have a right to object to inaccurate and sensationalized reporting; we have a right. We are all citizens of this country. Since when you became a politician you lose your rights in this country? Since when? That is another fallacy that Members of this House should not perpetuate. We are all politicians here. We are all citizens of this country. We are all entitled to equal treatment under the law. We are, and it is wrong for politicians to diminish the rights of other politicians, because one day you are there and the next day you are here and one day you are here and the other day you are there. These are facts—*[Interruption]* No, you were over here between 1995—2001. Now you are over there and you would be over there for a long time; a very, very long time. Speaking hypothetically, perhaps, one day in 2033 or 3030 you might be over here. It is wrong to say that politicians do not have rights in this country. It is wrong.

It reminds me—Members opposite spoke about President elect, Barack Obama. I was looking at the decision of Oprah Winfrey to endorse Sen. Obama. She justified her endorsement and her presence by saying it was a right to do so. She said it was her right to do so as a United States citizen.

6.55 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, it ties into the point that the Prime Minister has the right, as any other citizen, to object to what he considers to be inaccurate and sensationalist reporting. Oprah Winfrey made the point that she had the right to go and stand on a platform and endorse the Democratic candidate for the presidency. Some people said that because she is a quasi-public figure, and because she has a national syndicated television programme, she should not have done that, and because she did that she added her popularity to Sen. Obama. She said that it was her right to endorse him, and she did so in her private capacity, and she did not promote him on her television show.

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Mr. Speaker, in the same way, I am of the view that the Prime Minister, the Member for Tabaquite, the Member for Siparia and I have a right to object to inaccurate and sensationalist reporting. I want to caution Members that they would do well to follow that course of action.

Now, let me return to CNG. Mr. Speaker, this is a hand-held mobile device, and if you would allow me—[*Device in hand*]

Mr. Speaker: I am going to remind you that I am still waiting for a report. Go ahead. [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, with your leave, I would like to use a hand-held mobile device in the debate. I have a report from the International Energy Agency (IEA) dated November 06, 2008. For those who do not know, the IEA is one of the premier energy research organizations in the world. It is one of the most reputable and recognized agencies in the world. Yesterday, the IEA predicted a surge in oil prices to US \$100 per barrel. They said that they expect this to occur in 2009.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: We will have to wait until then.

Hon. C. Imbert: The point I am making—let me read the entire thing. The International Energy Agency said on Thursday that prices for crude oil would likely average US \$100 a barrel between 2008 and 2015. That is their latest forecast. Listen to these words! This represents a major upward adjustment from last year's outlook. So, yesterday, the IEA adjusted its outlook for crude oil prices upward and predicted that over the next seven years oil prices are going to average US \$100.

Mr. Bharath: Is that not the same agency that predicted that oil prices would have been US \$124 and the budget was based on US \$70?

Hon. Members: No.

Hon. C. Imbert: You see, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. That was the EIA. [*Laughter*] Hon. Members opposite, if you want to dance in the big league, familiarize yourself with the facts. [*Desk thumping*] The EIA is the Energy Information Administration of the United States of America Government and this is the International Energy Agency. [*Interruption*] Let me go on.

Mr. Speaker: If you could compress your statement—[*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, I regret to inform you that I am being entirely relevant. You see, the IEA has predicted a surge in oil prices and that over the next

seven years oil prices will average at least US \$100. This is such a reputable agency that it is used by developed countries and the whole of Europe. They use an American agency. You see, what hon. Members do not understand is that when we look at world trends, we cannot only look in this hemisphere. We have to look at other parts of the world. We have to look throughout the world because the American economy is in trouble. If the American economy is in trouble then you have to look at what the rest of the world is saying. That agency said that there is going to be a surge in crude oil prices and that is why we must move now to CNG. Do you understand the relevance? A reputable agency has told us that it expects crude oil prices to surge to US \$100.

Mr. S. Panday: What did the America agency tell you?

Hon. C. Imbert: They said US \$124. We now have to look at alternative fuels such as CNG and that is why this Order is so important. It is because of the fact that crude oil prices are going to be so high—

Mr. Manning: That is skill!

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, there were some other points that the Member for Siparia made. As I said, a little knowledge is a very dangerous thing. The volatility of the crude oil market is as such that just one week ago oil jumped to \$70. In one day, it jumped by \$6. It is \$61.04 today; West Texas Intermediate. For your information, that was the price at 3.52 p.m. If hon. Members want to get a good idea of how we forecast our revenues they could look at West Texas Intermediate (WTI); light sweet crude. That is the one you have to look at and not Brent.

The fact of the matter is today WTI is \$61.04; last week it was \$70; a month ago it was \$80-plus; and next month it may be \$80-plus. Countries do not base their budgets on variations in a single week or a single month. You cannot operate like that. In one day, in 2008, I remember oil prices jumped by \$30 in one day. You heard the hon. Prime Minister say that not too long ago oil prices were \$30 a barrel. I remember looking at oil prices and I could not imagine that oil prices would hit US \$100. I saw it went to \$40, \$50, \$60 and \$70 and I said to myself that it cannot go past that and then suddenly it went to US \$100. The same Energy Information Administration in the United States of America had predicted that oil prices would peek at US \$100 because they are conservative. You see, you have to look at historical trends. If an agency has a history of being conservative and it tells me that oil prices should average US \$124, I just cannot dismiss them out of hand and say that they do not know what they are talking about or that they are

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“dotish”. I have to look at the history and the accuracy of this agency. Sorry, I said I would not use the word “dotish” to refer to the Member for Siparia or hon. Members opposite.

Hon. Member: But you could use it for other people. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I cannot dismiss the predictions of a conservative reputable energy agency out of hand. I cannot dismiss it as “dotish”. I would never use a word like that to describe them. When I look at that, it is imprudent, impractical and irrational for Members opposite to just look at the variations in oil prices for a couple of weeks and decide that is what it is going to be for the rest of the year.

The other point I want to make, hon. Member for Siparia, is that you were wrong about natural gas prices. You were absolutely wrong. Just a couple weeks ago, the Henry Hub prices were \$6.15. Yesterday it was \$6.19. If you look at the trend line for the last four weeks, you are going to see that natural gas prices hit bottom about three to four weeks ago, and it is now trending upward. It is almost \$7. In fact, the spot market price for Henry Hub is in excess of \$7. It is trending up and natural gas prices are cyclical. It is a funny thing. It was in the summer that natural gas prices hit \$13 last year or this year. It was in the summer, and that is because of air-conditioning. Think about what you use natural gas for. Of course, it is heating and it is also for air-conditioning and these prices are very cyclical.

Last year, the lowest price was about \$7 Henry Hub and the highest was \$13. The average is about \$10. [*Interruption*] I am not going into that. It is going to take me an hour to explain the relationship between the Henry Hub price and the budget price and I just do not have the time to do that. We are going to do that on another occasion, not today. I am very conscious of the Speaker's feeling when hon. Members digress too much.

Let us go to the Motion itself; CNG. I would like to deal with some issues. As I said, natural gas prices are trending upwards. Do not get scared and do not panic. People in this country have a tendency to panic. If you look at natural gas prices over the last three years and you see it trending downward then you should be concerned, but it is trending upward. The revenue we get from natural gas far exceeds the revenue we get from oil. Mr. Speaker, \$1 variation in natural gas yields in excess of \$3 billion in revenues for this country.

Let us deal with compressed natural gas. What is CNG? How do you think we were able to get \$12 billion in additional revenues last year? Yes, it was from oil, but it was also from gas. If the net back gas price is \$2 or \$3 then it should have been \$9 billion. Where do you think all the money came from? The Prime

Minister has reminded me that for every \$1 variation in oil it is \$100 million. So, a \$30 dollar variation or a \$35 variation in oil is equal to a \$1 variation in gas. Do you see the difference? I made this statement before and I am going to make it again that it is not oil prices per se that you should be worried about, but you have to look at the gas prices. That is the one. If you start to see that trending downward then you have to start some radical restructuring and so forth. It is trending upward; it is not trending downward.

Now, let us deal with CNG. What is CNG? It is a substitute for gasoline. It is a fossil substitute for gasoline.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Would the Member give way?

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Thank you very much. From what you are saying, why did you not peg the budget to the price of gas rather than oil? If it is that oil is going down and all this gas-based revenues are coming in then we would be able to save more in the HSF and so on.

Hon. C. Member: Hon. Member, I will forgive you. If you read the budget speech—I brought it here with me so I am going to give it to you—we pegged our budget on a crude oil price of \$70 and a gas price of \$4.

Mr. Manning: Do you understand?

Hon. C. Imbert: I forgive you. [*Interruption*] That is not correct either. The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund deals with petroleum products and natural gas is a petroleum product.

7.10 p.m.

We have pegged our budget on an oil price of US \$70 per gallon and a netback gas price of \$4 per Million British Thermal Units (mmbtu). Let us deal with the issues of CNG. CNG is a fossil fuel substitute for gasoline; it is environmentally clean. For those who are worried about safety, my notes tell me that compressed natural gas (CNG) is much safer than other fuels in the event of a spill.

The reason is that natural gas is lighter than air, and therefore it disperses quickly when it is released, unlike gasoline. If you have a puncture in a gasoline tank it will flow and go all over the ground; if somebody throws a match you will have an explosion, but CNG, if there is a puncture it disperses in the air. So, CNG is safer, all things being equal. Of course, if somebody causes an explosion, exposes a CNG tank to an open flame; it is a volatile gas, it is going to explode, but all

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things being equal, gasoline is a far more volatile fuel than compressed natural gas, and is in essence, a far more dangerous fuel than CNG.

CNG is made by compressing natural gas, and natural gas is comprised mainly of the ethane. It is stored and distributed in containers at a normal pressure of approximately 3,000 PSI. For those of you who wanted to know the normal pressure that it is stored at, it is 3,000 PSI. I heard the Member for Fyzabad and the Member for Siparia talked about cars equipped for CNG, and both of them asked why do we not start to acquire cars outfitted for CNG. In fact, the Member for Siparia said, why do we not buy 200 cars that can burn CNG.

The fact of the matter is, it is very, very unusual for car manufacturers to manufacture cars that use only CNG. If you look around the world you would see that most cars that can use CNG can also use traditional gasoline fuel, and there is a reason for that. It gives people the option, because if you have a problem with filling stations, supplies, for whatever reason you run out of either fuel, most of the cars that are made in the world today are dual purpose; just with the flick of a switch you can switch from CNG to gasoline.

It is just like the hybrid cars you have in the United States, electric gasoline and then you have some bio-fuel electrics, where you can opt to use electric power or you can opt to use a fuel just by the flick of a switch. So, for that convenience, most cars that are equipped or outfitted for CNG have a dual purpose, both gasoline and CNG. The Prime Minister spoke about the drawbacks with CNG. You have these cylinders which take up plenty space, they are heavy, they can affect the suspension, and affect the steering of a car. The way manufacturers deal with that now, the way they have solved it, is that they install the tanks under the body of the vehicle, and they store them in a particular location, close to the centre of gravity, so it does not affect the steering. The suspension is also adequately designed to deal with the weight of the additional tanks. Countries are also moving to the use of composite materials.

An example of a composite material would be a carbon fibre material, Kelvar, not cardboard, I heard canvas; that is not what is meant by a composite material. Some of the most sophisticated aircraft in the world, rockets that are used to go out of space are built using composite material; very durable, very hard, very lightweight. So, it is not a question of using a soft material or material that is inappropriate.

If I would just go around the world, Mr. Speaker. In Europe, CNG cars are available as bi-fuel vehicles; burning one fuel at a time. The engine is a standard

internal combustion engine. It can run either on gasoline or on CNG from a separate cylinder. The driver can select what fuel to use. CNG is also used for locomotives, in railways. Several railways that operate on CNG, and an example I have here in my notes is the railway in Peru, the Central Andino railway, which has run a CNG locomotive on a freight line since 2005, and in California, the Napa Valley Wine train replaced its diesel locomotive—

Mr. S. Panday: Those are toy trains.

Hon. C. Imbert: No, no, that is a freight train. I have difficulty here; the Napa Valley is one of the premier wine growing regions in the world. The best wines in the United States come from the Napa Valley in California. Millions of litres of wine are moved, transported and exported from the Napa Valley. I am shocked! If the Member wants me to give him a lecture on the varietals, the various blends of wine—*[Crosstalk]*

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. C. Imbert: Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc. *[Desk thumping]* Is that what you want me to give you? A lecture on the Pinot Noir, Shiraz. That is what you want? Zinfandel, you want me to tell you? *[Laughter]* Are you okay now? Right.

Mr. S. Panday: Stop fooling us; you are just calling names, you do not know anything about.

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. C. Imbert: For the benefit of the hon. Member, the Zinfandel grape is a light sweet grape of an orange, pinkish colour. It is used with fish and poultry. If the Member wants me to give him a lecture on various varietals of grape, I will do so you know.

Mr. Manning: Give him one he could use with “dhal”.

Hon. C. Imbert: But it is all right we will not go there.

Mr. Manning: Give him one for curry goat. *[Laughter]*

Hon. C. Imbert: The fact of the matter is the Napa Valley Wine train has replaced the diesel locomotive used in the Napa Valley. It is a very large train, it is a freight train. It was done in May 2008. In Canada, CNG is used as an economical motor fuel. The Canadian industry has developed CNG fuelled truck and bus engines, transit buses, light trucks, taxis. In the United States of America, tax credits are available for buying a new CNG vehicle.

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You know they talk so much, you did not even know that on the ballot in California, in the Presidential election in the United States, was Proposition 10, and Proposition 10 was about giving tax credits for conversion of cars from gasoline to CNG. You did not even know that. Tuesday of this week there was a proposition on the ballot in California in the Presidential election for giving tax credits for conversion from gasoline to CNG.

That is what the hon. Minister of Finance had indicated. We are going the same way; we are following the world. We are going to make the cost of conversion from gasoline to CNG as affordable as possible. If you read the budget speech that is what the hon. Minister of Finance said. To tell you how they do not know, one of the largest users of CNG in the world is India. *[Interruption]* You see that may be so but I am quoting correctly. Let me quote from my article:

“The use of CNG is mandated for the public transport system of India's capital New Delhi as well as for the city of Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat. The Delhi Transport Corporation operates the world's largest fleet of CNG buses.

In Iran some 650,000 vehicles have been converted to dual-fuel system either in the production process in factories or at specialized workshop”—over the last couple of years—“There are close to 400 refueling stations in operation”—in Iran, and the government of Iran—“plans to expand the network to more than 800 stations.

There is also a government mandate that 60% of locally produced cars be equipped with the...”—capability to run both on gasoline and on CNG—

“In...Africa, Egypt is a top ten country in the world with more than 63000 CNG vehicles and 95 fueling stations nationwide.

In Singapore CNG is increasingly being used by public transport.”

In Malaysia, it is used for taxicabs and other public transport vehicles. Mr. Speaker, when you look at the history around the world, as governments have made CNG more affordable and reduced the price of CNG, reduced the duty on CNG, and so on, there has been a phenomenal rise in the use of CNG. In Australia, Brisbane Transport and Transperth have both adopted a policy of only purchasing CNG buses in the future.

The fact of the matter is, because of the price of petroleum products, the price of oil, the International Energy Agency has predicted that oil prices will remain at \$100 for the foreseeable future; in Trinidad and Tobago we cannot be left behind. Currently the price of CNG is \$1.07 per litre; the price of super gasoline, I think is

\$2.70, somewhere around there, and the price of premium unleaded is \$4. So, the cost of CNG is one quarter of the cost of premium gasoline, and by now almost one-third of the cost of super unleaded gasoline. [*Interruption*] The fuel consumption is not appreciably different.

We are talking about equivalent, remember CNG is a gas, so we are talking about the litre equivalent of CNG. Remember you have a compressed gas in a cylinder, you cannot really measure that in litres, you have to convert it into a litre equivalent. So the litre equivalent of CNG versus litre of gasoline, you are talking about \$1 for CNG, \$4 for premium, \$2.70 for super. [*Interruption*] It is similar; it is not an exact thing.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East has expired.

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

Question put and agreed to.

7.25 p.m.

Mr. S. Panday: You see how charitable we are.

Hon. C. Imbert: No problem, I am nearly done, but the point is, if you look around the world and you look at what countries around the world are doing, countries are reacting to the shock in oil prices. The \$70 oil and the \$100 oil and so on, by promoting the use of CNG. It is used for public transport vehicles, so that the very idea that was promoted by the Minister of Finance is, there is nothing unique about this.

As I said, in Australia most of the buses now run on CNG. In India most of the buses now run on CNG. It will take some time to get there. There are things that have to be done. Nobody is denying the fact that we do not have enough filling stations, and one of the things I omitted to speak about is the whole idea of slow fill and fast fill, because in the past you had low pressure refueling, it is called slow fill and now you have high pressure which is called fast fill, so that we will have to convert our stations from slow fill to fast fill.

In fact I am told there is a fast fill station in Arima—this is what I am told—but we will have to convert all of our stations to fast fill, so this will reduce the time significantly. We will have to promote the use of CNG, we will have to encourage importers and suppliers to bring in the dual fuel vehicles so that you

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could use the gasoline or the CNG. So, it is going to take time. [*Inaudible*] I am not disputing that, but you have to start the process somewhere and by the Minister of Finance signalling in the budget that we are going to do whatever is necessary to make the cost of CNG conversion as economical as possible, as low as possible and available of course, and by the reduction in the excise duty, this is all signalling to the national population, that there are viable alternatives.

And for someone who is considering purchasing a new vehicle, after reading this research, I will recommend to them that if it is no more costly to seriously consider acquiring a dual fuel vehicle. Seriously consider acquiring a vehicle—

Mr. S. Panday: Give tax breaks on those vehicles.

Hon. C. Imbert: You are pushing an open door, Member for Princes Town North. You are pushing an open door! If we have to give incentives and so on, this is something the Government has to consider.

So, in closing, there is nothing frivolous about this matter. This is a very serious matter and if we can encourage all of our citizens to start thinking about using more economical fuels, about using CNG as opposed to gasoline, they will save considerable sums of money, they will have a far less adverse effect on the environment and the benefits that will come to the country and citizens generally can only be positive.

I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj SC (*Tabaquite*): Mr. Speaker, I did not intend to join this debate, but I merely wanted to say a few words in the light of some of the comments which have been made by the Prime Minister. But I want to make our position quite clear. We have not opposed the policy of CNG. [*Desk thumping*] What we are saying is that the Government has taken too long to put the infrastructure in place to make it possible to have it readily accessible.

What the Prime Minister was saying though however, as part of the energy policy of the Government in which the CNG policy is, that the subsidy on petroleum fuel within the next two years will have to be removed and I believe that if that is going to be Government's policy, I believe two things that the Government should not do unless there is in this country a national consultation on the management and use of oil and natural gas because those are natural resources. [*Desk thumping*]

The Prime Minister mentioned to me across the Table that he is prepared to have that debate in the Parliament. I mentioned to him that it is not only sufficient

to have it in the Parliament, it should be with the national community because there is a special concept of natural resources, oil and gas particularly, in countries that these are really the wealth of the individual citizens of the country and they should have a direct say in how this thing is going to be managed and disposed of. [*Desk thumping*]

As a matter of fact, in some of the countries, in the small oil producing countries there are special funds in which these moneys are put and the citizens get a dividend. Alaska is one of the countries and in some of the small other producing countries there are funds which are used for example for retirement benefits, long holidays and better treatment for people. So, I think what the Prime Minister said it is a decision of the standing committee on energy and I think that is not sufficient. If the Government has a standing energy committee that is not sufficient for something like this.

The other point I want to make is, if it is that the Government intends to remove the subsidy on petroleum fuel which is now benefiting the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the people who owned these natural resources, I think the Government should also consider withdrawing the subsidy which the taxpayers and the people of this country pay which is given to foreign companies in the energy sector which use oil and natural gas. [*Desk thumping*] As a matter of fact, about two years ago—when I was no longer in the politics—I did a study of some of the companies which benefit from some of these subsidies and I got certain information—I do not have it here today, but I can say quite conclusively—that the subsidies which these companies get, are large amounts of moneys, millions of dollars and it is unfair to the citizens of this country who own the natural resources to have to give up or have it taken away from them—subsidy—and the foreign companies are benefiting tremendously from the subsidies which are given to these companies.

Mr. Speaker, there is only one other issue, I promise you I would not be more than 10 minutes. I am not disputing that a government and a Prime Minister has the right to express his view, the right to visit anyone. I am not disputing that, but we must remember that a Prime Minister, the person who holds the office of Prime Minister, when he goes to a radio station to protest, he does not go in his personal capacity, he goes as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and it is what signal he sends. If he sends a signal that as a Prime Minister he is entitled to go to the place of work of the journalist because he disagrees with the journalist, then the thousands of people in Trinidad and Tobago when they disagree with the decision of the Prime Minister, will go to his office. [*Desk thumping*]

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Would the Prime Minister accept in his office the thousands of people who disagree with his decision and who think that he is acting unprofessionally? [Interruption] So, the issue is—not whether the Prime Minister has a right as a citizen—what signal of leadership he sends to a country in which you are saying that you have fundamental rights. The media has the fundamental right to criticize. They are in a special category of people who are given the right under the Constitution to criticize. You may disagree with them, but as a Prime Minister you could file a writ, you could file a complaint before the Media Association, but I do not think it is conduct which should be repeated.

I wish on behalf of the Opposition and on behalf of the people of the country to ask the Prime Minister to reconsider quite seriously anytime he is having a haircut and he hears on the radio and he is tempted to jump in that car to go to Port of Spain in the radio station, please do not go. Do not go.

In relation to leadership and values, I would like with your leave to read some passages from a booklet: *Change we can believe in, some comments of Barack Obama*. I think it is very appropriate at this time, because I would have thought that what happened in America would have given all of us a new kind of inspiration, a new kind of reflection for us to understand that leadership in any role in a country is very important. The most important thing is not for yourself but for the people of the country.

In this booklet at page 145—

Mr. Imbert: What book?

Mr. R. L. Maharaj SC: Speeches by Barack Obama, *Change we can believe in Barack Obama's plan to renew America's promise:*

“Leading America at this critical moment in history requires more than policies and ideas. To meet our challenges we must summon our common faith in American values”—we can substitute that for our T&T values—“the sense of who we as a people, the common beliefs that bind us together, the spirit of patriotism and the service that bridges divisions of partisanship and ideology.

How do we restore trust in a government that seems increasingly removed from its people and dominated by special interest groups? What does it mean to be a citizen and what does that title require of us? How do we resolve our differences at a time of increasing diversity? How do we honour our commitments to future generations?”

And then he continued and I want to read from page 146:

“It means opening up our government with greater transparency so average citizens can access the information they need to hold their leaders accountable and it means inspiring and calling on all Americans to engage as citizens. Our government has an important role to play in this work and every aspect of it should be under review. We will eliminate waste, streamline bureaucracy and cut out-moded programmes, and Obama’s administration will open up the doors of democracy. It will put government data online and use technology to shine a light on spending. It will invite the service and participation of American citizens and cut through the red tape to make sure that every agency is meeting the highest standards. It will hold true to the obligations we have as stewards of our precious natural resources and an Obama administration will make sure that the doors of opportunity and community are opened to all.”

So, Mr. Speaker, this supports the principle that restoring confidence in Government requires the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to open up, to be transparent and let the people know the data. The people must know what the service arrangements are, these contractual arrangements with the foreign companies with respect to its natural resources.

We cannot use the excuse that this is private confidence. The people are not dealing with a private company. They are dealing with a government in which people own the resources and the people must know what these agreements are, what the subsidies are and they must have a say in the future of the policy and management of the natural resources of this country.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Before I call on the hon. Minister to reply, you may consider moving the Procedural Motion.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 10, I beg to move that the House continue to sit until the completion of the debate on this Motion and also the Geneva Conventions Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

7.40 p.m.

EXCISE DUTY (COMPRESSED NATURAL GAS) ORDER

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Karen Nunez-Tesheira): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In winding up the debate on this Motion, I anticipate that I would not be that long, primarily because there is not really much to answer, and what there was to answer, I believed that the hon. Member of Parliament for San Fernando East, as well as Diego Martin North/East have answered—*[Interruption]* What is that, Member?

[MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Thank you, Member for Siparia and the Minister of Information. I think they have all answered to a large extent to my contribution this evening. However, I would like to make a few comments with regard to the matters that were discussed and raised in the debate.

The first point, the Minister of Information spoke to that. In the context of why we need to deal with this Motion and why the urgency, I believe the answer has been put on the table. It is a question of a time frame. It is a question that if this matter is not debated and the Resolution is not moved and affirmed by the honourable House, we stand the risk of the Order lapsing, and as a consequence, the urgency of having this matter debated was put on the table.

The Member of Parliament for St. Augustine raised another issue and the issue that he raised was the question of the CNG. In the context of the CNG, he raised the issue that in the Draft Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2008, there was no provision for the payment of an application fee for compressed natural gas licences. Well, I just wanted to inform the Member for St. Augustine, that in fact those were just the estimates. The estimates were revised, and in fact, the amount that was paid in terms of the application fees was in amount of \$1,500.

Now, the question of course that raises is the amount that appears, and it is in fact not of much significance. I believe that the hon. Prime Minister, the Member for San Fernando East, to a large extent dealt with the issue as to why perhaps the amount that has been raised so to speak, in terms of the application fees for licences has really been negligible in large part. The reasons are there and we have discussed already at length. The first reason is the length of time it takes to fill your tank. The reasons have been discussed at length whether the oilmen or whatever the reasons are, that the length of time to fill the tank was considerable,

also the type of kit. The CNG kit itself was cumbersome, heavy and certainly slowed down the performance of the car. But, Madam Deputy Speaker, the real reason I believe, the reason at the heart of the lack perhaps, or the lack of interest in converting to CNG to date until this point, is because of the cost and the considerably low cost of petroleum gas.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are all aware that the petroleum gas in Trinidad and Tobago is among the lowest, not only in the region, but in the world. It is not only our petroleum gas, but also our water rates and electricity rates are among the lowest in the world. So the incentive perhaps to convert to CNG simply was not there. So to say that it is perhaps the length of time for filling your tank with CNG and the cumbersome nature of the tanks, that may have been a contributing factor. But I believe the real reason and the heart of it, is the very low cost that we, the nationals of Trinidad and Tobago have paid for gas, and that is in no large measure as a result of the Government's subsidy.

The Government's subsidy which cost the people of Trinidad and Tobago in the last fiscal year 2007, was over \$2 billion. And as the Member for San Fernando East made the point, we talk about a subsidy, it is in effect an expenditure. An expenditure that is appropriated to support a subsidy in lieu of doing other things, perhaps in terms of building schools and roads. So we pay a price and we pay a price for that subsidy.

This Government is a caring Government. This Government is a prudent Government and in exercising its prudence, in exercising its level of responsibility in removing the fuel subsidy, we do not do that in a happenstance way, we do not do that in a way that is ad hoc, we do not do that in a way that is irresponsible, we do that in a way that is deliberate, that is consistent with the Government's policy.

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

So to hear the other side at some point in time speak as if the Government has removed the fuel subsidy, then brought in the CNG; removal of the excise duty as if we have done it in a sort of a—the Member for Princes Town North I believe was making the point as if there was no thinking and no thought behind it. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, this is part of the Government's well thought out strategy. It is a question at the heart of it, a question of choice. That is what this Government stands for, a question of choice consistent with our democratic principles.

Mr. Speaker, when we look at the issue of the CNG, we must look at it in the context of the choice. What are the choices that the citizens of Trinidad and

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Tobago have as a mechanism for using fuel for their vehicles? They have three choices. There is diesel. We have heard the Member for Tunapuna already speak. The Member said that her vehicle had been outfitted to use diesel. The Member for Tunapuna has exercised a choice, a choice to use diesel. That choice to use diesel is not only a choice available for the Member of Parliament for Tunapuna in the use of her private vehicle, but it is a choice that is used in terms of all. Not some maxi-taxis, every maxi-taxi, all public transport buses and the majority of taxis that are legally on the road, they have the choice to convert to diesel.

Mr. Speaker, diesel is one choice. The other choice is CNG and we understand that the choices at this point in time are limited to the extent which persons can convert to CNG and use CNG. Because as we recognized that there is a need at this point in time, we have made that commitment and we made that commitment in the budget. We made the commitment that over a two-year period, that all National Petroleum gas stations owned by the Government have been mandated to be outfitted with CNG pumps. That is the commitment of the Government. So the Government is putting so to speak, the people of Trinidad and Tobago on notice, so to speak giving the people of Trinidad and Tobago the opportunity to exercise a choice consistent with our democratic principles. So, we have the choice of diesel.

We go to the question of gas and the removal of the subsidy from premium gas, because I heard the Member for St. Augustine say that we raised the price of premium gas. We did not raise the price of premium gas. We removed the subsidy from premium gas and without going into the technicalities of the issue with regard to the premium gas, what I want to assure the national community is this, that there are two types of unleaded gas available in our gas stations. There is super unleaded and there is premium unleaded. I want to assure the national community—in fact I have a publication from National Petroleum which is available I believe to members of the public, the 10 most frequently asked questions about unleaded gas. And the National Petroleum has assured the national community of this, that when you use unleaded gas whether it is premium gas or whether super, the octane rating of that type of gas ensures that your car is protected from the damage caused by pre-igniting of your engine.

Now, I am not a technical person, I am not an engineer, but my understanding is that the knocking effect is what does damage to your vehicle and the unleaded clean gas prevents that knocking impact, what they call the “pinking” is the expression—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Imbert: Pinging.

Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira: The point I am making is this, the difference between premium gas and super gas is really a question of performance. So if you are looking for performance from your vehicle, you are talking about premium gas. But in the context of damage to your vehicle, super and premium give you that protection.

So, Mr. Speaker, when we talk about the choices that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago have, premium gas is a removal of a subsidy. That subsidy is still there on the super unleaded. It is still in place on super unleaded and you also have the choice of diesel. And finally, we are now giving people of Trinidad and Tobago the real opportunity to convert to CNG.

Mr. Speaker, the reasons for exercising that choice, I imagine when I made my contribution at the start, I gave some of the reasons and I think we are all familiar with them. It is cheaper, it is cleaner and it is environmentally sound. In fact, recently I was in Washington attending the IMF and World Bank meetings and I was tempted to take a picture of the buses because every single bus in Washington had this on it, that they are using CNG gas, environmentally clean gas. Every one of them advertised that they are using CNG, and that is Washington. So the point I am making is that the question of whether CNG is a cheaper, whether it is an environmentally sound, whether it is a safer gas, I do not think we can put that is not an issue. So we, the Government, are giving the people of Trinidad and Tobago the opportunity to exercise a choice consistent with our understanding of democracy.

Mr. Speaker, what are the mechanisms that we are putting in place? The mechanisms that we are putting in place is the conversion of the gas stations, the laying of the lines to allow persons to be able to use various gas stations across the country and to fill up their tanks in a quicker space of time. But in addition to that, I believe I heard either the Member for St. Augustine or the Member for Princes Town North say that the removal of the excise duty at this point in time seems as though we are being ad hoc, that we are coming at the end as if there were no thought put into it. It is a question of the package of stimuli. It is a package of incentives. The package of incentives includes the removal of VAT; the package of incentives includes the removal of the taxes on import duties; and the package of incentives also includes the excise duty. So whether it was in the budget or we are speaking about it now, it is a package of stimuli and incentives. All for one purpose. The purpose is to give the people of Trinidad and Tobago the choices, the choice of diesel, the choice of petroleum gas and the choice of CNG.

Mr. Speaker, I made the point of talking about it being consistent with our democratic principles because I mean no offence to the Member for Siparia, when

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the Member appeared to be and also the Member for Tabaquite appeared to be giving the Prime Minister of this country, the Member for San Fernando East something of a lecture on democracy. Now, I sit on this side or I stand on this side at this moment and if it was not so tragic to hear that, it is laughable to hear the Members on that side speak about the issue of democracy.

Mr. Speaker, I can remember well, well in the very early days of that government, the UNC administration—I am a lawyer and perhaps my legal training makes me even more sensitive to the issues of democratic principles, separation of power, executive, you are more sensitive to those issues. But I remember very well that chutney rising, in a matter of a few months when the missing Member for Couva North— Why is he missing? The thing that they will come to lecture the Member for San Fernando East about, behaviour and inappropriate behavior, not only is it—it is so infra dig because the fact of the matter is, why is the Member for Couva North not here? Because of that behaviour that they call “inappropriate”. It was not in issue whether you use a laptop. The Speaker gave an order. This is the Parliament, the Speaker gave a ruling and the Member for Couva North, the Leader of the Opposition and a former Prime Minister of this country, refused to obey the order of the Speaker of this House. That is why he is not here today. That is inappropriately—*[Interruption]* Well, I have to speak to an empty chair. But it started very earlier on with chutney rising, which led to the dismissal of Jones P. Madeira and the start of a newspaper now, that morphed into *Newsday*. That is the beginning—and Ken Gordon, which went all the way to the Privy Council when he sued a then sitting Prime Minister for slander and libel, and one—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Imbert: Julian Rogers

Hon. K. Nunez-Testeira: And Julian Rogers—

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. K. Nunez-Testeira: And those who criticized, it is insulting—the cases can go on and on and on. So what I am saying, to come to this honourable House and want to lecture the Prime Minister so to speak, about conduct and respect for the office, I do not think with all due respect, that you are in any position so to do. *[Desk thumping]*

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: Two wrongs do not make a right.

Hon. K. Nunez-Testeira: That is not a question of two wrongs.

Mr. Speaker: Order!

Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira: With all due respect, Member for Siparia, it will take the Prime Minister several lifetimes to catch up with the Member for Couva North. [*Desk thumping*] Several, several lifetimes. That is like chalk and cheese, with all due respect to you, Member for Siparia. I am not here really to speak about the issue of democracy. I have only raised that issue of democracy in the context of options and choices and the CNG represents a question of an option and a choice which are available to the Members and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

7.55 p.m.

In the contributions from the other side, much was spoken about the economy, so I just want to make a few points with regard to that. [*Crosstalk*]

It was stated by someone, I cannot remember which Member on the other side, that in my capacity as Minister of Finance I said that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago or the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, was immune. I have always been very careful, if you go back to my statement in the Senate, or my statement to the nation, or any interview that I have ever given, that has been given that has been recorded accurately, I have never said that the economy of Trinidad and Tobago is immune and *carte blanche*.

I have always been very careful to always qualify my statements. I made it very clear, and it is correct that when you look at the economy of Trinidad and Tobago to date, the reality is this: The commercial banks, the insurance companies and the Central Bank, all these organizations, all these institutions, including the Stock Exchange, are well capitalized and very secure. In fact, the banks have a very low delinquency rate. [*Crosstalk*]

In fact, when I was at the IMF about two weeks ago, they did a presentation to the members of the Caribbean Community. One of the points they made was that in Trinidad and Tobago, our banks and our institutions have, essentially— [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Order! [*Crosstalk*]

I am trying to listen to the Minister of Finance and I am getting banter from both sides, please.

Hon. K. Nunez-Tesheira: At the breakfast meeting at the IMF a few weeks ago, the point was made that Trinidad and Tobago's economy was on a very sound footing. The point which was made too was that the reason our banks and insurance companies have, to a large extent, in a sense, been insulated from what

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is happening in the international economy, was because most of the investments have been either regional or domestic investments. That is what I have said and I stand by what I have said. In addition, the macroeconomic fundamentals for Trinidad and Tobago are strong and remain strong.

So when we hear talk about the Government's irresponsibility or the Government not listening to the national community, there is every indication that the Government has been prudent and responsible in the way it has managed the nation's public purse. In fact, I do not want to go into all the details, but I will mention a few of the statistics which, perhaps, I need to remind the other side of.

Foreign investments over foreign reserves, over \$8 billion, which represents about 11 months of import cover. If we look at our revenue it has tripled from 2001 to 2007, going from \$55 billion to over \$160 billion, at the end of 2007. You look at our external debt representing only 8 per cent of our gross domestic product (GDP). Concerning our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, of which much mention was made in this House today, in fiscal 2008 we deposited over \$6 billion into it. That Heritage and Stabilisation Fund represents about 12 to 13 per cent of our GDP. We have managed the country's savings well. We have managed our debt well and we have increased the revenues of Trinidad and Tobago.

So in the context of how we have managed the economy, there is no question that this Government has managed the economy in a prudent and responsible way. We have no intention, at this point in time, not so to do.

Another point that was made in the contribution of the Member for Siparia was the issue of the budget price for oil, how we derived that figure. I have said it on several occasions, but just for confirmation and reinforcement, how did we arrive at that price? Listening to the Member for Siparia, I should have listened to her as to what the price should have been. But we listened to OPEC; we listened to the International Monetary Fund; we listened and looked at the planning price and the budgeted price that was used by the oil companies operating in Trinidad and Tobago. We also looked at the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, which provided what is called an 11-year moving average in order to determine what the oil price should be.

With the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund using that mechanism provided by the legislation, we came up with a price of \$90 a barrel, but this Government always takes a conservative and prudent approach, so we took a planning price of \$70. [*Desk thumping*]

When you look back, 2020 vision is perfect vision. If we all had a crystal ball, we would always be able to win a bet. Whether it is with cricket or horse racing, the fact of the matter is that we do not. We make an educated and responsible estimation.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to draw to your attention for the benefit of those who question the use of \$70 a barrel. September 2007, the price for oil—and this is from the US Energy Information Administration—almost \$80 a barrel; October, nearly \$86; November, \$95; December, nearly \$92; January 2008, \$92.97; in March, \$105.45; April, \$112.58; June, \$133.88; July, \$133.37; in August, one month before the budget was presented, \$116.67. To come to this honourable House and give the impression that the Government somehow was irresponsible in using \$70 a barrel for oil and \$4 for gas, is to give the wrong impression to the national community.

It is not only that was the price oil was trading at, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) only a week and a half ago had readjusted what their projected price for oil would be. Up to a week and a half ago, according to the IMF, it expected that the projected price for oil would be US \$100 a barrel. They readjusted that price and according to the IMF, the average expected for 2008 was \$101, and for 2009, \$74.75. Today we have heard again from the Member for Diego Martin North/East, and based on that information we are expected to go even higher, up to \$101. What you are looking at is a product, a commodity, with a high level of volatility.

Mr. Speaker, the fact of the matter is that this Government has always prided itself on being prudent and responsible. While we look at the volatility of the price of oil and gas, the question has been asked by the national community about how the Government intends to respond to that situation. I have said on several occasions that not only are we monitoring the situation and in the circumstances, but the Ministry of Finance is looking at and monitoring the situation, but it is doing what we call "sensitivity analysis" or "contingency planning".

We want to assure the national community that this Government has no intention, at this point in time, because the circumstances certainly do not arise and certainly do not justify going in and using the funds deposited in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. There is absolutely no intention so to do at this time. The circumstances do not arise and there is no intention so to do.

What the Government intends to do and what it is committed to doing, is operating within the envelope called our budget, whether that envelope is large, whether that envelope is small or whether that envelope is medium. We are saying

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that the Government is being responsible; the Government is being responsive; the Government is doing the contingency modeling; the Government is doing the analysis, at this point in time.

We assure the national community that the necessary adjustments, in order to ensure that we work within that envelope of a budget, whatever that budget ends up to be, whether because of the volatility the prices go up, whether they continue to give this kind of movement, that this Government is prepared to operate within that envelope, whatever that envelope is, and that we have taken the measures. As we speak, we are taking the measures in the Ministry of Finance, to ensure that we are in a position, as a responsible and prudent government, so to do.

I also want to make a point on the issue of biofuels. The Member for Siparia talked about converting the sugar cane lands into biofuel use. The Prime Minister spoke on it, and I just want to add to that. I do not know if the Member recognizes that certainly with the biofuels in the US, one acre of corn land is used to fill up one SUV tank. When you look at what has been going on in the international community, the food and the fuel crisis, there is a relationship, because of the biofuels to a large extent, between food and fuel prices, because much of the biofuels, certainly in the case of the US, whether it is corn or wheat, have had the effect of driving up the prices of those commodities.

In fact, there was one report from the IMF that put the impact on biofuels on the price of food as high as 75 per cent. That is a report from the IMF. So the question of looking at biofuels and Trinidad and Tobago converting to biofuels, with all due respect to the Member for Siparia, has its inbuilt challenges.

We are committed to ensuring that the people of Trinidad and Tobago are provided with all the mechanisms, whether it is through the use of a cleaner source of energy, a cleaner source of petrol, whether through CNG or diesel, and giving the people of Trinidad and Tobago proper choices. So to speak about biofuels, in the context of Trinidad and Tobago, is really to speak of a theoretical construct.

I conclude my contribution in this debate with one or two points. The point I would want to make is with the issue of the indicators and using the competitive index. What is at the heart of using the indicator of the competitive index? It really speaks to the strength of our economy; it really speaks to how well the economy is being managed by the persons entrusted with that responsibility.

I want to look at another indicator called Standard and Poors. Standard and Poors tells the people of Trinidad and Tobago that their economy is deserving of an "A" grade rating. [*Desk thumping*] That is what they to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I want to look at another indicator, a very well respected indicator, coming from the Economy Watch, where they look at 178 countries. In looking at those 178 countries in 2008, they looked at transparency in transactions, liability for self-dealing and investor protection index. This is what the Economy Watch ranked Trinidad and Tobago: 15 out of 178 in protecting investors; this has to do with transparency; 40 out of 178 in starting businesses, and 48 out of 178 in getting credit. [*Desk thumping*]

I believe I heard the Member for St. Augustine talk about using statistics selectively. I want to say to him that too could be said for the Member for St. Augustine. What we will say for Trinidad and Tobago, and I quote after him:

"We have to give you a copyright; we have to give you a patent for that."

Facts are stubborn things; they will not go away. Our facts are the macroeconomic indicators. Our facts are Moody's that has given us an investment grade rating; our facts are Standard and Poors; our facts are the Economy Watch, and our facts are the strength of Trinidad and Tobago's economy. I would want to add, an unemployment rate of approximately 4 per cent.

Those are things that could not have happened by chance; those are things that are consistent with a government that is prudent, responsible and compassionate.

I end my contribution this evening to this debate on the Motion on CNG. I think the other side really has no quarrel with it; there is no basis for that quarrel. In fact, they should embrace the opportunity to give the people of Trinidad and Tobago another opportunity to exercise a choice.

8.10 p.m.

I want to say on our side, on the side of the Government, that we are committed to the people of Trinidad and Tobago; we are committed to democratic principles and we believe that the choice of CNG and the removal of the excise duty from CNG is just another example of this Government's commitment to options, to choice and to the democratic principles of a PNM administration.

I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Excise Duty (Compressed Natural Gas) Order, 2008, be confirmed.

GENEVA CONVENTIONS BILL

Order for second reading read.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs (Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move,

That a Bill to enable effect to be given to certain Conventions done at Geneva on 12th August, 1949 and to the Protocols additional to those Conventions done at Geneva on 8th June, 1977 and for related purposes, be now read a second time.

On the onset, I will go straight to clause 13, the very last clause of the Bill which establishes the legislative context in which this Bill is now presented to the House.

Clause 13 as it is, repeals the Geneva Conventions Act and those Acts are of 1911, 1937, 1957 (United Kingdom), insofar as they have effect in Trinidad and Tobago as well as in the Geneva Conventions (Supplementary Provisions) Act, 1960.

The history of the Conventions and the additional Protocols owe their genesis to a Swiss citizen called Henry Dunant. Mr. Dunant, in 1859, witnessed the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino and was horrified by the sight of thousands of wounded soldiers lying helpless and abandoned with no one to care for them. Mr. Dunant suggested the setting up of voluntary relief societies with personnel who could be trained during peace time to care for the wounded in time of war and further called for an international agreement to be drawn up to protect the wounded and for those who looked after them, from further attack.

In 1864, governments were invited to send representatives to a diplomatic conference and 12 European nations got together and signed a treaty stating that in future wars that they will all care for the sick and wounded military personnel regardless of nationality. They said also that they would recognize the neutrality of medical personnel, hospitals and ambulances identified by the emblem of a red cross and a white background. This treaty was called the Geneva Convention. This treaty, however, was concerned at the time just with soldiers on the battlefield. Over the years, however, the Convention was revised to cover everyone caught up in the conflicts but not actually taking part in the fighting.

There are now four Geneva Conventions which were drawn up in 1949 and two additional Protocols done in 1977. These instruments form a major part of international humanitarian law or as is commonly called, the Law of Armed Conflict, and have now been accepted by virtually every state in the world.

The primary purpose of the Conventions and Protocols is to protect persons who are not, or are no longer taking part in an armed conflict, specifically the wounded and the sick combatants, whether on land or on sea, prisoners of war and civilians. The Conventions and Protocols achieve their purpose by:

- (a) Prohibiting certain activities, including grave breaches of the four Conventions and Protocols;
- (b) By granting to protected persons fundamental guarantees and by regulating the use of the emblems of the Red Cross, Red Crescent and other protected emblems.

Trinidad and Tobago has been a contracting party to the four Geneva Conventions since 1963 and the additional Protocols I and II since 2001, and as a contracting party the State has assumed an undertaking to enact the necessary legislation to provide effective penal sanctions for persons committing or ordering to be committed, any of the grave breaches of the Conventions and additional Protocols.

Therefore, in fulfilment of our international commitment, the Bill seeks to give domestic legal effect to the provisions of the four Geneva Conventions and the additional Protocol I. If enacted into law, what the Bill will seek to do as well is to update and consolidate our existing legislation on the Geneva Conventions. Should the occasion arise when Trinidad and Tobago has to fulfil its international obligations in this area, we would have already in place the legislative basis to punish grave breaches of the four Geneva Conventions and Protocol I, as well as the abuse of the emblems of the Red Cross.

The Bill contains five parts and a Schedule, which contains the text of all four Conventions and the two additional Protocols. Part I of the Bill contains the short title and the interpretation section. Clause 1 states that the Act may be cited as the Geneva Conventions Bill. Clause 2 defines the following terms which are used in the Bill.

“‘court’ includes a Court martial convened pursuant to the Defence Act;

‘the Conventions’ means the First Convention, the Second Convention, the Third Convention and the Fourth Convention;

‘the First Convention’ means the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field.”

This was adopted at Geneva in 1949.

“‘the Second Convention’ means the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Conditions of Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea, adopted at Geneva on 12th August, 1949...”

‘the Third Convention’ means the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War...”

That was adopted in Geneva in 1949 as well.

“‘the Fourth Convention’ means the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.”

This was also in 1949.

“‘prisoners’ representative’ means the person who exercises the functions of prisoners’ representative within the meaning of Article 79 of the Third Convention.

‘protected internee’ means a person protected by the Fourth Convention or Protocol I, and interned in Trinidad and Tobago;

‘protected prisoner of war’ means a person protected by the Third Convention or a person who is protected as a prisoner of war under Protocol I.

‘the protecting power’...means the power or organization which is carrying out...the duties assigned to protecting powers under the Third Convention, the Fourth Convention or Protocol I;

‘Protocol I’ means the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12th August, 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts...done at Geneva on 8th June, 1977...”

Protocol II done at Geneva on June 08, 1977 and to which Trinidad and Tobago became a party in 2001 is not defined here and that is because there is no obligation on contracted parties to enact legislation to give effect to its provisions. The Protocol, however, is included in the Schedule for the sake of information completeness only. Just to explain further, Protocol II deals with non-international or just simply internal conflict.

Part II provides for the punishment of grave breaches of the Conventions and Protocol I. A grave breach includes the following acts if committed against a person or property protected by their respective Conventions. Protocol I includes:

- wilful killing;
- torture or inhumane treatment, including biological experiments;
- wilfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health;
- extensive destruction of and appropriation of property not justified by military necessity;

- compelling protected persons to serve in the armed forces of an enemy state;
- wilfully depriving a protected person of the right to fair trial;
- unlawful deportation;
- transfer or confinement of a protected person; and
- the taking of hostages.

Clause 3 creates as an indictable offence, a grave breach of any of the Conventions or of Protocol I and it defines a grave breach as an act referred to in Article 50 of the First Convention, Article 51 of the Second Convention, Article 130 of the Third Convention, Article 147 of the Fourth Convention, which is committed against persons or property protected by the applicable Convention and anything defined as a grave breach under paragraph 4 of Article 2 or paragraph 2, 3 or 4 of Article 85 of additional Protocol I.

Persons found guilty of committing a grave breach would be sentenced to death if the offence involves wilful killing and, in any case not involving wilful killing, the penalty for committing a grave breach would be imprisonment for life.

We now move to examine the effect of clause 3 with regard to the International Criminal Court Act. Nothing in clause 3 of this Bill is intended to restrict or affect the operation of the International Criminal Court Act; section 11 that is. This section of the ICC Act provides for the punishment of war crimes and a war crime is defined therein to include grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and additional Protocol I, other violations of the Conventions and Protocol I, not amounting to a grave breach and other offences occurring during non-international armed conflict which are listed in Article 3 of each Convention and Protocol I.

Whilst, therefore, the provisions of the Geneva Conventions and Protocol I only require a state party to the Convention and the Protocol to enact penal legislation for persons committing grave breaches of these instruments, the Rome Statute of the ICC has broadened the reach of international humanitarian law by requiring states to enact penal legislation to punish, not only grave breaches, but all violations of the four Geneva Conventions and two additional Protocols.

Clause 3 grants to the domestic courts universal jurisdiction over a grave breach. Universal jurisdiction means that the court may exercise jurisdiction regardless of the nationality of the offender or whether the offence is committed

within or outside of Trinidad and Tobago, and by providing for universal jurisdiction of the Bill it means that Trinidad and Tobago will, in fact, be fulfilling an international commitment contained in all four Geneva Conventions and Protocol I. These instruments impose on Trinidad and Tobago an obligation to search for persons alleged to have committed or to have ordered to be committed any grave breaches and bring such persons, regardless of their nationality, before its own courts.

Clause 4 requires that the consent of the Attorney General be obtained prior to the institution of any court proceedings. On account of the international character of the offence created in clause 3 of the Bill, the Government believes that any decision to prosecute or not to prosecute is the responsibility of the hon. Attorney General. The Attorney General has lead responsibility for mutual, legal assistance in criminal matters and will be in a position to make arrangements for international, judicial cooperation which is required to effectively prosecute international crimes. Additionally, this approach is consistent with the prosecution of other international crimes under the International Criminal Court Act of 2007.

Clause 5 identifies the Minister of Foreign Affairs as the competent authority to certify to the court any matter relating to a question concerning the circumstances in which the Conventions and the additional Protocol apply. In any proceedings for the prosecution of a grave breach, a question may arise under Article 2 of the Conventions and Articles 1 or 3 of Protocol I as to whether there is, in fact, an international armed conflict to which these instruments apply, and any answer to this question will require an assessment of international events in light of international humanitarian law, a matter which is the remit of the Minister with responsibility for foreign affairs.

Part III of the Bill relates to legal proceedings in respect of protective persons. It ensures certain safeguards applied to prisoners of war and civil internees in the context of any trial and sentences.

Under the Third Convention dealing with the treatment of prisoners of war, the definition of a prisoner of war includes a person who has fallen into the power of the enemy and who is a member of the armed forces of a state engaged in an armed conflict, or a member of a militia belonging to a party engaged in an armed conflict.

The Fourth Convention concerning the protection of civilian persons defines an internee as a civilian who at the given moment and in any manner finds himself, in case of an armed conflict or territorial occupation, in the hands of a foreign state engaged in the conflict. A protecting power refers to a neutral state

which looks after the interest of a party to the conflict by ensuring that its nationals enjoy the protection afforded under the Convention. The Convention also provides for an organization offering guarantees of impartiality and efficacy to perform the duties of a protecting power.

8.25 p.m.

Clause 6 speaks to notice of trial and places an obligation on the court not to proceed with a trial, unless the court is satisfied that a notice of trial was served on the protecting power, as well as any prisoner of war and his personal representative, at least three weeks prior to the trial date.

Clause 7 grants a prisoner of war or a civilian internee the right to appeal in those instances where he has been sentenced by a court to death or to imprisonment of two years or more. The right to appeal or leave to appeal runs from the time the protecting power is notified of the conviction and sentenced, either by an officer of the Defence Force or the minister with responsibility for foreign affairs. Clause 7 further provides that any sentence against a protected prisoner of war or an internee shall not be executed before six months from the date of notification of an appeal.

Clause 8 applies to the provision of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Act relating to discipline to every prisoner of war who is alleged to have committed an offence under the Bill. That prisoner of war is placed under the command of the Commanding Officer of the Defence Force which is holding that prisoner or the unit of the Defence Force that is holding that prisoner in custody. If the prisoner of war is in custody of the Defence Force, that person would be tried by Court Martial and the provision therefore, preserves the jurisdiction of the Defence Force in respect of prescribed acts committed while the prisoner is in their custody.

Part IV of the Bill regulates the use of the emblems protected under the conventions and additional protocols. These emblems are symbols of protection for persons in facilities during times of conflict. In order to retain their protective status in wartime, these emblems may not be used either in peace or war, except to indicate or protect the medical personnel establishments and material protected by the convention.

Clause 9 prohibits any person from using or displaying without the consent of the minister with responsibility for national security the emblem of the Red Cross, Red Crescent, Red Lion and moon and other emblems protected under the conventions. This prohibition extends also to the use of the protected emblems by

Trinidad and Tobago vessels and aircrafts outside of Trinidad and Tobago, meaning that this provision is extraterritorial.

Clause 10 establishes as a summary offence the contravention of clause 9. Any person found guilty of using or displaying a protective emblem without the required consent shall be fined \$10,000 or sentenced to imprisonment for a term of six months or both.

Part V of the Bill contains general provisions.

Clause 11 gives the minister with responsibility for national security the discretion to make regulations subject to negative resolution of Parliament, prescribing the forms of flags and emblems which may be in use in keeping with the conventions and protocols. Regulating the use of these flags and emblems for the protection of prisoners of war, pursuant to the provisions of the Third Convention and providing for other matters to give effect to the Act.

Clause 12 protects the use of emblems which were registered as a trademark prior to the passing of the Act and establishes as a defence the lawful use of the emblem as a sign or design prior to the passing of the Act in a case where the person is charged with using a protective emblem on goods or articles that the emblems were on such goods or articles before they came into his possession.

The emblems of the Red Cross are intended to be used for the purposes set out in the four Geneva Conventions and the protocols of persons authorized to use them. These emblems belong to the Red Cross. They are internationally protected symbols. We are obligated to discourage their misuse or abuse, lest the integrity of the symbols are so impaired, that their use in times of conflict to aid sick and wounded and prisoners of war is compromised. The question of misuse or abuse of the international Red Cross emblem came to international attention a couple months ago, where in the freeing of Madam Ingrid Betancourt who was held hostage by the FARQ guerillas—*[Interruption]* Hold on. You will get your chance to speak. One of the members of the rescue team did wear Red Cross insignia on his band and the President of Colombia was required to make an apology to the international public at large. We will do well and this Government would act responsibly to educate the public on the misuse or abuse of the Red Cross insignia to avoid them being in breach and committed to paying such a fine.

The Bill strikes a reasonable balance. Use of the emblem as a registered trademark prior to the passing of this Act is lawful. Following the passing of the Bill, consent in writing of the Minister of National Security would be required for use or display of the symbols. As a responsible government, we would undertake

to educate the public on the details of the abuse or misuse of the symbol and when it can be used legitimately.

We have chosen to give effect to this time, strictly to those obligations calling on Trinidad and Tobago in connection with the protocols to which we have become a contracting party.

There is a view that customary international law has developed to the point where States can give or should give the legislative effect to Protocol II even though the protocol is not required. This view is challenged because States do not easily allow the widening of international law into areas that are considered to be under national jurisdiction and laws. In other words, there is no need for Protocol II to be included. It was included in the Schedule as a matter of reference.

We have chosen to give legislative effect to obligations as laid down by the four Geneva Conventions and Protocol I. With regard to Protocol II which deals with non international or internal conflicts, there is no requirement on Trinidad and Tobago to enact criminal legislation. The absence of criminal provisions relating to Protocol II in this Bill acknowledges this fact.

The Bill you may say is voluminous and the Schedules may cause it to appear bulky. We have the four Geneva Conventions and Protocols 1 and 2 replicated and they are essential. All the provisions are there for the protection of the wounded and sick of the armed forces in the field and at sea; prisoners of war; civilian persons in time of war; victims of international conflict and victims of non international arms conflict. Notwithstanding the size of the Bill including the Schedules, it is correct to say that this Bill is simple and straightforward and the mere size of the Bill should not put us off.

You may ask: Why now? You will question the timing and whether it is related to any geopolitical or military events occurring at this time. I indicate that Cabinet took a decision to proceed with legislation to give effect to these conventions and Protocol I in February this year. As I said before, there is existing legislation on the Geneva Conventions that is being repealed and updated by this Bill. This Bill cannot be construed as a response or reaction to any geopolitical or military developments in this or any part of the world, at this time.

In conclusion, I wish to remind this honourable House that Trinidad and Tobago has an international obligation to enact criminal legislation and exercise jurisdiction over breaches of the Geneva Conventions and Protocol I. There is no similar obligation to enact criminal legislation in respect of Protocol II. The Geneva Conventions Bill seeks to fulfill Trinidad and Tobago's international

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commitment in this area of international humanitarian law. Enactment and enforcement would deter offenders from seeking safe haven or refuge in our territory. As I indicated at the outset, these four conventions and the two protocols together form a major source of international and humanitarian law, as it is also called commonly, the law of armed conflict. They have been accepted virtually by every State in the world. As their primary purpose they have the protection of persons who are no longer taking part in arms conflict, specifically wounded and sick combatants, whether on land or sea; prisoners of war and civilians.

I am sure that you will agree that this purpose is worthy of collective support. I recommend that the hon. Members of this House support this Bill to enable effect to be given to certain conventions done in Geneva on August 12, 1949, and to the protocols additional to those conventions done in Geneva on June 08, 1977, and for related purposes.

I beg to move.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, before I propose the question for debate, this Bill was amended in the Senate and the amendments have been circulated.

Apparently, it was impossible to get the amendments in there as voluminous as it is.

Question proposed.

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Mr. Speaker, it is late but it is important that the Government explain a number of questions that we have on the Geneva Conventions. First of all, the Opposition wants to register the fact that the Geneva Conventions Bill 2008 is 256 pages long. We were told about this last Friday when we left. We were given seven days to prepare a response to a Bill that is 256 pages long. It has five Parts, six Schedules, 64 Articles in Schedule 1; 63 Articles in Schedule 2; 143 Articles in Schedule 3; 159 Articles in Schedule 4; 102 Articles in Schedule 5 and 28 Articles in Schedule 6. That is a total of 559 Articles for six Schedules. This is what the Opposition was asked to analyze in great detail to come with a response to the presentation by the hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs.

I believe that the hon. Minister sought to try to explain the rationale for it, but did not do so because the question we ask is: Why at this time when there are so many other important Bills to be brought before the House, the Government considered it important to bring the Geneva Conventions Bill, when it does not affect any of the domestic laws, situations or Trinidad and Tobago's international relations? Is it by vaps? Is it because next year we have the Summit of the

Americas and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, that we have to look good in the eyes of the international arena as the United States and the developed countries, so that they would see Trinidad and Tobago is progressive, in terms of signing on to all these conventions and protocols?

8.40 p.m.

We find it very difficult to understand why this is being brought at a time like this. Nevertheless it has been brought and we have to discuss it. The whole question of wartime behaviour goes back a long time. We have had numerous attempts to codify the rules of appropriate military conduct and all of us in politics will know about Sun Tzu, the Chinese warrior in the 6th Century before Christ. He gave a number of suggestions on the limit of the conduct of wars; and in the Hindu code of Manu, which is 200 years before the birth of Christ, the notion of war crimes appeared.

In 1305, the Scottish national hero, Sir William Wallace, was tried for the wartime murder of civilians and the first Geneva Convention was signed in 1864, as mentioned by the hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs. In 1899, treaties were signed concerning asphyxiating gases and expanding bullets because that was the type of warfare that nations participated in. In 1925, the Geneva Gas Protocol prohibited the use of poisoned gas and the practice of biological warfare.

We have had prisoners of war, human shields in 1999 in the Gulf War and Saddam Hussein used biological warfare on his people in 1988. We heard and read about the atrocities in Darfur and cluster bombs by Israel on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. So the whole question of nation versus nation in warfare, national terrorism and warfare within nation states have been in existence and are worsening in some countries at the moment.

The Minister went through the whole issue of the four conventions and the two protocols and basically the first convention dealt with wounded soldiers on the battle field, which you will not see now in modern warfare because it is conducted in another way. The second convention is on wounded soldiers shipwrecked at sea, the third is prisoner of war and the fourth civilians. The first protocol deals with international conflicts between nation states and the second with non-international conflicts.

I want to get to the point immediately on this question of the amendment to what was presented in the Senate on Tuesday, July 29, 2008. In the amendment by the Government, in the definition of the term "Protocol", it was proposed that we delete the word "non-international" and substitute the word "international",

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with which we agree because Protocol I deals with international conflict. But to delete the definition of Protocol II and the definition of the protocols in the title to Part II and substitute the words "Protocol I", we do not accept. In other words, the Government is deleting Protocol II, which was presented in the Senate and we are asking for the rationale for deleting Protocol II.

The Bill itself, under the explanatory note, in the third paragraph on page 2, Protocol I governs international armed conflict. We accept that. Protocol II protects victims of non-international armed conflict, that is armed conflict that takes place in the territory of a state between its armed forces and dissident armed forces or other organized armed groups. This is conflict in its own country, protecting victims of non-international armed conflict, that is armed conflict that takes place in the state. For example, conflict in Trinidad and Tobago, between its armed forces, say the defence force and the police force, and dissident armed forces, let us say the revolution in 1990, or other organized armed groups.

The Minister of National Security mentioned that there are 81 gangs operating in Trinidad and Tobago. These are armed groups. So the protocol provides fundamental guarantees of humane treatment of persons not involved in the hostilities and rules relating to the protection of civilians.

So Protocol II provides fundamental guarantees of humane treatment to persons not involved in the hostilities. So in Trinidad and Tobago, there are armed forces, the defence force and the police service and you may have conflict between the dissident armed forces or organized armed groups like the gangs. But how is the civilian population going to be protected?

We have seen that the civilian population is not protected in Trinidad and Tobago. The gangs are moving with impunity and killing about 500,000 persons this year. The Prime Minister is unable to deal with the armed conflict that exists in Trinidad and Tobago. Who protects the civilian population?

We are asking: why it is necessary to remove Protocol II from the Geneva Convention when it implicitly states that it protects the civilian population in non-international conflict? We are at the mercy of armed groups and the Government is doing nothing. Can we not have the opportunity and the ability to use the protocol to go to the International Criminal Court which tries situations and persons responsible for very serious crimes? We are having very serious crimes committed on the population at the moment. Is it that the hon. Prime Minister and the Government are afraid someone will take an action to refer this Government and the Prime Minister to the International Criminal Court where he could be

tried for allowing the inhumane treatment of the civilians where they are murdered on a daily basis?

What is different in Trinidad and Tobago from what is happening in Darfur? In Darfur, there has been genocide. In Liberia, do you remember there was a gentleman called Charles Taylor whose son came to Trinidad? He was a lieutenant in a nation where the population was being massacred. His son was picked up in Trinidad and taken to the United States because there is an extradition treaty, and he was tried before a US court.

The whole question of conventions, rights and inhumane treatment came to the forefront in Liberia. Is the Government afraid that a similar situation may occur where we will take the action of referring the hon. Prime Minister and the Government to the International Criminal Court, the court which deals with the most serious and heinous crimes on humankind.

We are asking the hon. Minister to explain why the amendment is necessary. Why is the Government afraid to leave Protocol II on the Geneva Conventions Bill? It protects the civilians.

On page 3 of the Bill:

“Grave breaches include wilful killing, torture or inhumane treatment including biological experiments, wilfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health and extensive destruction and appropriation of property.”

Grave breaches are being committed upon the civilian population in Trinidad and Tobago, wilful killing, inhumane treatment, great suffering or serious injury to body or health and extensive destruction and appropriation of property.

“Clause 3 permits the exercise of universal jurisdiction in respect of the commission of grave breaches.”

Is the Government sensing something? Do they feel they may be taken to court and somebody found guilty of inhumane treatment on the population and that is why they are seeking not to include Protocol II in the Geneva Conventions Bill? We need some real explanations and we are not going to be happy with the exclusion of Protocol II from the Bill. It is fundamental; it is wrong and therefore we know this has to be included.

This Bill is so voluminous. It was mentioned by one of our colleagues in the other place that there should be consideration for a joint select committee to look into the whole issue. It is as serious as that. It may look innocuous, but it is not.

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They have to tell us the rationale for bringing it now and the whole explanation of why they are leaving out Protocol II.

8.55 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister says that we are bound by international law to sign this Convention, as it reflects our foreign obligation and commitment and, therefore, is crucial for maintaining good foreign relations and our creditability in the international sphere. These Bills have been around since 1976, waiting to be ratified by this country. Why then is it now you are looking at that, out of the blue? Are you anticipating that we may be prisoners of war or are prisoners of war at the moment? Are we being pressured by other countries to bring this piece of legislation on at the moment? Are we being pressured by the United Nations to bring this into legislation, or are we part of any war strategy in the United States? We do not know. We are next door to Venezuela. You know Venezuela's Chavez has his own difficulties with the United States at the moment. We know Chavez has a relationship with Cuba. We know the United States negative relationship with Cuba at the moment. Are we part of a strategy that this Government knows about and is not telling us and this is why they are rushing the legislation?

Since 2002, the United States and the United Kingdom authorities have been calling for these Conventions to be redone to suit the times we live in. I want to quote from an article:

“Geneva Conventions are outdated says US envoy”

This was written by the *Independent* newspaper of London on February 22, 2002 by Kim Sengupta. This is the article that was written by Kim Sengupta. I want to quote some issues on this article.

“The Geneva Conventions are outdated and need to be rewritten to deal with the threat of international terrorism, the United States Ambassador for war crime said yesterday.

The forthright views of Pierre-Richard Prosper, who was personally appointed by President Bush will fuel the controversy over the treatment of Afghan detainees by America.

His remarks, in an interview with the *Independent*, represent the first time a senior figure in the Bush administration has spoken so unambiguously about overhaul of the conventions. They reflect Washington's exasperations at criticisms by Western allies and international organizations of its treatment of prisoners at Camp X-ray on Cuba.

The Geneva Conventions have tempered some of the worst excesses of modern warfare, and attempts to tamper with them are bound to lead to opposition. However, there is a growing feeling in the administration that the present form of the conventions, signed in 1949, does not take into account the new type of conflict in which individuals and organizations such as Al Qaeda, rather than states, wage war.”

Since 2002, countries have been saying that the Geneva Conventions, the four Conventions and Protocols, are outdated. Why are we now signing into outdated Conventions and Protocols in 2008, six years later? The article goes on to say:

“The war on terror is the new type of war not envisaged when the Geneva Conventions were negotiated and signed. We now have organizations that...do not conduct their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war.”

We see it is Somalia and Afghanistan. The United States Ambassador stressed that the Geneva Conventions remained relevant for wars between sovereign states and sovereign nation-states, United States and Russia and United States and China. Those are sovereign states. But difficulties have arisen when they have been applied to international terrorism.

We are in the middle of international terrorism right here in the Caribbean. The world is being invaded by international terrorists. You have seen bombings in Pakistan recently and bombings of hotels all over. International terrorists are moving throughout the world. The Geneva Conventions does not apply to international terrorists. The Geneva Conventions applied to sovereign nation-states. Afghanistan is considered a pseudo state. It is not a nation-state, therefore, the laws for the Geneva Conventions and Protocols will never apply to places like Afghanistan, et cetera.

“Mr. Prosper, the son of Haitian immigrants, is a respected jurist who successfully prosecuted the first case under the 1948 Genocide Convention at the Rwanda war crimes tribunal. He was in Europe to defend America policy towards its Afghan prisoners, and met Foreign Office officials yesterday.”

The United States’

“...position on the prisoners has been inconsistent. After initially declaring that none was entitled to the protections under the conventions”—none of the prisoners of war they had in Guantanamo Bay—“President Bush said this month that Taliban prisoners fell under Geneva but al-Qa’ida prisoners would not.”

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Here was President Bush saying one thing and the Conventions were stating something else.

“He later added to the confusion by saying that Taliban prisoners would not have POW status but would be treated as ‘unlawful combatants’.”

You have the President of the United States saying that the Geneva Conventions are anachronistic, outdated and out of time, but here it is, Trinidad and Tobago Government, although we have signed the treaty, I accept that, why do we want to pass it in law in Government when the rest of the world is telling us that it is outdated. We cannot see the rationale for it. What is the justification for it?

Mr. Prosper, Mr. Bush’s representative, said:

“‘Analysis of the Geneva Conventions leads us to the conclusion that the Taliban detainees do meet the legal criteria under Article 4’.

He stressed that the prisoners, whom he had visited, were being well looked after and some of the privileges of the Geneva Conventions had been extended to them.”

I repeat the question: Why bring these Conventions now for us to sign and legislate on, without taking into consideration the fact that we may need to update them to suit the time and international sentiment as occurring at the moment?

Mr. Speaker, the United Kingdom has now passed a Bill for a 42-day detention without a charge; it was previously 28 days. The United States signed the convention and then said that they did not intend to ratify the statute. They had nullified the signature to the treaty, meaning that they have no obligations whatsoever to the Geneva Conventions. Israel followed in their footsteps. Israel voted against the adoption of the statute. In 2002, it gave the United States notice that it did not intend to ratify the statute.

The Iraqi transitional Government, in February 2005, decided to ratify the statute. Two weeks later, they reversed this decision. The International Criminal Court claimed that this was due to pressure from the United States America. You are seeing right around us that everything is changing, Israel, United States, all these sovereign states have changed their whole approach and their thinking on these Geneva Conventions and Protocols.

Do you know what these conventions and protocols also indicate? Prisoners of war must be given food, clothes, recreation and tobacco. They must pay these prisoners of war for work and not let them work overtime. Prisoners of war are

working. Compare our prisoners in Trinidad and Tobago to what is happening, do you think Trinidad and Tobago could really be realistic in taking care of prisoners of war and maintaining the code of conduct and behaviour, which guides the Geneva Conventions and Protocols? We cannot even take care of our prisoners in Trinidad and Tobago, far less taking care of prisoners of war.

Mr. Speaker, I want to proffer that the failure of this Government to see the need to be relevant is a reflection of their attitude towards our foreign policy. This Government has long been indifferent to establish any real foreign policy that reflects sense, intelligence and relevance to our global position.

I think we are all aware that we are supposed to have a foreign relations committee here in the Parliament. This has been defunct. Where is this foreign relations committee? Nobody knows anything about it and this is why Trinidad and Tobago is floundering in the international arena without any sound foreign policy whatsoever.

Listen to the PNM failures since 2002, as far as foreign policy is concerned: CSME—the Prime Minister seems to be in a confused state of mind as to whether to accept Caricom or whether not to accept it and CSME or break it up and form its own political integration with four countries, because it is going to suit him politically. Probably we may see people from these other countries coming to Trinidad to vote so that the PNM Government will be there for perpetuity.

We want to know what respect Trinidad and Tobago got; Trinidad and Tobago who has signed the Treaty of Chaguaramas, has come to know that Caricom exists for all 15 Caricom countries and have signed into it. The Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago went about to form a federation of four countries for political integration, including his friend the Prime Minister of St. Vincent.

Trinidad and Tobago has failed the FTAA. Trinidad and Tobago gave up the World Cup Cricket best games, because they said that the other Caribbean countries did not vote against us and voted for us. We gave up our cricket business for them. We went for the dirty brown bag. Trinidad and Tobago was supposed to be the head of the FTAA headquarters. Where is that?

What has happened to PetroCaribe? We lost Caricom trade to Venezuela because of PetroCaribe. Mr. Chavez went under the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago's nose and made sure that he arranged with all the Caribbean countries and gave them oil and oil products at concessionary rates, yet Trinidad and Tobago is spending \$500 million on a PetroCaribe fund to give to Caribbean countries to come up to scratch, in terms of their development.

9.10 p.m.

Mr. Dumas: I just want to know if you would comment on the relative cost of financing the energy programme that PetroCaribe has as against the provisions the Government made.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: That is a question that the Government should answer.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, relevance.

Mr. Sharma: What nonsense is this!

Mr. Speaker: I have to rule you out of order. I thought that there was an agreement between the leaders. Was there an agreement? Please, continue.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. Speaker, if I may satisfy the hon. Minister of Works and Transport—I am guided by the Speaker and I am protected by the Speaker. Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. With respect to the question of Trinidad and Tobago international relation foreign policy, I am sure the hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs cannot tell us what is our foreign relation policy. What is our policy to Venezuela? What is our policy to Cuba? What is our policy to the United States of America when the United States of America is at loggerheads with Cuba and Venezuela? What are our policies to South America, Brazil, Equador and Bolivia? How are we interacting with those countries? The hon. Prime Minister said this afternoon that we are selling gas to Brazil. Yes, we are doing trade, but what is our foreign policy as far as these countries are concerned.

We are hosting the Fifth Summit of the Americas next year from April 17, 2009—April 19, 2009. We will be hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government and we must have foreign policies. I would really like to hear in the Minister's winding up, or if anybody else is speaking, to tell us what is the foreign policy. Do you have a foreign policy in your hand to say that we are guided by it? They have a number of policies in a number of other areas like trade and institutional strengthening; they have planning and development, and they have policies to suit planning and development, but we do see or hear about a policy in foreign relations. So, it is a vaille-que-vaille type of situation where they have come by vaps and asked us to sign on the Geneva Conventions and Protocols.

Mr. Speaker, the second issue is: Why enact a convention to pappys show it to the international community when our history reflects our abject failure to implement any international treaty or convention? Could the hon. Minister indicate the conventions we have signed on to in addition to the Geneva Conventions and Protocols? We should have been given a list of these

conventions. I thought that the Minister would have probably educated us on all the conventions that we have signed on to as a country, and one comes to mind very readily.

We are a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. I am not going further into that so do not be exasperated. It has taken us nearly two decades to get the necessary laws to support this treaty and to get it up and running. Are we signing on to another convention that we are not going to be upholding?

Hon. Member: We signed it.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: The UNC passed the children legislation in 2000, and for eight years the PNM failed to enact that Bill and also to implement a policy and this was at the expense of the children of Trinidad and Tobago. It was only a few weeks ago they brought the Children Bill; 20 years after the signing of the United Nations Convention. [*Interruption*] Yes, you said that it was not proper and you sought to change it after eight years.

The hon. Minister of Works and Transport seems to be having a difficulty in terms of what I am saying. We are talking about international law and international relations which have a direct impact on the Geneva Conventions and Protocols. The Geneva Conventions and Protocols are in the realm of international law, international relations and international conflict, and it is in that context that I am talking about it. Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory to a number of conventions and protocols, one of which I mentioned is the United States Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Mr. Speaker: I agree with what you are saying, but it is just that some Members think that they are prisoners. Please, continue.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I think they are prisoners in their own mind. They are boxed in their own thinking.

Mr. Dumas: This is cruel and unusual punishment.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: It is not. [*Crosstalk*] Where is the guarantee and the supporting measures to ensure that this Bill will be successful and effective and will be put in place in a timely manner to give it credence? You know that regulations come with this Bill and, as we are all aware, this Government is very regular in not being able to bring forward regulations to accompany Bills. So, this evening we will go and pass this Bill and the regulations are not going to be forthcoming. Even though the regulations are forthcoming at some point in time,

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they are going to be by negative resolution and they may slip through. We may never see the regulations governing the Geneva Conventions and Protocols.

I would like to ask the hon. Minister: Do you have regulations to support this Bill so that if it is passed today we are going to have the regulations to support it? I believe that they do not have the regulations. So, this is another exercise in futility.

We all know that next year we are going to be hosting two major international summits; the Fifth Summit of the Americas and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. The Prime Minister is intent on proving to the world, the heads and the combined 42,000 visitors who will be coming to our shores to these conferences, that the country is developed. I think the hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs does not even know how many visitors will be coming as a result of these conferences.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Let me just clarify for you that with regard to Fifth Summit of the Americas, we are going to have 2,500—3,000 persons and with respect to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November, we are probably going to have about 5,000—6,000 people. So it is not 42,000 people. That is wrong.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: If that is a correct statement then it is about 10,000 persons.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: No, I am just correcting you. Again, that is a correct statement. In one circumstance, we are going to have 2,500—3,000 at one time and on the other occasion, we are going to have 5,000—6,000. There is no combining or anything like that. At no point are we going to have more than 5,000—6,000 persons in Trinidad. So, I do not know where you are going, but that is it.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Well, we wait to see what happens at the two conferences. I know that we have at least 56 heads of government, and they will be bringing their own delegation. So, we will wait and see.

Mr. Imbert: Standing Order 33(6). The Member is reading from a prepared speech.

Mr. Speaker: What is good for the geese must be good for the gander. This is an issue that I am very concerned with. Yes, the Member is an experienced Member and some of the new Members have been reading speeches. It is my intention to indicate to Members that in the second session of this Ninth

Parliament, this particular Standing Order will be enforced. I get the impression that the Member is just about to wind up his contribution. So, in those circumstances, I would let him continue. He has two minutes of original time remaining. So, in those circumstances, I am going to let him conclude his speech in his original time.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Thank you very much for your suggestion. I am simply referring to my notes. This is a very important matter and I have to be very careful about what I say. So, it is important that I take special consideration of what I have prepared in terms of how significant this is.

Mr. Speaker: Perhaps you should seek permission from the Chair before you read your copious notes. [*Interruption*] As I said, I think he is just about to wind up.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. Speaker, we all know that recently a secretariat was established outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to prepare for this summit. Do you know that a secretariat has been formed or established to prepare for the summits?

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Of course, there is a national secretariat and that is known to the general public. It has been set up for about a year now or perhaps a little more than a year, to prepare and manage the summits; both with regard to the technical side and the logistic side.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I am happy that the Minister of Foreign Affairs knows that. I want the Minister to tell us this evening, this secretariat which was established about a year ago and was initially headed by the former Ambassador Carlos Alberto Luis Rodriguez. My information is that for the past year this secretariat that is supporting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been operating as an independent body under the control of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 36(1). The Member shall confine his observations.

Mr. Speaker: I think what the Member is saying is the relevance. Whilst you are generally on foreign affairs, I think what he is appealing for you is to return to the Geneva Conventions and Protocols.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. Speaker, the Geneva Convention applies here because we have terrorism within the Caribbean; we have terrorism next door to us; and we are going to have the Commonwealth Heads of Government coming and the Fifth Summit of the Americas.

Mr. Speaker: We have terrorism right here. [*Laughter*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I think you better look on your right. I think you are seeing it on your right.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. Speaker, what I want the Government to answer this evening is that we understand that this gentleman is being paid \$161,000 per month for taking care of the secretariat for these meetings.

After one year, we found that this gentleman has been replaced by a former Chief of Protocol, Mrs. Joan Massiah. The Government is not prepared at the moment. Five months to go, and we are asking this Government how far have they reached in the preparation for this Summit of the Americas? We believe and we are made to understand that you are way behind time in the preparation for everything.

9.25 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, a double point of order, 33(6), he is reading from a speech and 36(1), he is wholly irrelevant.

Mr. Speaker: With respect to the reading of the speech, I thought originally the hon. Member was in fact winding up, but he is not. Again, as I said, Members on the Government Benches read speeches without my permission, and the hon. Member notwithstanding the fact he is a seasoned parliamentarian is reading. I get the impression that you are about finishing reading that speech. [*Laughter*] The Members are saying that you are holding them hostage; I do not see that, [*Laughter*] but still come back to the Bill.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Mr. Speaker, the point I am making here is, here is it we are talking about the Geneva Conventions and Protocols; we are talking about foreign relations. The country has embarked upon a situation where you are having heads of governments here in November and you are having a Summit of the Americas. [*Crosstalk*] The Speaker told me something one day; I must not be riled up by the behaviour on the other side, I will keep my cool. It seems as though their ignorance is pervasive, and their ignorance of foreign relations and the whole international scenario in terms of what is needed when we are

discussing a situation like the Geneva Conventions and the Protocols, necessitates discussion on foreign relations. What is more important than when you are having 55 heads of governments coming to your country next year? Is this not the epitome of foreign relations? [*Desk thumping*]

You are having world leaders coming to your country, security is not in place; your accommodation is not in place; the two cruise ships that the Prime Minister said he is going to hire to accommodate these people are not in place; the whole question of the media, they have no place allotted for them at the moment; the whole thing about transfer of information to the 55 countries, nothing is in place; the question of the bilingual and the trilingual for communication to countries—

Mr. Imbert: Under Standing Order 43(2), I beg to move that the Member no longer be heard.

Mr. Speaker: The Member has invoked Standing Order 43(2), and it follows certainly from Standing Order 43(1). Having indicated, I think, on two occasions to you, begging you to come back to the Bill, he has moved that you no longer be heard. I am obliged to put the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: Regrettably, I now recognize another speaker.

The Minister of Public Administration (Hon. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Mr. Speaker, I do not intend to be very long, just a couple of things that were raised that I think we need to respond to, and I thank my hon. friend from Caroni East for raising some very relevant questions.

First of all, let me assure the national community that all the plans for the Summit of the Americas are quite well at hand, and it is still being headed by Ambassador Rodriguez, and he has not been replaced. [*Interruption*] I will explain that. No, that is not true.

There are a couple of things the hon. Member raised as well, that I think needs to be put into context. He quoted extensively from persons in the Bush administration, indicating that the Geneva Conventions are no longer relevant. It is little wonder why we recognize President-elect Obama today. It is precisely because the world and indeed, America repudiated the acts of the Bush administration, and find the republicans no longer relevant. [*Desk thumping*]

I just want to bring to the attention of hon. Members, there was a Trinidadian-born woman who worked for the International Rescue Committee, who was killed

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in Afghanistan. I want to move beyond all of that to talk a little about our respect for symbols and our respect for convention. I think it is important, as we live in the world today, that we seek to have a healthy respect for symbols and indeed conventions. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Order! Order!

Hon. K. Swaratsingh: In fact, Mr. Speaker, I think one of the things we suffer from in the world is that in some instances we have completely lost sight and respect for the conventions that symbolize care for humanity. I trained at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, as probably one of the only persons in the Caribbean who has been trained as a military chaplain. One of the things that they taught us there is that we need to nurture the living, care for the wounded and honour the dead.

In Trinidad and Tobago our recent history, from the 1990s coming up, our own military has been involved successfully in a number of operations in the Caribbean. In fact, in the 1990s our defence force served with distinction in Haiti; we worked in Grenada, Montserrat, Antigua, and therefore, as a consequence I think it is quite important that we establish clear protocols when our own people are put in harm's way.

I will tell you coming out of the Haiti experience there were quite a few soldiers in other militaries serving Haiti and there were a few suicides in Haiti. Our own military was one of the elite forces. There are officers here who have distinguished themselves and have been decorated by the United Nations. Therefore, as a consequence, I think we need to recognize that there may come a time when our persons of Trinidad Tobago descent and indeed our own military are called to serve in other esteemed engagements.

I remember in the mid 1990s when the UNC formed the Government, we had a military exercise in Chaguaramas, and the then Attorney General and the then Prime Minister came and witnessed the exercise, and I think were sufficiently impressed by the work of the military. Therefore, these conventions, far from being outdated, are quite important as we continue to recognize from an international perspective, clear symbols and institutions that protect persons in periods of engagement, and when they go to protect and care for human life. [*Desk thumping*]

I just want to spend a minute or two dealing with symbols in general. I lament the fact that when we look at some of our own symbols, the way we treat our national flag; the way in which we respect institutions. I remember as a young

boy growing up, when you walked in front of a church you used to make the sign of the cross. You had a healthy respect for religious institutions, and a healthy respect for persons in uniform or persons who use such symbols.

Therefore, I want to suggest that it is quite important for us, far from asking why is this Bill so important and why are we doing it now, to understand that we need to keep and ensure that we establish protocols in dealing with instances where neutrality is required, care for human life is required, and we ought not to trivialize the effort of the Government in bringing this Bill forward at this time.

The Member for Caroni East is quite right when he indicated that terrorism today has forced governments to think how do we deal with people engaged in acts that are non-conventional? Having said that, it does not mean that convention no longer has a place. Even in our own security arrangements we are awaiting the arrival of the offshore petrol vessels (OPVs). These OPVs will have a three-week weigh capacity to sail on sea; could go as far as up the islands, and so on.

Therefore, it is quite important in the Caribbean context that we understand some of the conventions that are required, as our military expands its operations in terms of securing the Caribbean basin, when it comes to our own standing within the Caribbean context in the wider world. In fact, in the newspapers today, the Minister of Tourism has been elected as the Vice-Chairman of the Caribbean Tourism Organization. [*Desk thumping*] The Minister of Public Administration is now the President of the Caribbean Telecom Telecommunications Union. [*Desk thumping*]

I am saying that we are beginning to also understand our own importance, strategically, geographically and otherwise in the Caribbean context and indeed the Latin American context as well. I do not want to belabour the point, but I just want to go back briefly on the use of symbols. I think sometimes when we produce our own national flag, and we use it for sporting events and otherwise, then you see it discarded on the road. We now have this thing where we put flags on vehicles; you see them flying all tattered and discoloured. I think it speaks about our own sense of pride in ourselves; our own sense of patriotism for our country, that we understand the use of symbols in a way that allows us to have a deeper sense of who we are, and what these symbols represent in a wider context.

That is why when we misuse symbols such as the Red Cross or the Red Crescent, as in the case of Colombia, while the intent and the end, I presume, probably justify the means, it could also have the reverse effect, when in some instances you may go with a symbol that is genuine and is not accepted, and therefore others are coming into fatal activity. The world today is a world where I

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feel we are fast losing that sense of neutrality of symbols and what symbols speak to. You see it not only in terms of institutions, you see it in terms of behaviour that is reflective in that regard.

So, I want to say as we support this Bill, we also think in terms of our own symbols; we also think in terms of when our own people go in harms way, and we recognize the fact that the conventions we have today are conventions that allow us to recognize a deeper and wider purpose.

So, Mr. Speaker, I just want to put in context that because of our own recent experience, our own military have had to be involved in several engagements, albeit at a peacekeeping level, and humanitarian level. This convention speaks to the protection of human life, therefore, it is quite important for us that we continue to, as a Government and as a people, live in that vein.

Mr. Speaker, with that, I thank you.

9.40 p.m.

Mr. Chandresh Sharma (Fyzabad): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We must never fear to learn and to observe and what we have just observed from the Government side is that they use their numbers to shut up the Member for Caroni East. But very interesting the Member for St. Joseph, his entire contribution was in response to what the Member for Caroni East had to say. So, on one hand, had the Member for Caroni East not spoken, the Member for St. Joseph really would have nothing to say. [*Laughter*] So, what are you really telling the national community?

Now the Member for St. Joseph raised a few matters. On reflection we have been here since 1 o'clock today. The earlier matter debated has not benefited the national community and, again, what the Government has moved is not benefiting the national community, but what is worse is the contempt with which they hold this country and the citizens of this country.

The Minister is talking about how we treat with those who are hurt, injured and wounded. Let us look at the current situation; he is talking about the prisoners of war and those who died. On Sunday, two days from today, we will be observing what we observe the second Sunday in November—there are two centres in Trinidad: one in Port of Spain and one in Fyzabad—Memorial Day—and some Members are wearing the “Hush poppy”, I am not sure they know why they wear it.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. C. Sharma: Good, I just wanted to make sure you were listening, thank you. The point is, the centre in Fyzabad gets no assistance. They have to beg for money to host this programme. Thank God for Petrotrin, they give some money, I hope the Member for La Brea will attend on this occasion. In fact, no Government Member has attended that in the last six or seven years, so here you are pretending. We are concerned about those who fought in the war and died, et cetera and prisoners right in this country cannot be treated with.

The Member is talking about all this love and care; I do not know who he is trying to fool. The victims of crime up to this day—legislation has been passed—not a single victim of crime has obtained a cent, no compensation and the Opposition has been begging Government to do its duty. How about those who have been murdered, what about their families; no assistance for them? Who are these victims they are talking about? The Minister is talking about symbol; we saw the abuse of symbol in Trinidad and Tobago, in cars driven by Government officials with the Coat of Arms. The law does not provide for that.

Mr. Bharath: What about number plate?

Mr. C. Sharma: And a number plate. The Government is breaking the rules and then last week I saw somebody was claiming that some number plates in this country were illegal, suddenly. The Government has to be careful; they keep talking about doing this and doing that but really demonstrating absolutely no care.

The Member for Caroni East made some very interesting points; points that we must consider. We are talking about a global financial crisis, it seems from what we have heard from the Member for Point Fortin thus far, that moneys put aside for those two events that are coming up are not benefiting the national community.

Mr. Imbert: Standing Order 36(1), Mr. Speaker. The Member is talking about the Summit of the Americas and all kinds of things again.

Mr. Speaker: No, you have to give the Member a little opportunity to get where he is going. He has just started—9.39 p.m.—four minutes. I am sure he will get there in short order.

Mr. C. Sharma: Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for your ruling and I am glad the Minister of Works and Transport has raised this point because we are on national television and the national community will see the contempt with which this Minister and this Parliament is going. [*Desk thumping*] It seems as if nobody

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in the Opposition can speak in this Parliament. It is a calculated effort, and if this is going to be the practice of the Government, I am prepared to take my seat. I am prepared to take my seat for the simple reason—

Mr. Speaker: No, I have protected you; just get back to the Bill. I am here to protect every single Member of the House, so please; you need not belabour that point.

Mr. C. Sharma: No, the point I wish to make, you see, when Members of Government feel that they can use their numbers it is really telling the country that we are not citizens here. We are the duly elected Opposition, the loyal Opposition and we have a responsibility. [*Desk thumping*] There is so much of ill going on in this country, so much of Government wastage. We are coming here Friday after Friday to pass legislation hoping to add value to the lives of people in Trinidad and Tobago and nothing this Government has brought for the longest while is adding any value.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank you very much.

Mr. Subhas Panday (*Princes Town North*): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Geneva Convention is an international convention which has been accepted by a number of countries and the question we are asked is, why are they using and duplicating parliamentary time or wasting parliamentary time at this point? There are so many more pressing issues to deal with in this society. We are trying to deal with prisoners of war and the hon. Member for Point Fortin, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, has indicated in her presentation that since 1949 to now not a single person has been prosecuted under this convention, but we come here this evening to use parliamentary time to enact this legislation.

It is this honourable speaker who understands the problems of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The crime situation—over 450—we had a crime motion in the Parliament, only one sitting we had and only one speaker we had from this side of the House and the Government shelved that for almost a year. We thought instead of bringing this legislation at this time they should have continued that motion, because that motion affects the lives of the citizens at this time. How many persons will be affected by this legislation? We know since 1949 to now, 50-plus years, not a single person has been prosecuted under this legislation.

The point we are making is, we cannot fly in the face of conventions but to say the Government does not have a legislative agenda. So many children have died in this country at the hands of this PNM Government: Sean Luke, Anamunthodo, and the UNC government had passed the children legislation. This

Government—although they are bringing this legislation today—failed to proclaim that legislation so we could have saved the lives of children. After eight years—typical—they brought the children legislation and low and behold in the middle of a debate in which we are dealing with the future and the lives of our children, this Government pelt away the debate, they throw it in the rubbish bin, they are kicking our children, they are spitting in our children's face, they are encouraging the brutalization of our children, the murdering of our children, so they take that debate and they stop it.

Tell us why you stopped it? Tell us? There are children suffering outside. You stopped the debate to bring this. Do you have, really, any regard to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and in particular the young children? That is why people are annoyed. People are not annoyed because of the Geneva Conventions, but people are annoyed because you do not have a legislative agenda. This Government is operating the Parliament by "vaps" and we cannot allow the Parliament to be operated like that.

We are thinking about soldiers who have been wounded on the field and on the sea. How many of those does this legislation affect? Which country are we at war with? I could tell you something, there might be none but children in this country are dying while the PNM sits and presides over it and this is what the country must know. The country must know that the PNM does not care about the people.

Food prices are so high. One would have thought that they would have dealt with things like that. People are dying on our roads and they cannot even deal with that. Deal with the people in Trinidad and Tobago first before you deal with these prisoners of war. The Metrology Act was supposed to have been passed. Why you did not bring that before this? That would have been of greater significance and importance to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, because, that Act would have helped to deal with speeding, where a number of our persons are killed on the highways.

That Minister who jumps up every minute with the Standing Orders, why does he not do his work? Jumping up with the Standing Orders and trying to muzzle people, why does he not do his work so that it will prevent people from dying on the streets? Instead you are bringing this thing which is 49 years old.

Mr. Speaker, I want to show you something, I will never condescend to use the word "dotish". He has patent in that. That will stay on him like a stink breath on him. He is trying to remodel himself. Mr. Speaker, do you know how they are

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wasting time? The hon. Member for Point Fortin in her presentation said this evening:

“I am unaware that there has been in fact any prosecutions in Trinidad and Tobago under the existing legislation that will be repealed by this Act.”

So, you know what they are admitting here today is, there is legislation in place. If there is legislation in place, what is the great necessity for this Act and the legislation which was in place they could not implement it. They have never implemented it, but they come here today with this Geneva Conventions Bill and they are saying here—I wonder if they listen to themselves, because if they were listening to themselves—this Government—they would not be speaking such nonsense. You are saying that there is legislation in place and then you go on to say:

“Nevertheless, what this Bill seeks to do is to update and consolidate our legislation on Geneva Conventions so that if the occasion arises”—

If the occasion arises, Mr. Speaker.

For 59 years an occasion never arose to implement the Act, but you are telling this nation, when there are so many people being killed on the streets, when the food prices are so high, when you cannot pass legislation to deal with speeding. Mr. Speaker, do you know—everybody in Trinidad knows—that you could speed how much you want in the night, you could break the law with impunity if you want and they cannot do you nothing. I say they cannot do you nothing, double negative for emphasis, because they operate by the old primitive stopwatch and they cannot see the face in the night. People are dying on the streets, people are dying on the streets every night and this Government, they speak about being so caring but they are so insensitive and irresponsible, they have not brought the Metrology legislation before the House so we could have speed traps and speed timing in the night.

That is more important than this. That is not a situation to anticipate an occasion which may or may never arise. That is a situation on the streets of Trinidad and Tobago at this time. Why is the Government not dealing with the problems of the people? Hence the reason we are saying that you are wasting time. That Member here was in the last Government. They come here today to the 2001 convention, but in the last government when the—you were here, Mr. Speaker—hon. Member for Caroni Central said, we have completed our legislative agenda, and remember that day we went home early, one would have thought that this kind of legislation would have been brought at that time.

9.55 p.m.

So up to 2007, this was never part of their agenda. They had an agenda, but they said that this was not a part of it. Why now? That is the question everybody is asking. Why now? I read the contributions of many persons in the other place and the hon. Minister—I could trust you—the Member for Point Fortin said, “I will tell you. We want to honour our international obligations.” But you had the opportunity to do it all the time. In the Seventh or Eighth Parliament, you had the opportunity, why did the Government not do it? Mr. Speaker, it appears to me that they merely want to look good for the international events which may come next year. That is the only reason. The Member for Caroni East says that, “They are hardly prepared.”

Dr. Gopeesingh: It is a shame and disgrace on the PNM. That is why the United States does not want us there. You do not even know what is going on. You are a stranger to the whole thing. The Prime Minister—*[Interruption]*

Mr. S. Panday: Mr. Speaker, I will now go through the Bill clause by clause. I thought that the hon. Minister, when she made her delivery, would have given us the definition of “court”. The definition of court is an all inclusive piece of legislation and it says:

“‘court’ includes a Court-martial convened pursuant to the Defence Act...”

So since it says that the court includes a court-martial, then it will appear to me from the definition of court, that court could be any court in Trinidad and Tobago including the High Court.

But Mr. Speaker, is the High Court in a position at this time to deal with these kinds of problems?

Dr. Gopeesingh: Not at all.

Mr. S. Panday: Not at all. Why have you not brought this legislation, the Supreme Court of Judicature Act, Chap. 4:01, which gives you the power to increase the number of judges? They had that legislation in this Parliament. The Supreme Court of Judicature Act was laid in this Parliament and when that Act was laid in this Parliament, the objective of the Act was to increase the number of puisne judges from 23 to 27, and the number of Court of Appeal judges from nine to 11.

You passed the legislation, but do you have the infrastructure in place? Do we have a sufficient number of courts to deal with issues like these if they crop up according to the hon. Member for Point Fortin, in the event that the occasion

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arises? Or if the occasion arises, will they get special treatment like the high-class people in this society? Will the people in Trinidad and Tobago who are suffering and waiting for years for a trial and are in custody, will this take precedent over them? This is what the people want to find out.

Why sacrifice the persons affected by this legislation without putting the machinery in place. Mr. Speaker, what do you expect from this Government? While there are poor black people in custody for years trying to get—*[Interruption]* Yes, poor black, poor Indian people in custody for years waiting to get a trial, certain people—

On June 27, a Coroner was issued a warrant for murdering his wife, and while so many poor people are suffering and waiting for a trial, by October he had his Preliminary Inquiries determined and he walked home. Will these people—you know what I am talking about—get a special privilege opportunity? No! I say let us deal with our people first. Put mechanisms in place, put the administration in place, so that the whole society will be developed because if you do not do that, people would say you are making a joke. Passing this legislation is merely making a joke, is merely fooling the people and I will show you in a minute which is indeed we are fooling the people.

This Parliament, not me, but this Government is fooling the people and from the mere fact that the hon. Minister could indicate, we are passing this law in the event that the occasion arises, is that the way you treat legislation? Having regard to the history of the legislation, is that the way you deal with legislation? Oh, not at all. I see the hon. Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara look at me and I always said you should have been the Attorney General. What has happened is that the law has become outdated. The length of time we have taken to consolidate and to enact this law, it has become outdated. That is what the hon. Member for Caroni East was saying, “The Americans are saying the law is outdated, other countries are saying the law is outdated”, and one would have thought that when the hon. Member for Point Fortin—and I now speak to the Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara—was attempting to consolidate the legislation, we would have updated the legislation so that it would have been relevant. I will come to you in a minute.

Mr. Speaker, I move on to section 4(2) which says:

“...even though the consent of the Attorney General to the institution of proceedings for the offence has not been obtained...but no further proceedings can be taken until the consent has been obtained.”

What has happened here is, since it is a '49 piece of legislation, it would have been relevant in Trinidad and Tobago after 1962, under the Independence Constitution. Because under the Independence Constitution, what happened was the Attorney General could have performed the functions of the Director of Public Prosecutions. I am certain people remembered the then Attorney General sometime ago, Karl Hudson-Phillips, SC. He was the Attorney General and he donned his court wear and went and prosecuted Abdul Malick. You remember that? That happened under the Independence Constitution. Then the constitutional persons decided, that no, there should be the separation of powers. Politicians must not go in the courts and prosecute anybody. Your function is to deal with the administration of justice, and the Attorney General should be introducing the laws. But that part of the Attorney General's function was removed. So when the 1976 Constitution came into being, they decided to take away that power from the Attorney General.

Mr. Speaker, I now quote section 90 of the Constitution. Mr. Speaker, I really appreciate your interest in this matter. That section was introduced into the Republic Constitution for the creation of the post of Director of Public Prosecutions to perform all the functions as it pertains to court, criminal or otherwise. Section 90(2) says:

“There shall be a Director of Public Prosecutions for Trinidad and Tobago whose office shall be...”

Not a political, but a public office, independent of politicians; politicians not taking part in prosecuting people. It continues:

“(3) The Director of Public Prosecutions shall have the power in any case that he considers it proper to do so—

- (a) to institute and undertake criminal proceedings against any person before any court in respect of any offence against the law of Trinidad and Tobago...”

And this being a part of the law of Trinidad and Tobago since 1949, means that if he did not even consult with the law today, and under section 6(1) of the Constitution which says:

“Nothing in sections 4 and 5”—and that area in the law is the area of the hon. Chief Whip, the fundamental rights—“shall invalidate—

- (a) an existing law;”

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So even if this law was the law—and we did not come here today, to repeal the old laws and reenact this law. There is a saving clause here under Part II, Section 6(1) of the Constitution which says that the law has been received.

So, if this law did not pass today, then the DPP could have taken or commenced criminal proceedings under the existing law, 1949 law that we were governed by. So what has happened is today, when we pass this legislation, we are really moving backwards. We are moving backwards where we are taking away that power from the Director of Public Prosecutions to that independent office to institute legal proceedings and giving it back to the post Republican Constitution back into the Independence Constitution. So we are going backwards.

So therefore, we ask the question today: Are we passing laws which may be inconsistent with the present Constitution? No, no. These are the legal technicalities we should be looking at? Before we come here and just merely make these nice statements about law and we are fulfilling international obligations, did we look into it? That is why I thought that if the Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara had been the Attorney General, we could have had some lovely legal discussions.

Mr. Speaker, I know it is getting late and I will save my fire power for the other Bill, but I am certain that I just want to make one or two points again. Another thing is, the law is so outdated that when the law was passed in 1949, most of the countries in the world under your definition “of grave offences”—grave offences which include murder—the penalty was execution, and they said in other circumstances, life imprisonment. I remember hearing you say this afternoon, hon. Member. Section 2(1) says:

“The penalty of an offence under subsection (1) is—

- (a) when the offence involves the wilful killing of a person protected by the relevant Convention or by Protocol I, the penalty for murder...”

10.10 p.m.

In our country the penalty for murder is execution; this says that in any other case it is imprisonment for life, but this was in 1949; this is a 1949 convention. So when many countries had become signatories to the convention, in their domestic laws they had the death penalty as a consequence for murder. What has happened since then? In certain countries which are signatories to this Convention, they have abolished the death penalty for murder; so we are so far back, that in certain

countries they have gone forward. They have abolished the death penalty for murder, and we now come, after they have done that, to introduce this antiquated legislation.

The question, therefore, is: Will persons who have been arrested for offences under this Bill, receive a different treatment if they are tried in Trinidad and Tobago? If the same prisoner is charged in the United Kingdom (UK) where there is no death penalty, will he receive a different penalty under the European law? These are issues which we should have debated; these are issues which we should have looked at before we brought in legislation.

We are not marking time with certain parts of the world, hence, as the Convention appears to us today, it will have different consequences in one jurisdiction and other consequences in another. These are things that we needed to look at, but those are academic and legal arguments. If the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara was the Attorney General, we could have debated it. I am certain she might want to debate it, even at this point.

I humbly ask the hon. Minister who presented the Bill, since it is really a reacting and consolidating of previous legislation and, in particular, the Conventions of August 12, 1949 and June 1997, how many countries in the Caribbean have enacted this legislation? How many countries have introduced this law into their domestic legislation? I ask the other question: Did we look at their legislation? Did we compare their legislation so that we upgraded ours to make it relevant and modern? I do not know and I do not want to cast any aspersions, but it was merely to ask the question. If the answer is no, then the question is: Why? If the answer is yes, then the question is: How far is our legislation from their legislation?

The hon. Member for Caroni East spoke about the regulations. We will pass this legislation tonight, and like so many other pieces of legislation, it would merely adorn some shelves and may never see the light of day, because once the regulations are not put into place, then this has no effect.

The question I want to ask the hon. Member for Point Fortin is this: If other countries have passed similar legislation, did you look at their regulations or did they treat this as a joke, as we are treating it now, and brought the law without regulations? I have a feeling that we are fooling people; that we want when the Summit of the Americas come we probably would go on the public forum and boast that we have enacted in our domestic legislation all the conventions, although we may never ever implement them. We are fooling them. This

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legislation, in my humble view, is to fool the international community; it is to fool the international community. The reason I am saying so is because there is law in place. Why come at this time?

You will tell us in your winding up that we are merely trying to fulfil our international obligations; that would be your answer. The question is: Why now? There is already law in place.

To show you that they are not only mamaguying the people of Trinidad and Tobago, but the international community as well—and this will make you laugh—it shows in clause 11 under “General”:

"The Minister with responsibility for national security may make regulations..."

That is the biggest joke of the century. They were the authors of legislation to amend the Constitution and to amend the Police Service Act for the appointment of a commissioner of police. It is almost two years now that the Government—and I will never identify ministers or say anything about them, but I would say, "that Government"—has not been able to formulate proper legislation for the appointment of a commissioner. If the laws that you made, if the laws that you brought into being, the laws which you claim patrimony to, you cannot make regulations to implement, this piece of law, these conventions which the Member spoke about as having some 200 and something pages, when will you get time to make those regulations? It may never come. That is why people are so upset, that these regulations may never come; these laws may never be implemented.

I want to ask a question about something that just struck me. If there were laws from 1949 to now which have been integrated into our laws by section 6(1) of the Constitution, do we have any regulations for those laws? If even something had happened, because there were no regulations, those laws could not have been implemented. This appears to be a big joke and, as we said, we cannot object if the country is already a signatory to conventions. We cannot object to that being a part of domestic law, but these are some of the issues that we thought could have been dealt with. Maybe that is why the Member for Diego Martin North/East decided that we started this debate at 8 o'clock.

Thank you.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs (Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Mr. Speaker, I rise to wind up this debate on the Geneva Conventions, and I will speak to the questions of relevance that were raised. Most of them were raised, indeed, by the

Member for Caroni East. I will be brief, given the hour, but I will try to attend to each of the points made.

The first, of course, was the voluminous nature of the Bill. I did speak to that in my presentation; I am surprised that it was, in fact, brought up again. It seems to be of no significance, because I think the Member should understand that all the provisions of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, Protocol I and Protocol II which are included in the Schedule, are just replicated. This is the reason it is bulky.

I am disappointed that he had a problem with the task. This was laid before in the Senate a couple months ago, so it has been around. Notwithstanding the size and apparent bulkiness of the Bill, we must bear in mind that it is, in fact, simple, it is straightforward, and it is nothing more and nothing less than what it is intended to be, which is to give legal effect to the provisions of the four Conventions and the additional Protocols I and II. That is all it is.

The question was raised as to why at this time; that again was answered in my presentation. Cabinet took a decision in February of this year to tidy up this legislation and to update, consolidate and bring it all into one; that simply is what it was. It was just an attempt to tidy up the legislation and bring it into one. In fact, it was legal before, but it was the four pieces of legislation and the two protocols. This is all that it is, nothing more, nothing less.

You were concerned about the rationale for deleting Protocol II. Protocol II we said protected victims of non-international conflict; therefore, it is affecting just internal conflict; that is conflict that takes place within your territory, within Trinidad and Tobago, between our national armed forces, let us say, and some dissident armed forces. I do not see the relevance of including it, because the fact is if we do, we would be seeking to have extra territorial jurisdiction. Why do we need extra territorial jurisdiction, in response to internal conflicts? [*Interruption*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: Why have the other countries accepted Protocol II? Why have the other 190-plus countries signed on to Protocol II, if you are asking why we need it?

Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I really do not think that I can answer you, I have not examined the legislation of all the other countries, but really it is insignificant. All it is doing is giving extra territorial jurisdiction to internal matters and there is, in fact, significant enough legislation to deal with all these matters of internal conflict, so there is absolutely no need. We find it insignificant and it is not going to be included; it is just noted for reference in the Schedule, and we leave it at that.

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You did mention the fact of a joint select committee, I think because it was raised by your colleagues in the Senate. There is no reason for that. Again, we go back to the reason for this; this Bill is simple and straightforward. I cannot see why anybody would take a matter of such simplicity to a joint select committee. I think that this matter is of no moment and no significance at all.

Mr. Speaker, the Member also raised the question as to whether there was any reason the Bill was now being presented. I really do not have ample justification, but, again, it was to pull the thing together as one piece of legislation. I also did address the issue and gave every assurance that it was certainly not due to any geopolitical or any military events. Any suggestion of ships and vessels being in our waters at this time or in waters close by has absolutely nothing to do with the timing of the presentation of this Bill. The decision was taken in February to bring it and it was laid in the Senate. It was discussed in the Senate probably two months ago; it has absolutely nothing to do with any matters connected with Cuba or any of the things you suggested at all; no geopolitical or military events. So I really do not see the relevance of your statement.

10.25 p.m.

So I really do not see the relevance again of that statement made by you. You said that it was outdated. It is outdated, yes, but it is still in existence in almost every country in the world. Why not us? You questioned the fact that it was not up to date in that it did not deal with acts of terrorism. I do not see that that is necessary when, in fact, there are other pieces of legislation to deal with acts of terrorism, for instance, the Anti-terrorism Act and also the International Criminal Court Act. So those matters of terrorism are, in fact, taken care of under other pieces of legislation and there is no need for modification of this Geneva Conventions Bill at all.

He also raised the question of foreign policy and he made the point that there is no foreign policy at all. I would admit that what is known is a foreign policy that is very dated. In fact, it may have been around for about 20 years or so, but I would let you know that we have, in fact, a new foreign policy in hand and it will be laid in Cabinet. The reason for the delay is that it was completed about a year ago and given the dynamics of the international environment, we thought it wise to go back and just review two or three of the matters that we find of great significance at this time. So the document will, in fact, be laid for discussion in a matter of months. But it is there; there is a foreign policy document, but we just have to go through the procedure of going to Cabinet and having it approved and

then coming to the Parliament with it. So it is not at all the claim that we are indifferent to foreign policy. That is not so.

The Member spoke of the foreign relations committee of Parliament and I am aware of it and with the Speaker's guidance I will seek to have this instituted.

Mr. Speaker: It is an issue that was raised in the Eighth Parliament; I think it was raised earlier on in the Ninth Parliament. Members from both sides of the House must submit their names to me and then I will announce it. It is as simple as that.

Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: We would be more than pleased to participate, Member for Caroni East.

So again, I want to highlight to you that we are not at all indifferent to foreign policy. You spoke about the failure of CSME [*Interruption*] I will come to that, but you spoke to the failure of the CSME and I want to—

Dr. Gopeesingh: No—

Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Yes, you did. Well, let me just clarify it, because I know that the *Hansard* will, in fact, reflect that you said that. It has not failed; it is that the Caricom Single Market is, in effect—we have passed recent legislation to include a number of persons with skills in other areas other than the initial ones of graduates, teachers and so on, and it is in place, and matters of immigration are being sorted out to ensure that there is, in fact, a free movement of persons and labour. So I cannot understand that statement of the failure of the Caricom Single Market. But with regard to the single economy, we are now progressing to have this put in place. That, I would say, is not yet in place but it is not that it has failed.

With regard to the political and economic integration, I do not wish to speak too much about that at this time because eventually it will be brought to Parliament. It is just at a declaration stage to say that there are a number of persons who are willing to examine this, and you know that there is a technical team in place coming up with the modalities of how this union may, in fact, work. So the question of political and economic integration has nothing to do with lack of foreign policy or failure of Caricom, or failure of CSME or anything like that; it is just another aspect of integration which will exist alongside Caricom. It is that Caricom has not failed.

The Member also spoke about the PetroCaribe Fund and I want to say that there is no such thing as a PetroCaribe Fund. There is a Caricom Petroleum Development Fund. That is just for your edification. At this time, I do not think there are any other matters of relevance that I could speak to now that you have

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raised and I will just want to wrap up. This is a very simple piece of legislation. All it does is give legal effect to the provisions of the Four Geneva Conventions and the additional Protocol, Protocol I. All it seeks to do is to protect the wounded and the sick combatants on the battlefield, to protect the shipwrecked combatants, prisoners of war and to protect the civilian population, that is, the innocent bystanders.

Without further ado, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.

House in committee.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2.

Question proposed, That clause 2 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Mr. Chairman, I asked for Protocol II to be left in and not be amended. I would like to put that forward. I know I will have opposition but I just wanted to register that I wanted Protocol II to be left in.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: As I said before, Protocol II deals with matters of internal conflict and it is pointless to have extra territorial jurisdiction to deal with matters of internal conflict. It just makes no sense.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Well, you admitted the fact that you did not give us satisfactory answers why the other 190-plus countries have Protocol II within them, but yet still you are leaving it out and you want us to accept the Conventions and Protocol II. One hundred and ninety countries have Protocol II within them. I do not see any difficulty with having any extra territorial jurisdiction. It means we are a democracy within a league of nations and there are 200-odd countries in a league of nations which have extra territorial jurisdiction at times. This is what the ICC Court was meant to be. So that if there is a breach of fundamental human rights within a country, the International Criminal Court will take care of those matters.

Mr. Imbert: Member for Caroni East, I am advised that although most countries have acceded to Protocol II in the Convention, very few have enacted it into their domestic legislation. What you are asking us to do is to incorporate Protocol II into our domestic law, which is very, very unusual internationally.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Could you just explain why you left out Protocol III as well? Protocol III is the added emblem.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Protocol III of 2005, I believe, speaks to the Islamic insignia and is of really no significance to us.

Mr. Imbert: In addition, Member for Caroni East, we have not yet acceded to Protocol III.

Dr. Gopeesingh: That is what I wanted you to say; I wanted you to tell us whether you have acceded to it or not.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: No, and we are not going to.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 to 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 11.

Question proposed, That clause 11 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Mr. Chairman, would the Government kindly consider making these affirmative resolutions of Parliament rather than negative resolutions.

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: No.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 11 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 13.

Question proposed, That clause 13 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Mr. Chairman, I am asking for an explanation on the rationale for the expulsion of the Geneva Conventions Act, 1911, 1937 and 1957 of the United Kingdom and the Supplementary Provision Act of 1960.

Mr. Imbert: Member for Caroni East, I get the impression that you still want to be a member of the British colonies. Those are Acts of the Imperial Parliament of the Queen. I know you like the Queen. [*Laughter*] Those Acts are no longer relevant; that is British legislation. With the enactment of this law, we are now incorporating these Conventions into our law and no longer have to bow to the Queen.

Mr. Chairman: There is also a rock band called Queen; maybe that is the Queen he likes. [*Laughter*]

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 13 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to, That the Bill be reported to the House.

House resumed.

Bill reported, without amendment, read the third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday, November 14, 2008 at 1.30 p.m. On that day we will be doing the Financial Institutions Bill. I also want to advise Members that we wish to make our best effort to finish both this Bill and the Children Bill before the end of this session. In those circumstances, we may not be able to deal with any other legislation. I just want to get the priorities clear to the hon. Members opposite. Of course, if you all are very helpful and we can speed through those two Bills, we may do some of the other Bills on the Order Paper.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 10.44 p.m.