

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, May 22, 2020

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from Ms. Marlene Mc Donald, MP, Member for Port of Spain South, who has requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Member seeks is granted.

ANIMAL (DISEASES AND IMPORTATION) (AMDT.) BILL, 2019

Bill to amend and the Animals (Diseases and Importation) Act, Chap. 67:02, brought from the Senate [*The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries*]; read the first time.

PAPERS LAID

1. Notification of Her Excellency, the President in respect of the nomination of Mr. Courtney Mc Nish, for appointment as a Member of the Police Service Commission. [*The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Esmond Forde)*]
2. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Fifteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity on the Current Provisions for the Education of Children who require Special Education Programmes and Services in Public Primary and Secondary Schools. [*The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Thirteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on

UNREVISED

4. an Inquiry into the prevalence of Teenage Pregnancy and the State's capacity to minimize the occurrence of teenage pregnancy and provide services and assistance to teenage parents. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
5. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to the Thirteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an Inquiry into the prevalence of Teenage Pregnancy and the State's capacity to minimize the occurrence of teenage pregnancy and provide services and assistance to teenage parents. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
6. Response of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to the Thirteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an Inquiry into the prevalence of Teenage Pregnancy and the State's capacity to minimize the occurrence of teenage pregnancy and provide services and assistance to teenage parents. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
7. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to the Twelfth Report of the Joint Select Committee on State Enterprises on an Inquiry to assess the performance of the Community-based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme and its operations. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
7. Administrative Report of the Arima Borough Corporation for the period 2018 to 2019. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
8. Annual Report and Audited Financial Statements of the First Citizens Depository Services Limited for the year ended September 30, 2019. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
To be referred to the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.

9. Delegation Report on the Caribbean Stakeholder Meeting ahead of the 25th Anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, held in Barbados on February 10 to 11, 2020. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

URGENT QUESTIONS

Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission (Employees Sent for COVID-19 Testing)

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Public Utilities: Could the Minister confirm how many employees of the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission exhibiting flu-like symptoms have been sent to medical institutions for COVID-19 testing?

The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, as is well known to all, this nation collectively adopts sensible and working measures to minimize the spread of COVID-19. And I am also advised that the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission has put systems in place in order to ensure that all mechanisms consistent with the recommendations of the Ministry of Health to protect all of its employees and customers. They have ensured as well the reliability and security of the essential service that it is, is maintained. Protocols have been put in place as well to ensure that the health and safety of employees and customers are safeguarded. I wish to ensure the population that T&TEC will continue to apply that duty of care in keeping with the standards set and the protocols set by the Ministry of Health in this matter.

With respect to the number of employees at the T&TEC exhibiting flu-like symptoms who have been sent to medical institutions for COVID-19 testing, I am advised that there was one employee, one employee from the jointer crew who was

tested on May 17, 2020. He was feeling unwell the day before and his results are pending. On May 19, 2020, all other five employees of that crew were sent to the Mount Hope health facility. They were not tested but were given sick leave pending the results consistent with that employee who was tested on May 17th. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Minister, could you confirm reports that T&TEC prematurely brought back out workers which violated the agreement they had with the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union which was clearly defined in a meeting with the said workers' representative on the 25th of March, 2020?

Madam Speaker: I will not allow that as a supplemental question based on the question originally asked and the response. Member for Couva North.

**Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association
(Rescheduling of CSEC Examinations)**

Ms. Ramona Ramdial (*Couva North*): Madam Speaker, to the Minister of Education: In light of recent appeals made by the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers' Association to the Government, could the Minister state whether he will seriously reconsider the rescheduling of the CSEC examinations from July 2020, to some other date agreed upon by the various stakeholders involved in the educational system?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this question is predicated on the notion that the Minister of Education can unilaterally reschedule the CSEC exams.

Madam Speaker, CXC is a regional examination body which has the direct responsibility of administering the CSEC and the CAPE exams. On May 08, 2020, the sixth special emergency meeting of the Council of Human and Social Development, (COHSOD) Education, was held. This was a virtual meeting and

was attended by the Ministers of Education of the region. One of the areas of discussion was CXC administration of regional examinations in 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. The meeting decided that the CSEC and CAPE examinations be held in July 2020. This was a decision of the regional Ministers of Education. Any change can only be effected if the Ministers of Education collectively decide on any change.

I have been in communication with the Minister of Education, Michael Browne of Antigua who chaired the meeting on May the 8th, and I was told that all Ministers of Education among the region are in support of the examination being held in July. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member of Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Mr. Minister, based on what you have just informed this House, have you held the appropriate consultation with stakeholders, and based on the consultation with stakeholders, are you satisfied that all the school-based assignments for students in Trinidad and Tobago have been evaluated and their marks computed, and so on, to give the students a sense of comfort to sit the exam in July of 2020?

Madam Speaker: I will not allow that as a supplemental question based on the original question and the response. Member for Oropouche West.

**Rescued Venezuelan Nationals
(Quarantining of Coast Guards)**

Mrs. Vidia Gayadeen-Gopeesingh (*Oropouche West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Health: With respect to the 32 Venezuelan nationals who were rescued and taken to the coast guard post at Cedros, could the Minister state whether these coastguard officers will be held in quarantine for the prescribed two-week period in light of one of them displaying flu-like symptoms?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much,

Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this question as posed inadvertently, not deliberately, has a degree of mischief. If one reads the second part of the question:

“...whether these coastguard officers will be held in quarantine for the prescribed two-week period in light of one of them”—that is the coastguard officers—“displaying flu-like symptoms?”

—that is the inadvertent mischief. So it is based on a false premise. Why? Because I am told by the Chief Medical Officer who was in contact with the medical personnel at the coast guard that no coastguard personnel displayed flu-like symptoms. So that is the inadvertent mischief, not deliberate, because one gets the impression from the question somebody comes in contact with 32 people and you suddenly develop flu-like symptoms; it does not work that way.

Are they in quarantine? The answer is, yes. They are in quarantine under the authority of the Chief Medical Officer with his powers under the Quarantine Act and under the direct care of the coastguard medical personnel at a facility designated by the coastguard’s medical personnel. So, yes, they are in quarantine, but no one of the coastguard staff displayed flu-like symptoms. So I thank you for the question.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental. Member for Couva North.

Mrs. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Oropouche West, second one, No. 4.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West.

**Royal Caribbean Cruise Line
(Trinidad and Tobago Nationals)**

Mrs. Vidia Gayadeen-Gopeesingh (*Oropouche West*): Thank you. To the Minister of National Security: Considering that 71 countries are making arrangements to bring home their nationals from the Royal Caribbean cruise line, could the Minister state whether the respective 345 Trinidad and Tobago nationals abroad will be brought back to their homeland?

The Minister of National Security and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, as was stated earlier today, it is coming to our attention that there may be nationals of Trinidad and Tobago in different numbers on various cruise ships, in different locations throughout the Caribbean and elsewhere. Previously, the official request for exemptions for entry by our nationals on cruise ships had been provided to the Government by agents of the cruise ship companies as a collective with the total request exceeding 430 nationals. We have not been provided with breakdowns per cruise ship and the particulars of where these various cruise ships are located. We have been making attempts to locate, for example, six nationals on one cruise ship said to be nearby. This task has been challenging as we do not have individual applications from these six, but rather we have a blanket application on behalf of 430 nationals. The Government, Madam Speaker, has been managing the public health care system and balancing the entry of nationals based in great measure on the capacity of our public health care system to handle COVID-19 cases without being overwhelmed.

Exemptions for the entry of nationals into Trinidad and Tobago have been granted consistent with ensuring that we can manage the numbers being quarantined by the State to ensure the continued protection of the population of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we are—I repeat, we are going to permit the entry of our nationals on these various cruise ships by establishing a schedule which allows us to manage their return consistent with our resources to protect them and the population. Today I met with the Minister of Health and the Chief Medical Officer, and I also had other conversations with other officers involved and we are discussing how the entry of these nationals, our nationals on these cruise ships can

be scheduled. We are also managing the return of close to 275 students whom the Government is working on bringing back to Trinidad and Tobago from Barbados and Jamaica. Madam Speaker, that is how we are managing it.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Oropouche West.

Mrs. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Hon. Minister, you said there will be a schedule, what criteria would you use to determine who stays and who goes?

Hon. S. Young: Madam Speaker, at absolutely no point in time did I indicate anyone would be staying anywhere. And let me state it here categorically and clearly with a great degree of clarity, none of our nationals on cruise ships are not going to be permitted to re-enter Trinidad and Tobago. Their re-entry, it being over 430 that we are aware of at this stage, will be worked out in a schedule that our public health system can accommodate. We are also going to be speaking with the cruise ship companies to work out what role they will play, how they will participate in ensuring the safe entry of our nationals back into Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Oropouche West.

Mrs. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Hon. Minister, I am not sure if I heard you clearly, you were saying none of the nationals will be brought back, is that what you said? Or is it that there would be a breach of their constitutional rights not to return them to Trinidad?

Hon. S. Young: Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Just one minute. Which is the question?

Mrs. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: I am asking the first part and the follow-up, is it—

Madam Speaker: Ma'am, Member, you are entitled to one question at a time.

Mrs. Gayadeen-Gopeesingh: Would there be a breach of the nationals' constitutional rights to prevent them from returning to Trinidad?

Hon. S. Young: Once again I repeat, exactly as I said a short while ago and said before that—I will add this, it is obvious that the Member wants to create a furore and mischief. All of our nationals on cruise ships—all of our nationals, “our” meaning Trinidad and Tobago’s nationals who are currently on cruise ships will be allowed re-entry into Trinidad and Tobago on a scheduled basis. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: I am sure all Members are quite familiar now with the Standing Orders and particularly for Urgent Questions. The Member who has asked the question first has the right to the supplementals, and unless they fail to utilize it then hon. Members can ask. Member for Couva North.

**Iranian Flagged Ships
(Government’s Policy on Passage)**

Ms. Ramona Ramdial (*Couva North*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of National Security: Could the Minister state his Government’s policy with regard to facilitating in any way the passage of the Iranian flagged ships carrying petroleum products to Venezuela?

The Minister of National Security and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Madam Speaker, once again a narrative is born amongst the Trinidad and Tobago UNC Opposition to misrepresent the country’s foreign policy to the world; a deliberate narrative born in the bowels of the UNC Opposition to misrepresent this country’s foreign policy to the world. Exactly as the Member has just said is being said in Venezuela by the Venezuelan Opposition coming directly from the UNC Opposition in Trinidad and Tobago. The UNC continues, the Opposition continues to bolster their self-born narrative trying to incite US sanctions against Trinidad and Tobago. It was in this House, Madam Speaker, on the 8th of March, 2019—[*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Members, the Minister is entitled to answer the question.

Hon. S. Young: It is in this House, Madam Speaker, on the 8th of March, 2019,

this Government adopted a United Nations Security Council Resolution and adopted under the Economic Sanctions Act, 81:05, a resolution with respect to the Islamic Republic of Iran. So I will put it very, very clearly on the record that this Government will be doing absolutely nothing to facilitate in any way the passage of any Iranian flagged ships carrying petroleum products to Venezuela. And, Madam Speaker, it is quite wrong, especially for those in this Parliament to give this erroneous impression that we do not comply with UN resolutions and sanctions which we do, and this Government continues to abide by UN resolutions, [*Desk thumping*] and we not fall prey, we will not fall prey, to the UNC Opposition call for sanctions against Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon.Members, the time for Urgent Questions is now spent. Members will be well aware it is 15 minutes.

ORAL ANSWER TO QUESTION

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there is one question on notice and we will be answering that question.

COVID-19 Social Support Measures (Persons Receiving Grants)

67. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services:

Could the Minister provide:

- A. The number of persons who, to date, have received the following grants under the COVID-19 social support measures:
- i. Salary Relief Grants;
 - ii. Temporary Food Support Cards;
 - iii. Rental Assistance Grants; and

- B. With regard to A. ii, could the Minister state the number of Temporary Food Support Cards issued to families with children in the School Feeding Programme?

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, for clarity I wish to inform the House that the salary relief grant is being administered by the Ministry of Finance in collaboration with the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago for citizens and permanent residents who have suffered involuntary termination or suspension of income from March 19, 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 health and safety measures. It is to be noted that March 19, 2020, is the date on which the first Public Health [2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV)] Regulations were published. The salary relief grant is specific in the first instance to workers in certain types of businesses, such as bars and restaurants. Workers in other businesses affected by the subsequent novel coronavirus regulations are also under consideration. In this context the Ministry of Finance has advised that as at May 21, 2020, 15,333 salary relief grants were paid for a total value of \$21.17million.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has responsibility for protecting the most vulnerable in our society and has a key role to play in ensuring that the welfare of its thousands of existing clients, in addition to persons who have been impacted by the shock of the pandemic and its accompanying measures are addressed. Accordingly, immediate action was taken to address the needs of existing clients and to introduce the COVID-19 social support grants; food, income and rental for citizens and permanent residents who were retrenched, terminated or experienced reduced income in March 2020. Madam Speaker, as it relates to the persons who had permanent food cards, the first action that was taken

was a top-up to all 25,101 households already in receipt of food support in the sum of \$17,144,100. Food support was also provided to 2,818 persons who had applied for the senior citizens' pension but whose applications had not yet been finalized, and that was in the sum of \$12,681,000; and to 488 persons who had applied for the disability assistance grant and had not yet been approved, and that was in the sum of \$1,464,000.

Madam Speaker, emergency food support was also provided to 1,400 in needy households throughout Trinidad in the form of a hamper in collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. [*Desk thumping*] The Ministry is also partnering with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to provide 30,000 market boxes to needy persons in communities [*Desk thumping*] comprising \$250 worth of fresh produce and two chickens, and a \$250 grocery voucher. This is being undertaken in collaboration with the MPs offices and already more than 5,000 households have benefited. The overall cost of this initiative is \$15million. The faith-based organizations have also been provided with a grant to allow them to provide food support to families residing in their communities, and this is expected to be over a three-month period at a cost of \$30million. [*Desk thumping*] The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has also received the sum of \$30million for use in the 14 corporations.

Madam Speaker, with regard to the grants, that is to say the food card and the public assistance that have been applied for by citizens, to date 11,335 persons have received their grants and this is at a total of \$21,735,180. As it relates specifically to the rental assistance grant, we have thus far received 1,012 applications and 657 have been processed for payment; 52 have been rejected because we have noticed and detected several anomalies suggesting attempts to

commit fraud, and in light of this the Ministry implemented a more robust system to validate all requests for rental assistance.

Madam Speaker, with regard to part B of the question, which is the temporary food support card issued to families with children on the School Feeding Programme, food support cards were provided to 20,497 families with a child or children registered with the School Feeding Programme, and to date the cost of that is \$31,360,410. Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Thank you, Madam Speaker. With respect to the salary relief grant, could the Minister tell us how many in their estimation would have qualified in Trinidad and Tobago given that the workforce is over 300,000 persons and the fact that only 15,333 have been processed and paid?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, the issue is not the qualification, we have indicated what the mechanism for qualification is, and that mechanism is, first of all the person has to be on the NIS system, the person has to be a citizen or permanent resident, and more than that, the person would have had to suffer involuntary termination or suspension of income from March 19, 2020. Those are the qualifications, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Madam Speaker, rental assistance grant, is the Minister satisfied that with 1,012 applications that sufficient publicity was given to this because this cannot represent the number of people in need of rental assistance support?

2.00 p.m.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, this was publicized on the television, on the newspapers, in the regional corporations, at the police stations, on social media and we used every form of mechanism for giving notice of this grant. And,

Madam Speaker, let me say that persons have applied. Thus far, we have received 1,012 applications. We do believe that there has been sufficient notice given to all of the members of the public [*Desk thumping*] and I am sure that what we are seeing here is the first set of applications that have come in and, Madam Speaker, I am sure my friend knows that this is an ongoing programme.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental. Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Madam Speaker, is the Minister aware that in Naparima constituency there are close to 3,000 students who are on the School Feeding Programme and only—less than 500 or less than 600 have received support from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago? So it is 600 out of 3,000. Is this satisfactory?

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima, I am not certain what is your question. You are entitled to one question, ask that question.

Mr. Charles: The question is, is the Minister satisfied that 600 school feeding cards are satisfactory, given the fact that in Naparima, one constituency, there are 3,000 students on the School Feeding Programme and only 500 received cards?

Madam Speaker: Again, I am lost in what the question is. You have 13 seconds to ask a question.

Mr. Charles: The question is 500 cards to satisfy 3,000 students on the School Feeding Programme; are you satisfied that that is meeting the needs?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the issue is two-fold. The list is a list of students who are registered on the School Feeding Programme to receive the school feeding through the Ministry of Education. The second thing is that some of the persons who have their children on the School Feeding Programme are already in receipt of a permanent food card [*Desk thumping*] and, as a consequence of that, in addition to that, several of the

children who are on school feeding are from one household. In many instances, it is two or more children on the school feeding. As a consequence of all of that information, Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services examined the list and we thought that 500 food cards was fair and each Member of Parliament got the same amount.

The other issue though, Madam Speaker, is we have indicated that in the event that there may be families who are not captured by the food card, we have provided the market box hampers [*Desk thumping*] which are of a value of \$250 with a food card or a grocery voucher of \$250. [*Desk thumping*] So, in event, the family gets \$500 worth of food.

Mr. Charles: Madam Speaker, given the understatement of numbers of people who have access to this grant, the Minister will agree that it has not touched the level of poverty in Trinidad and Tobago and it is a PR exercise. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Again, Member, the question, because—one minute. Your original question covers three subsets, please let us know what you are asking.

Mr. Charles: Is the Minister satisfied that it is a PR exercise or it is really touching the needs of the society? [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, as far as I am concerned and as far as the Government of Dr. Keith Rowley is concerned, this is touching the needs of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And, Madam Speaker, we have made sure that we have created, not just a social safety net, but a sieve, Madam Speaker, because we have used the MP's offices, we have used the market boxes, we have used the food cards, we have used the permanent food cards, we have used the income support, we have used the salary relief grant [*Desk thumping*] we have used several other types of assistance to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, and as a consequence of this, also at this point, we have also used the faith-based

organizations. [*Desk thumping*] So, Madam Speaker, we are of the firm view that this is touching and reaching the majority of persons who are in need in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hinds: Well said.

**ECONOMIC MASTER PLAN
(BIPARTISAN COLLABORATION)**

Madam Speaker: Members are reminded that the COVID-19 rules apply in terms of speaking time. Member for Caroni Central.

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie (*Caroni Central*): Madam Speaker, our party leader and Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, instructed me to file this Motion and I have willingly complied. I, therefore, now read this Motion standing in my name:

Whereas the Government is bungling the management of the human aspect of the COVID-19 crisis to the distress of citizens, a large number of whom is without work and struggle to put food on the table;

And whereas the emergency economic measures put in place to support businesses are not working and are having a devastating effect on general commerce especially small, medium and micro businesses; *And whereas* citizens are fearful for their future and see no hope of recovery and prosperity under this Government post-COVID-19, especially given the state of the oil and gas sector, the loss of business confidence, little investment, continuous decline and lack of growth:

Be it resolved that this House agree that the Government should favourably consider the Leader of the Opposition's proposals to the Prime Minister of an Economic Master Plan; and

Be it further resolved that this House agree that the Government should facilitate a genuine bipartisan collaboration, towards a national policy for

recovery and growth in Trinidad and Tobago.

I filed this Motion in good faith on May 09, 2020, Madam Speaker, but since then events have overtaken us. As of today, May 22, 2020, Robert Le Hunte is no longer Minister of Public Utilities and no longer vice-chair of the road map committee; the controversial visit of Madam Delcy Rodriguez, Vice-President of Venezuela and her entourage and the equally controversial sale of the fuel by Paria Limited which have become matters of international speculation and controversy, and which have led to disputed statements by the Prime Minister and Minister of National Security have made the Government weak at the knees.

Thirdly, given the now likely inevitably imminent call of the 2020 election, the credibility of any document produced by the road map committee as a non-partisan stakeholder guided document of national consensus has been severely undermined and can be hotly contested. So the Government by its own reckless actions has served to undermine any good intention it may have had and have rendered any proposal for a recovery plan by Members opposite suspect. This might have been avoided, Madam Speaker, had the Prime Minister heeded the call on March 16, 2020, of the hon. Leader of the Opposition to establish a bipartisan committee which she expanded to include a range of other stakeholders in business, economy and society in her submission at a meeting with the Prime Minister on March 20, 2020. Instead, what the Prime Minister did on April 16th was to appoint a road map committee of selected individuals, ignoring the Opposition Leader entirely. In hindsight, I believe that even if the Government had acceded to the proposal of the hon. Leader of the Opposition, current events would have overtaken us anyway making the whole thing hollow.

The fact is that where we find ourselves today makes it very difficult for the

Government to exercise any moral authority whatsoever in anything. Where we find ourselves today makes it difficult for the Government to summon any credibility for them to elicit any receptivity from the population or to engender any trust from the vast majority of citizens.

The truth is that Government finds itself between a rock and a hard place because of the difficulty of establishing truthfulness surrounding the vital details of the fateful meeting with Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez on March 27th, and because of the controversy about the ultimate intended destination of 150,000 barrels of fuel purchased by Wilmer Ruperti Company from Paria Trading Company.

What we are dealing with in this Motion, therefore, Madam Speaker, focusing on the last two paragraphs, is the issue of legitimizing a national agenda or a national plan for Trinidad and Tobago that meets with public favour and widespread acceptance in the midst of an unprecedented crisis of health and economy, but also a crisis of confidence in the Government. In the best of times forging a national agenda can be problematic. Narrow partisan interests often encourage dissonance and discord, no matter what country. So the issue of crafting public policy to support a national plan or a national agenda which can gain cross-partisan support, the buy-in of stakeholders and the approval of the masses can be a complex one even in the best of times.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the PNM has had 30 conservative years of government from 1956. The Opposition in various forms has had sporadic five-year stints after that, but so too has the PNM in the post-1986 period. On September 07, 2020, the Keith Rowley Government would have had five years in office. They have been dread years. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, 18

consecutive quarters of economic decline up to December 2019, four and a half years of recession yielding a depression. A recession is measured in quarters. Three or four quarters of decline signal a recession. We had 18 conservative quarters of decline.

A depression is measured in years. Up to December 2019, we have had four and a half consecutive years of depression. Business knew it, the middle class felt it, the poor and the vulnerable lived it and tried to survive it. We also ran up during that time a \$101.3 billion debt according to the Central Bank Report of January 2020 and the Exchequer Account was overdrawn by 41-plus billion according to the Auditor General. All of this was pre-COVID.

The pre-COVID normal was horrible and undesirable [*Desk thumping*] and then came COVID-19 and every vulnerability was suddenly exposed. It is in this context that the hon. Leader of the Opposition wrote to the hon. Prime Minister as we entered an uncertain period of lockdown in which risk had to be managed, survival had to be ensured, recovery had to be planned for and the strategic actions had to be initiated to cope with the different economic and social environment than anyone had envisaged one year ago. And remember, Madam Speaker, the pre-COVID economic depression was real and with COVID-19 the crisis was certain to deepen and no one knew when the crisis would end.

The letter of the Opposition Leader to the Prime Minister of March 16th was a very thoughtful letter which took into account the partisan and combative nature of Trinidad and Tobago politics, but which pointed out that the two leaders had enough knowledge and experience to rise above the differences and to meet the crisis together head on in the best interest of Trinidad and Tobago. When the Prime Minister met with the Leader of the Opposition and her team on April 20th,

the Leader of the Opposition handed the Prime Minister a seven-page memorandum outlining actions the Opposition is taking in the crisis, highlighting the Opposition's concerns such as costs and sources of government funding and the issues of testing and the adequacy of supply of equipment. But the leader also highlighted key elements of the Opposition proposals under five pillars: protecting the vulnerable, protecting the economy, protecting our citizens' social net and standard of living, ensuring that our medical response follows international best practice, rebuilding our future as we ease out of the crisis.

In concluding her submission, Mrs. Bissessar, hon. Leader of the Opposition stated and I quote from her:

“In this time of crisis our nation needs to stand united. We have seen around the world where those on opposite sides have come together to work in the best interest of their citizens, countries and the global wellbeing.

We in the Opposition stand ready, willing and able to assist with the national effort to ensure our citizens safety and health are protected.”

This was March 16th. When the Prime Minister announced his carefully selected team on April 20th, glaringly absent from the team were university economists, except for Prof. Carl Theodore, and Opposition UNC Members who occupied all the seats in Parliament not occupied by the Government. And so a great opportunity for uniting Government, Opposition and key stakeholders behind a truly national policy which can be driven by either political party in the broad national interest in a decidedly non-partisan way has been missed and squandered. [*Desk thumping*] After all, this is an election year and anyone can win. We will have a new government after elections. [*Desk thumping*]

Perhaps our system, imitative of the British parliamentary model, is too

combative and too constraining. Perhaps our party system geared towards popular support is too rooted in loyal communities, be they tribal, ethnic or ideological and linked as it is to rewards and patronage aligned to these for the issue of political choices to be truly free, based on ideas, options and vision for the future from the point of view of the citizens. But maybe also, from the point of view of a political party which has achieved political power, and that means any party, it becomes too difficult to rally citizens behind a national vision when alignment in a campaign before election results is generally decidedly partisan and sometimes mindlessly so. It is this that makes legitimization of a national plan or agenda so very difficult to achieve, and it is this issue on the eve of an election that the hon. Leader of the Opposition sought to address.

So many hearts and minds went into *Vision 2020*, but the Opposition was not included from the beginning, and so when the end came there was no support from the Panday-led Opposition at the time. There were other issues which I need not address here, but the main thing to be understood was that *Vision 2020*, which claimed to represent a national vision, was not bipartisan in conception nor in input nor in buy-in and so it was also with our first five-year plan in the early independence period in which agriculture had a major role, and all the five-year plans after that derived from manifestos, and then the jolt of the 1970 revolt and the plans for national reconstruction after 1970 and party manifestos and policy derived from these as the norm thereafter.

In 2010 the People's Partnership had a manifesto. Our government's medium-term policy framework derived from that, and the medium-term policy was measured via an established national performance framework. A national physical development plan was laid in Parliament after extensive consultation.

Indeed, all documents just mentioned were duly laid in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago and when we left, we left a draft of action 2015 to 2025 in the Ministry of planning. *Vision 2030*, unfortunately, never made it to consciousness. So in Trinidad and Tobago we have never really had a fully endorsed national plan which leads development and has broad-based buy-in across sectors and different segments which must work together to build a nation.

There are some thoughtful books and articles written on why some nations succeed and why others fail. There are all kinds of models and examples. There are articles and books on successful nations that are small. The COVID-19 crisis has shown how meaningless are some of the previous assessments. For instance, the OECD graduated Trinidad and Tobago to developed status about five years ago. West Indian countries are ranked high in human development terms and are regarded generally as high income or middle income. But meaningful development remained elusive and self-sufficiency and sustainability nowhere in sight. Food production in the context of food security is weak everywhere in the region except Guyana. All countries are dependent on one export.

In most cases, imports incur high costs that cannot be met by export gains. The base of production as well as opportunities for export are narrow. No matter how strong an individual economy may seem at any time with oil or with tourism, all these countries in the Caribbean are fragile. The middle class is shaky, working class poor, poverty is persistent, productivity is low, competitiveness is weak, IC systems are unintegrated, not up to mark and applied innovation virtually absent even in the face of so much spontaneous creativity in the region. Such vulnerabilities and deficiencies have been ruthlessly exposed by COVID-19.

So how are some countries successful? What do they do? What really

makes the difference? When one summarizes what those who seem to know are saying, one can identify a few critical success factors, for instance, a strategic focus consisting of vision and mission and leadership and management and the wherewithal to think things through collaboratively. Then there are the people issues: competence, capacity, quality. Then there is the management of operations: the processes, the work ethic, seeing things through to results. Then there is the communication aspect to sell and market ideas and concepts so that things can percolate and be drilled down. And then there are the resources including finance, assets, facilities, equipment, which are all necessary to get the job done. Then there is the effective management of risks to prepare for the unexpected and then you have to review things along the way as you go along, learn from achievements as well as mistakes and share the learnings to continue to improve. That is how successful companies do it; that is how successful countries do it. It takes leadership, structure, system and care.

But a country is not a company. It is more and it is significantly more complex and complicated. The way you organize land, labour and capital and get them to work coherently is important. The way you unleash entrepreneurship, the way you deploy education. These are critical. The use of central power in relation to other polls and points of power is vital. The structure of the society and the way these structures relate are also important. But even more important is the way incentives are created and deployed to help society to transform itself.

Certain questions arise: should the economy be incentivized to innovate? How do you get an efficient and an effective tax collection system to sustain revenue? How do you ensure good government and efficient and effective governance? What must one do to create a competitive business environment?

How do you create a framework conducive to continuous social progress? This is what one knowledgeable person had to say about good government and I quote:

An effective government invests in people, advances opportunities for shared prosperity, raises the revenues needed to support the public structures that support inclusive economic growth.

Actually that sounds like the People's Partnership at work during 2010—2015. [*Desk thumping*] So it takes structure, infrastructure and effective governance and what about the people, society and culture? What are the key ingredients?

When experts look at successful societies, they find that the attitude of the people moulded for many years by education and culture are important; the value of ethics as a basic principle of culture and habit of governance; strong sense of individual and group responsibility; simple things like punctuality, respect for laws and rules, love of work, the effort to save and invest, the desire and the will to be productive. So values, cultural norms, ethos are vital ingredients in ensuring socioeconomic and political success in a country.

In the national economic transformation plan of the United National Congress, these are some of the ideas and plans which we consider important: creating a food secure nation, infrastructure to connect people, places and communities, creative industries to forge national identity while recognizing and supporting diversity, a meaningful tourism industry, renewable energy, a digital economy as a platform for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, cycling as a driving concept, biotechnology, energy sector rationalization and strengthening, jobs and skills through education and training, human development, foreign policy to anchor and reposition our society. And we have 12 projects which the political leader often speaks about. Regionally—

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central, your speaking time is now ended.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Is what?

Madam Speaker: Is now ended.

Dr. B. Tewarie: No, that could not be, Ma'am.

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central and all Members, the Motion which was moved and adopted for the changing of the speaking time was 20 minutes.

Dr. B. Tewarie: No, the first speaker has 30 minutes, Ma'am. [*Crosstalk*] Yes I—

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central, I am certain that you do not mean that. Just let me check with the Clerk. Member for Caroni Central, I stand corrected. I will give you 10 more minutes from here, because I stopped you at 20 minutes. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. B. Tewarie: Stopped Ma'am?

Madam Speaker: So 10 minutes from now will be 2:38:26.

Dr. B. Tewarie: Thank you very much, Ma'am. [*Desk thumping*] So, I was saying, we have 12 additional projects and that the key to all of these are five guiding principles: people-centred development, emphasis on private sector driving growth and development, resilience, economic reforms with a human face, local content and promoting environmental stewardship. It is a clear plan to move away from energy overdependence, a restructuring of the economy for greater self-sufficiency and economic diversification and a movement towards renewable industries, research-driven information, technology driven, science technology and innovation propelled industries.

We have a plan for the country post-COVID and the political leader shared

that plan with the Government and presented elements in it in the last budget in September 2019. But a plan like this to restructure the Trinidad and Tobago economy and to build out a new one will only be possible if we, first of all, manage well the survival phase of COVID which we are now in. It is in this survival phase and emergency phase where relief measures are not reaching the people, that citizens reel in distress.

It is in this survival period, when businesses have not received a cent of Government's support yet, that the threat of closures loom and in particular, there are 17,000 small and medium businesses facing a bleak future. In the malls today, closures are the norm. And it is because a light at the end of the tunnel is not visible, amidst the economic turmoil outside and in the country itself, that people are becoming more fearful.

2.30 p.m.

Let us start with Caroni Central constituency. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services gave me 500 food cards to give out in Caroni Central. I gave them all out but there are 800-plus more families who qualify on the basis of children in the School Feeding Programme, who have not received any food cards from us. It is difficult to say how many of these might be receiving some other form of benefit or have received nothing at all.

I got 50 hampers from the Ministry. With private support, I was able to get 500 more to the constituents. So 550 got in my constituency, but what about the rest? On May 5th, Minister Robinson-Regis said that 2,991 of 30,000 applications received got bank transfers. Today she updated those numbers. But the question is: How many of the people who really need, are going to be reached? The finance Minister talked about a \$300million loan. I do not know anyone in the business

community who has yet accessed those loans, which are meant to be collateralized in part by Government and the Government is meant to subsidize all the interest. The VAT refunds, you cannot take as loans. That is their money. The income tax refunds, that is their money. And we get numbers of—we hardly ever get numbers of the actual number of people being reached. We get the amount of money that has been allocated. We get the number of money that is being spent, but we do not get the number of people who have actually been reached.

In the *Guardian* today there is talk about salary grants not reaching the people. Okay? So, you have a situation. Today, for instance, somebody called me. The \$1,500 grant, which is supposed to be \$1,500 for three months, actually the person was told by social development that they are to use it \$500 a month, and they will not get anymore. There is some confusion about that. So there are real problems here, in terms of the Government grants. There are problems in terms of the facilities, Tobago hotel facility, the credit union; all of these things, very little has in fact been dished out to people.

On the energy front, you have a situation where the country is not in a good place. It is not just the international price of oil and gas and other energy commodities. It is also the aftermath of the refinery closure at Petrotrin, the closure of seven downstream plants and the potential deindustrialization of Point Lisas Estate, and the need to bring upstream NGC and downstream around the table to navigate a resolution. And there are other outstanding issues in energy which I will not deal with here because I do not have the time.

There was a needless controversy raised about my serving on the road map committee. Which of you on the other side would have served on a Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar's committee of anything, without first raising it with Dr.

Rowley? [*Desk thumping*] Why the double standards? I have been grateful to serve this nation in many capacities and I will continue to do so. I served on *Vision 2020*. I worked with Prime Minister Manning to speak to the Heads of Caricom on quickening the pace of wider economic integration. Caricom was not ready in 2004. I have dedicatedly served Prime Ministers Robinson, Panday, Persad-Bissessar, and Lloyd Best and I enjoyed a healthy collaboration till the end. Today I serve the UNC, its vision and mission, [*Desk thumping*] our leader, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Leader of the Opposition. Every road I take and have taken is a road of national commitment and of national service and I will not change that. Trinidad and Tobago is the only country I have, the only country that I belong to. I give my ideas freely. I speak, I write, I talk, I engage, I believe in ideas. Ideas are a doorway to self-discovery, creation and action.

As I close, I have been reflecting on the last five years of the Rowley PNM but especially the last few weeks, and it has been troubling; troubling enough to share this quote with you, which I have taken from a 1957 book, *Atlas Shrugged*.

“...when you see that in order to produce, you need to obtain permission from men who produce nothing—when you see that money is flowing to those who deal, not in goods, but in favors—when see that men get richer by graft and by pull than by work, and your laws don’t protect you against them, but protect them against you—when you see corruption being rewarded and honesty becoming a self-sacrifice—” [*Desk thumping*] “you may know that your society is doomed.”

I ask the citizens of this country to reflect on this. The prospects are not good going forward under this Rowley Government. [*Desk thumping*] May the citizens of this country have the strength to save Trinidad and Tobago.

I had different experiences with development. I went to Singapore. I went to Malaysia at one time in 1990. Those are not really democracies, as we understand it, but they are countries that have achieved much in a short time. And there are certain things that they did that are very clear. They drilled down the plan. They included everybody. They integrated everything. They got all the political forces into the fray. They developed a plan which could be aligned with everything that every sector of the country was doing. And small countries can also do a lot.

In New Zealand, for instance, they established a system which designated public service officers be held accountable for results. This alone has made a difference in national performance levels. In Estonia, they use information technology and a flat tax to improve. In Costa Rica, tourism, self-branding for sustainable development, ICT and education. In Uruguay, they created an institution that would allow entrepreneurship to flourish. So we can do this. And what is required is not just unity of purpose but unity of the country itself. Madam Speaker, that is what the political leader of the UNC and Leader of the Opposition was looking for. [*Desk thumping*] And if we cannot do it like this, we will wait on the election date in order to bring this country together in unity, to do a plan together built on the national transformation plan. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: This Motion requires a seconder.

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Madam Speaker, I second the Motion. I reserve my right to speak later in the proceedings.

Question proposed.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, in law, the word “frivolous” means lacking merit and a matter that has little prospect of success, not serious; “vexatious” means without reasonable or probable cause, harassing, annoying, instituted maliciously or on the basis of improper motives, intended to harass or annoy. I think those legal definitions, Madam Speaker, of the words “frivolous” and “vexatious” are best to describe the Motion that we have just heard. [*Desk thumping*] In fact, it was not only frivolous and vexatious, it was tedious and annoying.

Madam Speaker, it seems to me that hon. Members opposite are in some sort of time warp. The Member for Caroni Central is also, Madam Speaker, a stranger to the truth. In trying to make one of his points, he claimed that when the Government speaks about the grants and the other forms of support that the Government has provided, is providing and will provide as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the Member claimed that we never gave numbers.

Madam Speaker, I was with you in this Parliament this afternoon, not too long ago, when the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services was asked a question about these very grants, and I heard the hon. Minister utter the number 15,333 being the number of salary relief grants that had been paid up to yesterday, the 21st of May. So what is all this foolishness about; about the Government does not give out actual numbers? Not only did the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services indicate that we have paid over 15,000 salary relief grants already but the value was also given at over \$20million, Madam Speaker.

The other problem that the Government sees on the other side, as I said, they seem to be living in a time warp, in a little world of their own, is that it is not just the PNM Government and the Members of the PNM Government who are of the

view, and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, by and large, are of the view that this Government has done a tremendous job in dealing with the problems caused by COVID-19. It is not just the PNM. It is not just the majority of citizens of this country but it is the rest of the world, Madam Speaker. And let me remind the Member for Caroni Central and Members opposite, that the Oxford University of the UK, one of the premier universities in the world, University of Oxford, has a school of government called the Blavatnik School of Government, which studies governments all around the world, studies what they do to deal with matters, to deal with crises, to deal with situations and the Blavatnik School of Government, at the University of Oxford, is carrying on a daily examination of every single country in the world, over 180 countries, Madam Speaker, and they have published something called a Lockdown Rollback Checklist. And, Madam Speaker, on this Lockdown Rollback Checklist, which is designed to examine a country and look at things like the number of cases that have been controlled, the number of tests that have been done, the preventative measures, the management of imported cases of COVID-19, the community understanding and a number of other measures that countries have taken throughout the world— and the University of Oxford has ranked Trinidad and Tobago out of over 180 countries as number one in the world, in terms of being ready to exit the lockdown.

And I am very pleased to say and I am very proud of this Government, the Minister of Health, all of the health professionals, all of the frontline workers, and everybody else who has contributed to a situation that as the Government has begun to ease the restrictions associated with the lockdown, there has not been another case of COVID-19. We are an exception in the world, Madam Speaker. We are an exception. Other countries far more developed than us, with far more

resources, are unable to make that record. We have had no cases for weeks and as we exit the lockdown, there is no evidence of any spike in cases of the virus. Which other country in the world could say that, Madam Speaker? Not one, I daresay. And that is with respect to the measures that we have taken, the public health measures, the control measures we have taken to ensure that we did not collapse into a state where we could not control the situation, where our health sector was overburdened, where our health care workers were overburdened, where we ran out of supplies, we ran out of equipment, we ran out of hospital beds. We are number one in the world, Madam Speaker.

And that is not all. *The Economist* magazine, one of the premier economic research magazines in the world has looked at 66 emerging economies around the world and has determined whether they have the strength, the financial strength, the economic strength, to cope with the problems associated with COVID-19. And this magazine, *The Economist*, as I said one of the premier economic research magazines in the world, has ranked Trinidad and Tobago as number 15 out of 66 emerging economies, in terms of our ability to withstand the problems that are associated with COVID-19. And this is not PNM saying so. This is not Imbert saying so. This is not the Government saying so, this is *The Economist* magazine. So the Members opposite could scream and shout and utter all sorts of empty sounds, Madam Speaker, but the University of Oxford and *The Economist* magazine are telling the world that Trinidad and Tobago, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, the PNM Government of Trinidad and Tobago, under Prime Minister Rowley, we are on the right track. We are best in class, Madam Speaker, [*Desk thumping*] best in the class.

And what does this Motion tell us? What does this Motion say? That we

are supposed to work with them opposite towards some sort of national policy for recovery? Come on, come on, Madam Speaker. All the Opposition has done since this COVID-19 crisis came, is to come up with proposals that would destroy the economy, destroy our public health system, create a runaway crisis, in terms of the virus, create confusion. They are the ones who said that rum shops should be kept open, no rational basis, Madam Speaker, when the public health experts are telling you that you have to control the places where people congregate. It is only logical. There is no rocket science in that. This is what you have to do. You have to look at where people congregate because you are looking at the likelihood of transmission of this silent killer. And what is so bad about COVID-19, it is different to other viruses such as SARS, Ebola. It is very different. It is different to swine flu. It is different to influenza A or B, very, very different. And I have seen no understanding among hon. Members opposite, no understanding whatsoever. And there are three alleged medical doctors on that side.

Madam Speaker, what is terrible about COVID-19 is that it is a silent killer. You can have the virus for 14 days and demonstrate no symptoms, unlike the other viruses, SARS, Ebola, influenza, et cetera. You get manifestations of symptoms within a matter of days. So if somebody has swine flu or something like that, within two or three days the person would be coughing and sneezing, and you can see that something is wrong, but not with this silent killer. The person can have it for seven days, 10 days, 14 days, and demonstrate no symptoms. In fact, there are people who are asymptomatic; demonstrating no symptoms at all and therefore, they can be carriers and spreaders of the disease. That is what is different about COVID-19 and that is what this Government understood. That is why this virus is so deadly. Because you could be out there spreading in the population and nobody

would know, unlike other forms of flu. But what do we hear from the other side? “Open de rum shop. Open dis. Open dat. Let people do dis. Let people do dat. Let everybody come back in.” That is the kind of irresponsibility we have been faced with by Members on the other side, Madam Speaker.

And we are being told to go with them and to deal with their plan? “Hmm”. I looked at this alleged plan that was published at the beginning of May, Madam Speaker. It is just a hodgepodge, a mishmash, a cut and paste of the same tired, old, outdated and useless ideas that the UNC has been putting into the system for the last five years or so. All of this diatribe, Madam Speaker, was put into the UNC Manifesto of 2010, and 2015 in particular. In 2015, all of this tired, old diatribe was rejected by the population in 2015. [*Desk thumping*] This is just a mishmash, a hodgepodge, a regurgitation of silly ideas.

For example, look at this silly idea, after the UNC increased public expenditure by 50 per cent, Madam Speaker, during the 2010 to 2015 period, increased expenditure by 50 per cent, with no commensurate increase in income, creating an unsustainable expenditure pattern, Madam Speaker, unsustainable. They took public expenditure from 46 billion in 2010, to 63 billion in 2014, with no revenue flow and that is why they had to raid the bank account of the National Gas Company, raid the Current Account at the Central Bank. That is why they had to take us from credit where we were in 2010, to nine or \$8 billion in overdraft in 2015, take out \$15 billion from the National Gas Company. You know why? Because they had to support their profligate and unsustainable expenditure profile.

But hear recommendation number one, reduce taxes. So we are running a country where expenditure has gone from 46 to 63. We have been able to bring it back down into the 50s and still there is a wide disparity between income and

expenditure, but the main recommendation of the other side is reduce taxes. So where the money coming from to run the country? Pie in the sky foolishness, Madam Speaker. Remove VAT from basic foods. We did that, Madam Speaker. There is no VAT on basic food items. "How yuh could remove something dat already remove?" Restart the Guaracara refinery, Madam Speaker, the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union put in a bid, along with other bidders, for the refinery. They won the bid. They are now in the process of doing the due diligence. COVID-19 has slowed them down, understandably. There were not able to do what they should have been able to do because they have been stuck for the last several months, but they are working on it, Madam Speaker. And the Leader of the Opposition expects us to breach a public procurement process, cancel the contract with Patriotic and give it to somebody else, Madam Speaker? This is what they are recommending. This is what is in the Opposition's plan. That is what we are supposed to do.

Let me see what else. Jump start food security. Madam Speaker, the record will show that when you examine the contribution of agriculture to our gross domestic product over the 2010 to 2015 period, despite all the old talk and fancy talk, there was a decline in agricultural production between 2010 and 2015 under the previous administration. But according to them, they would jump start food security. "Yuh tink is ah car, yuh come wit ah battery and yuh jump start?"

So, Madam Speaker, what else are they recommending? Take idle cash balances from National Insurance Board and Unit Trust and use it to create a fund, so that you could develop national infrastructure. Madam Speaker, are they living in Trinidad and Tobago? I have laid in this Parliament, the report of the actuaries on the National Insurance Fund and this has been known to the other side for years

because my predecessor also laid reports of the actuaries on the National Insurance Fund, and every report of the actuaries shows that the National Insurance Fund is in difficulty, that contributions are less than benefits. Right now, the National Insurance Board is paying out more every month than it receives in contributions because we have an ageing population. Less and less people in the NIS system, more and more people on NIS pension. People are living longer. And the last actuarial report that I laid in this Parliament, not too long, indicated that unless we take action, the National Insurance Fund will be in serious difficulty in the next 15 to 20 years. So what cash, idle cash does the National Insurance System have, that they could just had over \$4 billion for some infrastructure fund? Pie in the sky.

What idle cash does the Unit Trust have, idle cash? Madam Speaker, the Unit Trust is investing its funds all the time. The money in the Unit Trust belongs to bond holders, thousands of little ordinary people. That is not idle cash you could just go huff it, which is what is being proposed by hon. Members.

Next ridiculous suggestion, create a green climate trust fund using the Green Fund. Madam Speaker, the UNC mortgaged the Green Fund. They used all the assets in the Green Fund and mortgaged it and overdrew the Government bank account to \$9 billion. The whole Green Fund is mortgaged, since the advent of the UNC, but they are saying use the Green Fund to create a green climate fund.

What else are they saying? Deepen economic reforms with a human face. Madam Speaker, the majority of economic pain that the people of this country have had to withstand between 2015 and now is because of the reckless overspending, waste, mismanagement and corruption that we encountered between 2010 and 2015. That is the pain that the people of this country suffered and that is what we in the PNM have dealt with and are dealing with, Madam Speaker.

Human face? “Hmm”, would like to know where “mamoo” is. I understand he is in Panama, run away with a billion dollars. Human face? Human face?

What else? What else are they recommending? Create an East-West Corridor biotechnology corridor. What is this? Where is the investor demand? Where is the feasibility study for this harebrained scheme? “Where yuh finding land in de East-West Corridor to create ah East-West biotechnology manufacturing corridor? Who write dat? Who come up with dem words, Madam Speaker? Dey just pluck worlds out of ah Thesaurus and put dem in ah piece ah paper because it sound good.” Foolishness.

Listen to this one, invite the private sector to manage a locally-branded hotel resort in Tobago. “Yuh hear dat?” They chased Sandals out of Trinidad and Tobago. “Dey run Sandals”. They destroyed the reputation of Trinidad and Tobago as a safe haven for international hotel brands. They maligned Sandals. They maligned the Government and “dey run de people”. But their solution to business is to create a brand hotel in Tobago. Just talk, pie in the sky, Madam Speaker.

Listen to this one, invite international investors to establish a cruise ship complex in Plymouth. “You could see none ah dem ever went tuh Tobago in dey life. Dey doh even know where Plymouth is”. They do not know the ocean currents, the wind action, the swell and the berthing conditions in Plymouth. There is an old jetty in Plymouth, which was abandoned because it is impossible to bring any vessel of any size into Plymouth, but that is their recommendation. They do not know a thing about Tobago. They do not know anything about harbours and safe berthing places in Tobago. They are just putting words on a piece of paper, Madam Speaker.

How much more time do I have, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: You end at 3:09:01.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. That is plenty time. So let us see what else. Establish a steel pan manufacturing industry in east Port of Spain. This is just old talk. This is just like the cable car from Laventille, another pie in the sky dream from the Member for Caroni Central. Remember that, hon. Members? He was going to build a cable car from Laventille to Port of Spain. “Five years dey there and they never build one piece ah cable in Laventille”, but he was going to build a cable car and a tunnel to go to the north coast. “Dey just talk, talk, talk, talk, but dey cyah do. Dey cyah do anything, just old talk”.

Steel pan manufacturing industry in east Port of Spain? Why “yuh did not do it when yuh was in Government? Why yuh did not do it? Yuh just talking, is lip service”, Madam Speaker. And Madam Speaker, there is nothing else in this plan, just a mishmash, a hodgepodge of ridiculous, empty, vacuous, frivolous proposals. It makes absolutely no sense.

3.00 p.m.

Now let us look at what we are doing, Madam Speaker, let us see what we doing. Madam Speaker, under the astute management of this Government, the Rowley administration was able to deal with a very catastrophic collapse of global energy prices in 2016. You remember, Madam Speaker, oil went to \$25 in 2016. We lost \$20 billion, \$20 billion in one year in revenues from petroleum, national income dropped from \$56 billion per annum as it was in 2014 to \$36 billion in 2016; \$20 billion, Madam Speaker, more than one-third of national income just disappeared just so, overnight.

Any other administration would have been hard pressed to deal with that. Certainly, they would not have been able to deal with that, Madam Speaker. But we in the PNM administration, we got advice from experts on fiscal and monetary policy, we did wide range of consultations, we looked at our economy, we looked at the fact that we were wasting, we are spending about \$10 billion that we did not have to, and we did a number of measures aimed at fiscal consolidation, and we were able to slowly stabilize and recover the economy so that it went from that catastrophic situation in 2016 when we had economic decline occasioned by a 40 per cent loss in revenue of about 6 per cent, bring it down to 2 per cent and then bring it down to zero, Madam Speaker, and stabilize the economy. That is what this administration was able to do.

We also have been able to manage the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund very well, Madam Speaker. When we came in it was \$5.6 billion, and pre-COVID we got it up to 6.5 because of astute management, and even when we got it up to US \$6.5 billion, a lot of old talk outside there you know, old talk. When we came in the Heritage Fund was at US \$5.6 billion, we took it up to 6.5 pre-COVID and that is after withdrawing \$600 million for funding of the deficit in '16 and '17. So when you take that all into account, Madam Speaker, we had grown that fund by US \$1.5 billion in the four years. And even now, Madam Speaker, in the last month or so, the fund was able to recover from the collapse of world stock markets, Madam Speaker.

Anybody who has any knowledge of world stock markets would have seen what happened to the New York Stock Exchange. In the February/March period, stock markets just collapsed the same way oil prices collapsed. People lost trillions of dollars in value, Madam Speaker, all over the world, and we in that

situation found ourselves losing about \$900 million in a month on, in terms of our Heritage Fund and we have already recovered \$700 million of that, Madam Speaker, over the last month. We have recovered US \$700 million, five billion Trinidad and Tobago dollars, through astute management of the Stabilisation Fund, Madam Speaker.

Look at what we are doing in response to COVID, because they cannot take it, you know; is pressure for them, you know. We have established the salary relief grant. We have put an allocation for that of up to \$500 million, Madam Speaker. That is for persons within the national insurance system. Then we have a number of social support measures in the Ministry of Social Development for persons outside the national insurance system because, as I indicated in an earlier statement to this House, about one-third of the labour force is outside of the national insurance system. We have about 600,000 people in the labour force, and then 200,000 or so of them not registered for national insurance.

So, recognizing this as a reality, which is something that we have to address as a Government, we instituted a system through the Ministry of Social Development to deal with people outside of the NIS system, and a series of grants, food support, food cards, income support, public assistance, and so on. And we have given the Ministry of Social Development another \$500 million allocation for that. So that is a billion dollars. Madam Speaker, between the salary relief grant and the various number of grants in the Ministry of Social Development.

Just today, the Minister of Works and Transport started the process of giving out the fuel support grant to maxi-taxi owners. As I speak here, the Minister of Transport, the hon. Rohan Sinanan, is in his office handing out fuel grants of \$2,000 to maxi-taxi owners, because we are a Government that cares about people,

Madam Speaker, and that is estimated to cost \$10 million and may actually cost a little bit more as we go along, Madam Speaker.

We established a special foreign exchange window in the Exim Bank, because we recognized that we had to have food security in terms of imports and foreign exchange available for essential supplies, for medical supplies, for pharmaceuticals, for personal protective equipment and so on, so we established a special forex window through the Exim Bank and qualified importers are now already accessing that facility to get their foreign exchange.

We have given out \$700 million, Madam Speaker, in accelerated payments of income tax refunds to individuals. In fact, we cleared off every single individual income tax refund due at the Treasury and the BIR, Madam Speaker, every single individual income tax refund has been paid, accelerated. Whether you put in your return last month or you put it in last year, we cleared off all, and we have cleared off all VAT refunds due, whether you were due it two months ago or whether you were due it last year, up to \$500,000 in cash, that is a total of 700. And I am happy to say today that we have issued VAT bonds in the amount of \$175 million, Madam Speaker, over the last week, VAT bonds of \$175 million, and we are well on our way to our target of a billion dollars over the next two or three weeks in VAT bonds and then going for \$3 billion in VAT bonds, Madam Speaker.

These are payments that are not normally be made, because the Government simply does not have the cash flow and we are clearing off VAT arrears before they are due, Madam Speaker. Under the legislation VAT arrears are not due for six months. We are clearing off all, does not matter if you put it in three months

ago, four months ago, we are clearing them all off, Madam Speaker. That is performance PNM style, Madam Speaker. That is performance. [*Desk thumping*]

We have given the credit unions a facility of \$100 million to make soft loans to their members; grants to religious bodies \$30 million; money going to the Ministry of Local Government, another \$30 million for food support. We have worked with the Central Bank and the commercial banks to have relief in terms of loan payments and so on, Madam Speaker, reducing reserves at the Central Bank, increasing liquidity, reducing the prime interest rate. We have given Tobago \$50 million in COVID funding for medical purposes, another \$50 million available to them for hotels, another \$5 million available to Tobago for enterprise development; and Tobago will get more, Madam Speaker, from this administration for other entities in Tobago who have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis, Madam Speaker.

We have sent money for university—UWI students in Mona and in Cave Hill, Madam Speaker, and it does not end. Every day we assess what needs to be done, and we deal with it, Madam Speaker.

We have also been able to maintain an investment grade rating with Standard & Poor's and I am happy to announce today that Moody's has affirmed our credit rating, where countries all over the world are being downgraded today, Moody's affirmed our credit international credit rating, Madam Speaker. We were able to get our credit rating affirmed because we have a comprehensive medium term macro-economic fiscal framework that we produced for Moody's and they accepted it. UNC “doh” have to accept what we are doing you know, but the Standard & Poor's, Moody's and all the international agencies are happy and welcome to accept what the PNM is doing, Madam Speaker.

So Madam Speaker, we had a Roadmap Committee meeting on Monday, the presentation of the first report, looking at all the things that we are doing, the \$300 million loan programme for small and medium enterprises, \$35 million grant programme for micro enterprises. Those are just some of the things, Madam Speaker. I do not have enough time to talk about it all. I have hundreds of pages of things here I could talk about, but I simply want to say this Motion is frivolous, it is vexatious and it is ridiculous and I reject it, Madam Speaker, thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: Member for Tabaquite.

Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan (*Tabaquite*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I want to begin my contribution by joining the national community, really, and a word of thanking God for his many mercies and blessings that he has bestowed upon this country and its people over the last couple of weeks and also to say a prayer of gratitude alongside all citizens for the safety of our frontline persons who have been involved in treating with citizens of the country, in treating with all those who have been affected during this particular crisis.

Madam Speaker, in his typical style, the Member for Diego Martin North East, has tried once again to create and develop a narrative he started way back in 2015 and even before that, in the days when he used to have emotional outbursts sitting in this Parliament and would drop all his books on the ground and so on. That is an emotional side of him that is well known, it is the actor side of him. But in doing so he thinks that he will fool the people, but I remind him again, you can fool some people some of the time but not all of the people all the time. And he started by talking about legal definitions of this Motion being frivolous and vexatious and so on and so forth. But he, in doing that you know, it struck me that

he did not understand how serious this Motion is in terms of his own Government, and the manner in which they are treating with the distress of this country.

When you stand up in this Parliament and you make a joke of this Motion, you make a joke of the feelings and the emotions and the distress of the people of this country, Mr. Minister. Nothing, nothing will excuse this Government for its failure to protect this country for the future. It is not just about COVID-19 now, it is not about what has happened in the last two months, it is what is going to happen and the manner in which you are setting the foundations for the recovery and reconstruction of this country in the future. And may I say here and now, that while you try to make a mockery of the UNC plan for recovery, let me say, Mr. Minister of Finance and Member for Diego Martin North\East, you think that you probably did that, but you—your Government has not produced, it has failed to present to this country a plan that will take this country into a sustainable economic future. The only plan that the country is able to see before it, the only plan that the country is able to evaluate, is that which has been presented by the United National Congress. That is the only plan.

And when you talk about, you know, the plan of the UNC, and you talk about everything else, you know, you still have to account, account for your last 57 months in office—56 months in office. You have had 56 months in office to create a plan that will see a country not depend on oil and gas, and what happens to the fluctuations in the prices of oil and gas. There has been no plan for diversification in this country, no plan to take this country into sustainable economic future.

So you make—you try to make a mockery of the plan for the East-West Corridor, not realizing that some of the worst poverty is in the East-West Corridor where you need to create jobs, where you need to create jobs and you need to

create industries that the world wants. This is part of the problem I have been saying all the time. Trinidad and Tobago has to decide what it is that the world wants that we can in fact produce, rather than simply thinking that God is a “Trini” and that we will have oil and gas to survive for all to come. So, the only plan for diversification of this country has been presented by the United National Congress. That is the only plan.

You talk about revenue streams. I want to ask the Minister, what new revenue streams have you created over the last 56 months you have been in office? What are the—you talk about the UNC using up money while they were there. Have you not been raiding the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund also? Have you not been doing that? You have been borrowing excessively, both on the local market and under the foreign market. And you are not telling the country now what is the rate of debt to GDP. And with a falling GDP, that rate is going to become even higher, putting the country in a kind of peril.

What is the stream of revenues, therefore, that you intend to create in the future that will cause you to be able to repay those debts? Even if you have a moratorium now like you have negotiated in one or two of your things with CAF, you have to pay those debts in the future and the country will be indebted because of the debts you are creating and you are not showing a new stream of revenues from which we will be able to pay the debts.

3.15 p.m.

But when you look back at the United National Congress and you look back at one area, for example, tourism, the United National Congress was on a path of creating a viable sport tourism industry in this country. Say what you want about Anil Roberts, say what you want about former Prime Minister Kamla Persad-

Bissessar, but when you look at the tennis centre, when you look at the cycling centre, when you look at the swimming centre, you know that you were creating streams of revenue for the future while you were also developing your people internationally.

Hon. Member: Cycling.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Cycling in Couva, a whole sporting tourism complex there. But instead of that what you have is Tobago where tourism is dead. [*Desk thumping*] Tourism is dead in Tobago, and what you are doing you are bribing the people of Tobago by giving them \$50 million and say, repair your hotels there, but they do not have any plans for bringing guests into Tobago. You pay airlines to bring people into Tobago. When you cannot pay those airlines to bring people on every one of the seats that you pay £100 or what, what is going to happen to the people of Tobago? And the people of Tobago must open their eyes to see the bribery that is being put in their face, and understand that this country will not be able to support that kind of thing into the future.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), bribing Tobago.

Madam Speaker: Okay, Member for Tabaquite, I would ask you to withdraw that word and please restate in a more acceptable manner.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Sure, Madam Speaker, the word “bribery” is withdrawn. It is just creating false hopes for the people of Tobago, creating false hopes for the people of Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Tourism is dead in Tobago. Whether you like it or not tourism is dead in Tobago. You talk about saying that the UNC ran Sandals out of Tobago. Why do you not talk about what the people of Tobago had to say how they would have been scandalized by that investment in Tobago and they would have been run into

the ground, because Sandals was being given all that Sandals wanted and they were not being given what was due to them to develop their small and medium sized enterprises. [*Desk thumping*] There are two sides of these stories. You know, the Minister is borrowing all kind of money, but the Minister is not thinking about the existing debts of the country. If I were the Minister of Finance I would have at this point in time look at all those debts that we have, loans that we have, and try to renegotiate those loans, try to renegotiate the rates on those loans, try to create moratoriums also on those loans, so you can have an economic space, a financial space, in order to rebuild this economy as it has to be rebuilt. But the Minister is not thinking in those particular terms.

Madam Speaker, I want to repeat. Nothing will excuse this Government for its failure to begin to protect this country for the future by having a viable economic recovery plan. The Government has a responsibility to make sure it treats with the needs of the people of this time. That is a responsibility of the Government. But they have a greater responsibility for what happens after COVID, after the end of COVID, the plan for recovery and reconstruction that has not been present to them. But the thing is that a plan is not all that is enough. It is about who is capable of carrying out the plan, and who is capable of delivering results, and that requires leadership, and that requires management, and we have not seen that, because there has been no transformation of the economy under the PNM. There have been administrative changes, but that does not create the basis for getting you the revenues that will create a sustainable future.

Madam Speaker, COVID-19 is really an opportunity as we see it, to rethink development, to rethink the basis for economic prosperity, for sustainable growth, especially in a country, I want to repeat, that keeps its bets on oil and gas.

COVID-19 is an opportunity, as we see it, to mobilize, and we would have mobilized the people to make a dramatic shift in their attitudes to work; in love for country; to become more self-sustaining at the personal level; to help wean people away from state dependency; to create entrepreneurship. But what do we have? We have over 300,000 persons who are either self-employed or in small and medium-sized enterprises. They have no idea of what their future is going to be because those small enterprises and those self-employed persons they have a very bleak vision of their future, because no hope is being provided for them by way of a plan, by way of the kind of support that they can expect, because nothing is reaching them at this particular point in time. It is not reaching them.

Nothing has been presented by the Government for small and medium-sized enterprises that suggests that the Government is putting them on a path of reconstruction with a modicum of hope for a more prosperous future. So where is the plan? What has the COVID-19 committee come up with so far? We were supposed to get reports from the COVID-19 committee. What do we have from them? Instead we have today a very patriotic Gary Aboud accusing the Government of discrimination in terms of how you are reopening businesses, and saying openly, to quote him in the *Guardian*, in the *Newsday*, sorry:

“...crippling multiple small business and self-employed (people)...”

Crippling. The Minister talked about agricultural production.

Madam Speaker, food security, whether we like it or not, is going to be a very important thing in the next couple of years. Food security. It is no good talking about agricultural productions falling and so on. Now is the time to talk about how you are going to support the farmers of this country in order to produce more, and how you are going to get them in order to move in terms of vertical

integration into agro-processing. Where is the Government setting up a committee now that will help to move us from simple agricultural production to agro-processing and creating food security? You know, vision is a funny thing. When the People's Partnership was in Government, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar created the Ministry of Food Production as against agriculture, and that is significant, because food production meant that she saw the need to have food security in the country. [*Desk thumping*] So there is no team put together yet to transit and to make sure that agriculture comes into the forefront, and we are able to ensure that people would be fed. You see, there is a difference between a talking government and a doing government, and this Government is a talking government. It is not good enough to just talk about policies. It is good to talk about implementation and results. What are the results that people should expect in this particular situation?

Madam Speaker, there have been one or two surveys done by AMCHAM, a first and second, of the state of businesses in this country. If this Government was serious, and if we were in charge, what we would have been doing is continuous surveys right now of the businesses in this country. But the Government itself, unless I am wrong, has not done any survey of business entities to really determine the level of economic and financial distress. They have not done that. If a survey was done we would be able to put a more progressive plan to save jobs and to introduce the relevant policies and programmes. What you have, by the Minister of Finance, I like to describe as a Band Aid programme. You know Band Aid is something you put on a cut. A Band Aid programme rather than a structured programme. It seems to me, and the country is beginning to realize it, that the decisions are more politically driven than people centred. So if you think, for

example, about the \$2,000 that they are giving to the maxi-taxi drivers, very good. But, Madam Speaker, I want to ask a question. Given that oil prices have fallen so much, and given that that should have resulted in a drop of prices at the pump, how is it in Trinidad and Tobago we are importing gas and diesel and the prices are not dropped at the pump? If the prices were to drop at the pump, would not the maxi-taxis and the taxis and so on benefit much more? So while I say that they should be happy that they are getting somewhat of the \$2,000, at the same time that is not enough.

Madam Speaker, COVID-19 has done something important for Trinidad and Tobago. It exposed poverty in Trinidad and Tobago. But side by side with exposing poverty, it has exposed the generosity, the tremendous generosity of the people of Trinidad and Tobago who have been able to give to each other. And had the people of Trinidad and Tobago, in terms of their personal generosity and corporate generosity, not come forward, a lot more people would have been suffering in this country. Madam Speaker, I do not want to go over it, but it is difficult to have 1,600 children in your constituency on the School Feeding Programme, and to see them come with their mothers and fathers at your door in the constituency and you can only give 500 cards, or you could only give 50 hampers. It is difficult. Madam Speaker, you know what it takes for a mother who has never ever come to my office to come and say, "I have no food to give my baby. I need some milk for my baby", which is \$80 a tin and she has none. Her husband does not have any work and he has applied for the salary relief fund and has not gotten it.

Madam Speaker, some on the Government side who are still living in glass towers secluded from the reality of the poverty and the suffering and the stress,

read the *Guardian* today and you will see the personal stories of people in terms of what is happening. We talk about online learning right now, and children would be home and there is online learning. But do you know that there are hundreds, maybe thousands of children who do not have a computer, do not have Internet access, and therefore they are being excluded from online learning? You know I may just say, just yesterday I personally bought 20 tablets and gave it to students at Naparima College because they do not have. [*Desk thumping*] Madam Speaker, we have to reach out. But when the People's Partnership Government was giving computers to the school they said that they will use it for other purposes than study. Today we see the vision of the People's Partnership with respect to the computer programme. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, you must have seen the pictures of the police distributing foods hampers in Diego Martin, and the conditions under which people are living, sub-human conditions. And yet we have a National Self-Help Programme in this country that should be put to use to do that. I always remember 37 days after the NAR got into office the then Prime Minister, Mr. Robinson, called me and said, he said, "You know, you started a self-help programme when you were chairman of St. Patrick, I want you to give me a paper so I can start a national self-help commission in Trinidad and Tobago", and myself and Mr. Gerard Hadeed prepared that paper for the start of the National Self-Help Commission. Madam Speaker, I want to warn this Government. I heard they are speaking about selling state assets or the possibility of selling state assets. I want to tell them that when you sell an asset that has a stream of future revenue possibilities and you take that money and use it for recurrent expenditure then you do not have that stream of revenue coming. You have to be very careful how you decide to sell state assets. [*Desk*

thumping]

Madam Speaker, why does the Government not look right now in terms of a plan? Let me give you one example, you are importing \$136 million fish and fish-related products, including tilapia from China, while you have all the ponds all over the place where you can get your people involved in producing Tilapia, which is a high source of protein, and get into fish processing together with other foods. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of Finance and the Central Bank have been prevailing upon the banking community to assist people with their loans and deferrals. Now people are discovering that it is not a deferral, it does have a cost, that you still have to pay your interest, and you are paying interest upon interest. You know, I make bold to say that banks have not been very kind to the people during this time of COVID. [*Desk thumping*] They have not been kind. People are just only extending their loans. If you speak to small and medium-sized businesses you would hear they are planning now to scale down operations.

Madam Speaker, job losses are on the rise whether we agree or not, and you are not hearing of any plan, concrete plan to give financial support to these vulnerable businesses. Madam Speaker, I make bold in this Parliament to say today that banks should be prepared to give up 25 per cent of their profits in the form of interest rate reductions and deferral without penalties to the people of this country. The banks cannot be forced to do that but the Government holds serious investments in Republic Bank and First Citizens as well as Unit Trust, and other financial institutions that carry mortgage portfolios, and the Government can start by indicating to—

Madam Speaker: Member for Tabaquite, your speaking time is now spent.

Dr. S. Rambachan: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Mayaro. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to join in this debate as I join with my colleague from Caroni Central for this Motion. Madam Speaker, I want to make it very clear as I am starting, that we must separate in this country the measures taken by the Government in terms of the medical response versus the economic policy social response. I have no issues today with the medical response. I think the medical response has been on par. It has been with the greatest of results as identified today [*Desk thumping*] and I have no issues with the medical response. I think the advice given by the medical professionals, because I know neither the Minister of Health is a doctor, the Prime Minister is a doctor, the Minister of National Security is a doctor, but they have been given the best of advice by the medical professionals. [*Interruption*]

[*Madam Speaker stands*]

What I have the challenges with, Madam Speaker, going forward is the response from the economic policies and the social policies.

Madam Speaker, in the United States and Great Britain, Canada and several European countries, most of these modern societies have had purposeful debates in their respective Parliaments on measures to combat the medical and economic crisis caused by COVID-19. Trinidad and Tobago has been a notable exception. The Government has declined to debate many aspects in terms of the responses to this emergency. The single occasion that the Government has come to this Parliament on a COVID-19 related issue was to dip into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. There has been very little accountability to Parliament on the billion-dollar spending, on the value of the measures to the people and on procurement of applicable goods and services.

Madam Speaker, in Great Britain, from which Trinidad and Tobago has adopted its Westminster system of Parliament, all parliamentarians were permitted to participate in debates, some of them remotely through digital technology. Madam Speaker, the Boris Johnson's Government dutifully reported to the people and relevant Ministers provided extensive accountability and subjected themselves to questions from the Opposition. The prestigious Commonwealth Lawyers Association said in a statement that Governments must account to their respective population through their Parliaments. The Executive in any parliamentary democracy must be scrutinized by Parliament. The politicians and those who find themselves as part of an Executive at this time, have the responsibility to be accountable to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the arbitrariness and lack of partnership and bipartisanship which the Government adopted in the COVID-19 crisis so far is a major reason for its disorganization and slapdash approach, and lack of meaningful success from an economic and social perspective. The Government has not consulted or partnered with the largest national organization that has the widest electoral support, as evidenced by the local government election results, the United National Congress. How do you go forward in building national consensus in any sort of plan in terms of the post COVID-19 response without the views of the United National Congress, the parliamentary Opposition in this country? The Government must do like other countries and make the Opposition a meaningful partner in order to achieve the united purpose and a national consensus which will be very much needed going forward.

Madam Speaker, the Government's financial response to the economic crisis caused by COVID-19 should have been prioritized in the following way:

- Keeping people employed has to be the highest of the order.
- Incentivizing and supporting the small and micro enterprises.
- Effective social security measures.
- Reducing bank cost which is a huge issue today for our small and micro enterprises.
- Deferring payments on loans and on utility charges and other statutory bills, liquidity support and offering credit lines and guarantees.

But, Madam Speaker, there is an absence of strategic goals and objectives in the Government's—I would say “voops” and “vaps” type of response to the economic crisis.

Madam Speaker, the Government's response is characterized by repaying a fraction of the long outstanding BIR and VAT refunds, and proudly determine that as assistance to the SME sector. But those small businesses that would have been owed this VAT and these BIR refunds for many, many years, all this money would have done was to fill that hole that has been existing in their working capital budgets. So this money is really coming to full it. It does not add any new value, any new buying/purchasing power to these businesses to keep them afloat going into a post COVID-19 economy.

Madam Speaker, after listening to the Minister of Finance, the hon. Minister has really convinced himself, and he has also sought to persuade this country that this particular measure was a meaningful intervention in assisting the endangered SME sector. Madam Speaker, all this time thousands of SMEs are in danger of folding up, leading to increased unemployment, which is one of the biggest concerns that I have as the Member of Parliament for Mayaro. Madam Speaker, about 85 per cent of businesses in this country are small and medium sized. Still

the Government has not responded to this critical and urgent need of this vital sector. [*Desk thumping*] The Minister has spoken about a \$300 million fund that is going to be specifically directed to SMEs, but as of today, it is going in about two or three weeks, I have heard nothing about it, about how these SMEs are going to be classified, what is the mechanism for getting this fund, and how soon it would be available to these SMEs to get them going.

Madam Speaker, in contrast, progressive Governments have provided tangible supports to their SMEs in their countries. If you allow me to give a couple examples: In Britain, a business interruption loan scheme was introduced to assist with cash flow. The Government covered the cost of a specified number of sick days by employees, provided cash grants, and deadlines were extended for tax payments. None of that has happened or has even been considered in our environment here. Madam Speaker, most noticeable, and I know it was raised by my colleague for Tabaquite in terms of the bank interest rates, in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, the Central Bank reduced the reserve requirement and repo rate, but commercial banks have not responded in kind to its customers. Instead, moratoriums were granted with customers eventually having to pay interest on top of interest, and I do not think that was the intention of the Minister, the Finance Minister, when he made that announcement many, many, many weeks ago. On top of that, Madam Speaker, customers are also being made to pay the cost of new legal contracts with respect to negotiated loans. So, Madam Speaker, a man owns a car and he has to ask for an extension or deferral, but because this mortgage document has to be redone, he now has to pay \$3,000 or \$4,000 legal fee in order to get that deferral. I really do not think that was the intention of the Minister, and that is something that I feel the banks really should have been—

reconsider and do not apply this pressure to our citizens. Madam Speaker, the Government has done very little or nothing for banking clients. Commercial banks in my respectful view have escaped having to bear part of this financial burden. I think they got off easily. Madam Speaker, there has been very little rhyme or reason in Government's social security measures. I know speakers before have spoken about the issue concerning food cards, to the parents of students who are the School Feeding Programme, and again, it is widely known that all MPs' offices did get 500 cards. But, what I just want to say is that for the Mayaro constituency, Madam Speaker, we have 26 schools, and the total list of students on that list was about 3,600. And we did a meticulous cleaning up of the list, we looked for parents that had multiple children, we looked for parents who had children in multiple schools, and when we tallied the list down, we ended up with a little under 1,900 students. So, Madam Speaker, even with the 500 cards that were issued to the Mayaro constituency, we still ended up with about 1,400 children that would have been left off. *[Interruption]*

Madam Speaker: I am sure I am hearing a device. Could the Member please go outside and get their device under control? Continue, Member for Mayaro. Please continue, Member for Mayaro.

Mr. R. Paray: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Yes, so I was saying, Madam Speaker, that the balance of students who were left, the 1,400 students that were left in the Mayaro constituency, it has put them at somewhat of a disadvantage, and I think the messaging and communication a bit was bad, because I think that at the inception of the programme there was the feeling that all of the students would have gotten these cards, and it has put a bit of pressure on MPs' offices. I know all around the request for this support has come and I think that would have caused

some problems for us. And the replacement programme as well, Madam Speaker, with regard to the food kit, which again I have absolutely no problem with, It is my understanding that MPs' offices, my office, will get probably a maximum of 200 kits of which we have gotten 50 so far. Again, if we apply that 200 to the balance it still brings about 1,200 students that will be left out of the programme. But in that case, Madam Speaker, we are trying our best to work with our corporate folks in Mayaro, some of the NGOs, to try and fill that gap as we go forward.

Madam Speaker, in a post-COVID-19 economy, the way forward will not be business as usual. The post-COVID-19 economy will be one of reduced globalization and increased focus on the development of the nation state. Trinidad and Tobago therefore has to make quick strides towards food sufficiency. There must be substantive measures towards the effective diversification away from the now struggling energy sector. Investors must be lured back to Trinidad and Tobago, and improving the ease of doing business matrices is an important factor in our first steps post COVID-19. The current Government has not attracted a single investor. In addition to several entrenched investors like ArcelorMittal and Unilever, they have fled to greener investment pastures. As a result, thousands of workers have lost their jobs. In a new economy, we must place the focus on renewable energy, climate change, and the ever evolving technology including artificial intelligence.

Madam Speaker, all these areas are clearly identified in the UNC's national transformation plan for Trinidad and Tobago. So, I cannot see how the Minister of Finance can, in his own words, tread lightly on some of these ideas, some of these plans, because the Government has not mentioned a single one of those initiatives over the last four and a half years. They do not even speak about it in the debates,

so I am a bit sceptical as to what are the COVID-19 going forward plans, what is it going to be if the plans that we have submitted in the national transformation proposal is being ridiculed and laughed at, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker, improving our manufacturing competitiveness and improving worker production are an essential part in boosting the output and to improving trade. Post COVID-19, our trade output has to be increased. It has to be our output, our quality, our time to deliver. You know, just-in-time services, these things have to be tightened. It is all identified in our national transformation plan. In many cases, Madam Speaker, labour skills will have to be retrained. And manufacturers must introduce cutting-edge technologies. So, in our national transformation plan we speak to the retraining of workers, we speak to the role of education in terms of retraining our senior citizens, our mature citizens, because we now have to find a new model, a new role that they can work in new industries, new systems going forward.

3.45 p.m.

Madam Speaker, the focus as well has to be placed on strengthening national institutions. Implementing watertight procurement measures, introducing a modern national statistical organization is absolutely critical. Madam Speaker, the UNC has consulted extensively and has proposed this economic master plan that places emphasis on reducing the tax burden on citizens. Added to that, jump-starting food production, resuming the petroleum refining and investing renewable energies, all lay at the core deliverable on our national transformation plan. There are plans to utilize the abandoned Caroni lands for an extensive food production programme which would also create thousands of job opportunities and spawn agro-processing operators.

Madam Speaker, the World Bank has warned of widespread poverty in developing countries. The President of the bank has said the shutting down of economic activity is erasing much of the recent progress in poverty alleviation. In Trinidad and Tobago, thousands of dispossessed, including workers in the informal sector, single mothers, and the elderly and infirm are slipping into poverty. More than one in three nationals are already having great difficulty in putting food on their tables, buying their medication and meeting their nominal monthly bills. While the Government will argue that it has set up a recovery committee, there is a fierce urgency of now and there is need for new thinking, appreciating the current international economic dynamics. Throwing money at the problem is not the solution. The Government cannot sit idly by, as it is doing with the Point Lisas Industrial Estate, and expect the issues to evaporate. Trinidad and Tobago has to become more innovative, competitive and self-reliant in the quickest possible time.

Madam Speaker, the Government must bring all stakeholders on board in this period of unparalleled crisis. Almost five years the Government has ignored labour, employers, business, independent economic experts, academia, manufacturers, NGOs, CBOs. There must not be a repeat of this scenario that led to the resignation in frustration of members of the Economic Development Advisory Board and their proposals were rejected. There is urgent need to protect both lives and livelihoods at this time. The Opposition implores the Government to adopt a cooperative bipartisan approach to the clear and present economic danger. We in the Opposition are willing, prepared and anxious to play a meaningful role during this critical and challenging period. The solutions to the crisis should ideally be charted by all national stakeholders. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Yes, thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, just for clarity, at what time do I end please?

Madam Speaker: You have 20 minutes.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Twenty minutes, thank you very much. Yes. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is my absolute pleasure to join this debate and to follow my colleague, the Minister of Finance, who I must congratulate in doing an excellent job in [*Desk thumping*] debunking the unfounded theories put forward by my colleagues opposite. Madam Speaker, in the 20 minutes that I have, I just want to put on record the following facts and this Motion starts off with the ultimate human aspect. The ultimate human aspect of COVID-19 is saving lives, reducing cases and ensuring that people have lives to go back to our livelihood after.

Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has been recognized as a world leader in this management of COVID-19. [*Desk thumping*] A world leader. Madam Speaker, let us compare and contrast the UNC's approach to COVID-19 versus the PNM's approach to COVID-19. The UNC suggested a state of emergency. Take away people's constitutional rights, that is their approach, then they went to court to keep rum shops open. Which way do you want it? Our approach was a strategic, well-thought-out, graded approach applied over 65 measures starting on January 21st, when I, as Minister of Health, went to TV6 on January 21st and spoke about COVID. [*Desk thumping*]

January 30th, we took the decision for travel restrictions for China first in the hemisphere. January 31st, Trinidad and Tobago—T&T—declared COVID-19 a dangerous, infectious disease. It was only on March 11th that the WHO declared it same. We were before the WHO—before. What else did we do? Mitigation.

March 12th, we had our first case. March 12th, we suspended the cruise ship season. March 13th, we closed schools and closing schools, I am told by the public health experts, was the best thing that we could have done. [*Desk thumping*] The best thing, hard decision. March 18th, the Prime Minister addressed and advised that several committees be established across the financial, labour, social and economic sectors to deal with the fallout. March 19th, financial and social policy measures were announced. March 29th, we had our first death and the village ghouls were the first to announce it. Could not wait for the family to know, but the village ghouls revelling in that death announced it. And it goes on and on.

April 16th, the Prime Minister, a responsible man, announced the road To Recovery Committee. What else was the UNC's approach to managing COVID? Use hydroxychloroquine, coming from a doctor on the UNC Bench. Our approach, under our Prime Minister, was a parallel health care system. Get 74 ventilators, activate 922 beds; that was our response. What was the UNC's response to testing? The Member for Siparia is on record as saying, "Test, test, test." We said, "No, you test suspected cases." So the UNC would test asymptomatic people which is now recognized, globally, as a waste of time. But hear the biggest insult to this country of all—and I want Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, Member for Caroni Central, who is going to speak after me, and I want Dr. Fuad Khan, Member for Barataria/San Juan, and I want Dr. Lackram Bodoie, Member for Fyzabad, to tell this country whether they agree with the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar that our successful response to COVID was because of the weather and heat. I want those three medical experts, and I want the media to call them and ask them whether they concur that the weather was responsible for our position.

Any doctor who is going to speak to me after has to say they agree with their

leader because if you believe that theory, Madam Speaker, it is an insult to health care workers in Trinidad and Tobago who work tirelessly. It is an insult to the Chief Medical Officer. And the final insult to Chief Medical Officer was when the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar said that the Chief Medical Officer was hiding data, an insult to a public officer. But we trusted him. We believed in the science. So the hon. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh who will follow me, is to tell this country whether the weather and the heat saved this country.

Hon. Member: The sun.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: The sun. Madam Speaker, we started the revival of the economy on Monday the 11th and it continued on Thursday the 21st. We have had no new cases now—case 115, 116, for almost two incubation periods—but, Madam Speaker, one of reasons you cannot open up small business, especially hairdressers, nail salons, barbers, grooming, massage parlours is this, and the science will tell you close physical contact is considered contact within three feet for 15 minutes or more and that is why we cannot open up that sector of the society, that sector of the economy. We cannot at this point in time.

We also want to make sure we have a healthy workforce to go back out to work and that is why we are protecting people's lives as far as humanly possible because no people, no economy. No workers, it means our hospitals are filled and we will not have flattened the curve. No confidence to go back out to work means people are fearful, people are panicking and people are worrying. We do not have that because people want to go back out to work. That is a good thing because we were measured and scientific. That is how you protect small, micro and medium enterprises by giving them the confidence that when the gates are open to them they are healthy, they are well and they are alive. Putting people back to work in a

responsible way is alien to the UNC because the word “responsible” does not exist in their vocabulary.

Doing things in a strategic way is alien because strategy in this whole COVID response was alien to them, have a state of emergency but keep rum shops open. We are doing it in a safe way, words that are not in the vocabulary of the UNC. The UNC’s response is hydroxychloroquine; put everybody in Maracas, Quinam, Vessigny, Charlotteville, put them on the sun and the sun will kill the COVID—that is their strategy—and go to court and let go COVID-free patients into society. That is their approach. You see, they are bent on populism, short-termism. We will take tough decisions in the country’s long-term interest. You remember there was a fire in the last days of their Government? Populism, give everybody \$5,000. That is what they do. We do not do that.

Our decisions, led by the Prime Minister, were based on science, not on temperature. We did not put a temperature gauge outside there and measure the temperature and say, “Okay, it is safe”. We did not do it based on sunshine. And I want their three doctors to tell me again, do they agree with that statement, it is the sun? I want those three honourable doctors, hold a press conference and say it is the sun. Because if we believe you, how many more would have died? How many more would have died? You see, Madam Speaker, we believe in science and communication, they believe in voodoo, sun; we believe in strategy, they believe in “voops”; we believe in leadership, they believe in “vaps”; we believe in patriotism, they believe in vaille-que-vaille. [*Desk thumping*] That is what the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar has to offer this country, voodoo, “voops”, “vaps” and vaille-que-vaille, but the PNM offers you science, communication on a daily basis, leadership and patriotism and led by a Prime Minister who is a scientist

above all. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, the damage done to this country by the statement of the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar where she rubbishes the work of health care workers in saying the reason why we did well is because of the sun, heaps scorn on the health care workers who worked day and night in this country, it heaps scorn on the activities of the Chief Medical Officer. You do not want to thank me, you do not want to recognize me, that is fine, but at least recognize the Herculean efforts of the Chief Medical Officer, officers at the Ministry of Health, and doctors and nurses. [*Desk thumping*] Because you see, saying it is because of the sun is not only dangerous to the psyche of health care workers, it is dangerous to the population, Madam Speaker, and I will tell you why. It tells people that go out there, be reckless, have COVID parties, congregate in five or more, do not wear a mask and the sun will save you. That is what is so medically dangerous about that statement. It tells people go out there, be reckless and the sun will save you.

Let me tell you another piece of medical advice we got from the UNC. I was disappointed and disturbed. Again, you want to attack me as a politician, fine, but when you attack the Chief Medical Officer who is a public servant, as the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar did, and now the hon. Fuad Khan—Dr. Fuad Khan, Member for Barataria/San Juan, was interviewed by TV6 and I am paraphrasing but I am sure I get the gist of it right. He said the advice given by the Minister of Health and the Chief Medical Officer is foolish about the wearing of masks. Could you imagine that? The wearing of masks is recognized worldwide as a way to stop the transmission of COVID. A medical doctor on that side. The same employees we want to protect to have the economy open back up, could you imagine a former Minister of Health is saying the Chief Medical Officer and the Minister of Health

are foolish in recommending the use of masks? When that is coupled with the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar's statement, it is a good thing—

Madam Speaker: While I understand you using the word “honourable”, I will suggest you refer to Members in here by—

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I apologize. The hon. Dr. Fuad Khan, Member for Barataria/San Juan. And again, the Member for Caroni Central is going to follow me, or Caroni East, Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, the hon. Member, tell this Chamber whether you agree with your colleague that the wearing of masks is foolish. So you have two answers to give.

Madam Speaker, in the few minutes that I have left, I just want to put in context how Trinidad and Tobago did with COVID-19 and I am going to quote a series of statements by independent persons and agencies that speak to the economic and health response of this Government. The World Bank. A 2020 World Bank report entitled: “The Economy in the Time of Covid-19”. The economy:

“...claimed that developing countries in the Caribbean...”—in particular Trinidad and Tobago—“was more prepared for the crisis than a lot of its Caribbean counterparts.”

That is the World Bank, not the PNM. [*Desk thumping*] European Union:

“The EU Delegation wishes to commend the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the measured manner in which it has been proactively managing the challenges posed by the global coronavirus crisis and for the activities by the Ministry of Health in preparation of a possible surge in the number of persons that carried the COVID-19.”

That is what the EU said.

Oxford University records and compares governmental measures in response to the virus. On May 01, 2020, an assessment by Oxford University ranked Trinidad and Tobago as the number one country in the world in implementing COVID-19 Lockdown Rollback Checklist which will stimulate economic activities locally.

Market Facts & Opinions report of 4th May. The report published on May 04, 2020 by MFO found overall that citizens were satisfied with Government's response to the virus and the Government has received high marks for the handling of the COVID-19 and the economic and social fallout of the pandemic, which is what this Motion is about. So this is not the PNM saying this. This is the man in the street responding to an MFO survey, that they have given the Government high marks for its handling of the economic and social fallout from the pandemic because there will be economic and social fallout.

Former Independent Senator, Ramesh Deosaran, in an article in the *Newsday* of April 12, 2020:

“Four months now, Dr. Rowley, National Security Minister Stuart Young...”

—yes, my colleague and I want to thank my colleague, Mr. Stuart Young for being a co-pilot [*Desk thumping*] with me on this journey. The country may not appreciate you, many people may not appreciate you, but my brother, you and I have worked well and I thank you.

“...Health Minister Terrence Deyalsingh and of course, Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Roshan Parasram...”

This is Dr. Roshan Parasram who was called foolish by the Member for Barataria/San Juan for recommending the use of mask. This is Dr. Roshan

Parasram who was accused of hiding data by the hon. Member for Siparia, Kamla Persad-Bissessar—

“...are carrying out their respective responsibilities with effective coordination.

To encourage, I give Dr. Rowley and his frontline team nine out of ten.”
Nine out of 10. You will never hear that from my colleagues. A former Independent Senator.

“This is for accountability, resource management, public assistance and disease control.”

Mr. Raffique Shah commending and he says:

“Early o’clock...”—and Mr. Raffique Shah is no friend of any Government, including the PNM—“Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley decided to lead the charge from the front.”

That is my Prime Minister whom I have the honour and pleasure to serve because he believes in science not sunshine.

“In a crisis like this pandemic, people in leadership positions are put to the test in the most severe way.”

They say sometimes leadership reveals character or leadership forges character. In this COVID environment, the leadership of Dr. Keith Rowley was revealed for all to see [*Desk thumping*] and also, the leadership of the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, MP for Siparia, was seen because she believes in sunshine.

Madam Speaker, how much more time do I have, please?

Madam Speaker: You have about 32 seconds.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you very much. So, Madam Speaker, as I close, I just want to say that this Motion is hypocritical, it is dangerous, it is unpatriotic just

like the UNC, and I condemn it to the dustbin of history. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to join my colleagues earlier on in support of the Motion raised by and moved by the Member for Caroni Central, but let me first respond to some of the questions that were raised by the hon. Minister of Health, the Member for St. Joseph. First of all, let me just indicate to him that the hunt is on. [*Desk thumping*] The hunt is on, hon. Minister. I want to quote directly from an article on social media from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-04-sunlight-coronavirus-quickly-scientist.html>, and the article says, “Sunlight destroys coronavirus quickly”— [*Desk thumping*— “says US scientists”. So let me repeat that, “Sunlight destroys coronavirus quickly, says US scientists”. [*Desk thumping*]

“The new coronavirus is quickly destroyed by sunlight...”

—*medicalxpress.com*. [*Crosstalk*] Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I would like to hear the Member for Caroni East and I would also remind Members that to watch their language. It is not parliamentary to engage in certain kinds of language. Member for Caroni East.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Thank you. Madam Speaker, I listened attentively to the Minister of Health and I want to put forward the issue of this Government’s bungling the management of the human aspect of the COVID-19 crisis to the distress of citizens, a large number of whom without work and struggle to put food on the table. Everyone will remember Her Excellency the President proclaimed at the end of January that the COVID-19 is a public health emergency. The WHO President declared the virus as a global emergency at the end of January. We heard nothing from the Government then, Madam Speaker, except the Minister of

Health saying that Carnival must go on. Nothing official.

There was a meeting of Caricom Prime Ministers sometime around February, yet nothing still from the Trinidad and Tobago Government. For the first time in March, a statement from the Prime Minister came in Parliament and unfortunately, he tried to accuse us of not allowing him to speak and not wanting to hear him speak, and he know that was untrue because we became a little tired of repeated times by the Government to wave the Standing Order which they are allocated 10 minutes to even more. There had been repeated requests and we were tired of acceding to that. The Government was ill-prepared and late in their decision making, fumbling along to put processes and institutions in a state of readiness.

Madam Speaker, I want to say that the Government and the Ministry of Health had no line of sight in the full magnitude of the situation. They were reactive rather than proactive. Their approach always benchmarked on what was going on when looking at CNN. So they took example from what was going on in CNN. They were fumbling to put processes and institutions in place. They were deficient and restrictive, and had restrictive measures and criteria for testing: you must have association with someone who came in from abroad, you must have two of the symptoms. These were the criteria that they used for testing and that was restrictive, Madam Speaker, and it was shown where the rest of the world did not adopt those criteria, and they adopted those criteria because they knew fully well they did not have enough test kits to do the sampling which was required to be done.

So they had absolutely inadequate testing. Non-functioning of the PCR machines at hospitals. So that is why they knew they could not more testing. They

relied solely on CARPHA which had only 3,000 kits for the entire Caribbean. Still up to today, there are promises being made by the Minister of Health that more kits were coming in from China, they will expand the testing, hospitals will do the testing. No hospital is doing any testing up to today.

4.15 p.m.

He spoke about the private labs seeking accreditation. Still today not one of these private labs has been accredited. They speak about community testing. The Prime Minister said that they will wait for two more weeks and do about 700 more community tests. I want to indicate, no community testing has been done. The testing which had been done were done from health centres, and specific health centres were identified. The Minister must tell us whether what I am saying is not true. There was no community testing. The testing was done from identified specific health centres.

So, Madam Speaker, the decisions being made today and by the hon. Prime Minister and his team based on testing is an unscientific epidemiologic approach, which is guiding their decision making for opening up of the country. We should have had by now almost 20,000 testing so far benchmarked against international standards. We are 0.008 per cent, highly unsatisfactory. Britain is testing nearly 1,500 citizens per million population per day. They are testing 100,000 per day for their 65 million. The United States has done over 10 million tests out of the 330 million, which is 3 per cent, nearly 40 times more than we have done in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Their isolation and quarantine have been absolute failures and have been national disasters. The Caura tier one facility for isolation was shown to be unhealthy, unsanitary, faeces on the floor. Improper separation of male and female

patients in Caura, causing emotional pain and suffering and mental scarring of patients, sometimes to the extent that people began to think very negative in terms of what was happening to their lives.

The Balandra situation. Fourteen people were quarantined in one room without ventilation, which was causing cross-infection amongst the people quarantined there. The Brooklyn Village; there were no doors on the toilets, cockroach infestation. Even in the worst of situations we should have been able to treat and manage patients with some degree of dignity. Many of those who were quarantined suffered emotional pain, and they complained that their dignity was robbed from them. Many people thought it was a virtual lock-up if you were tested positive. So if you are tested positive you have to go to Balandra, go to Caura or go to Brooklyn earlier on.

Hundreds of patients or citizens today with mild to moderate symptoms—I want the national population to listen to this issue. I believe personally and I have been asked by many patients and many of my senior colleagues have been asked by many citizens about what we advise them to do. Many called and said that they were having mild to moderate symptoms. They described the symptoms, and when you advised them to go to the centres which are dealing with it they said, “I am not going. I prefer to die at home,” because they are afraid of being what they virtually called “lock-up”. So hundreds of citizens with mild to moderate symptoms are still afraid of being locked up and are not coming forward for testing. We do not know whether the true state in Trinidad and Tobago is really zero, because there are serious fears, emotional trauma and apprehension by many, many citizens.

As one of my classmates from south Trinidad, who is a senior medical

doctor and a specialist—and let me just remind the Minister of Finance that there are no query doctors on this side—three query doctors. We are full-fledged specialists in our field, [*Desk thumping*] very well recognized not only nationally but internationally. Together with my 45 years' experience, Dr. Fuad Khan, 45 years' experience, and Dr. Bodoie nearly 30 years' experience, we have over 120 years' experience as top ranking specialists in Trinidad and Tobago and in the Caribbean. So let that put to rest the query Minister of Finance who has absolutely no knowledge about finance, but put there as Minister of Finance.

So, Madam Speaker, what is happening internationally? People have been going forward willingly and voluntarily to be tested. The Minister of Health said that random testing is a thing of the past and they do not need to be doing that type of testing. It seems as though that the established criteria for selecting places for quarantine must be a PNM supporter, and the establishment must belong to a PNM supporter.

The Government, which constantly speaks of proper procurement, leased the property in the Sangre Grande area for \$315,000 as a stepdown facility without any transparency and accountability. When there was public outrage at the cost, the country was told by the Chief Medical Officer of Health that he had requested an official report on the procurement measures, and that was the last the country heard of that matter. Nothing else has come forward.

Madam Speaker, I want to proffer that frontline nursing and medical personnel for days and even for a few weeks did not possess sufficient personal protective equipment and masks to protect them from infection. They were fearful for their lives by becoming infected as a result of lack of equipment. They voiced their serious concerns and apprehension very quietly. Hundreds of these personnel

worked in those difficult situations, and all the nursing, medical, security, para-professionals must be recognized for their tremendous service to the people of this nation with their lives at risk, as shown by so many frontline professionals who unfortunately lost their lives attending to patients.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health speaks about a parallel system, and he boasted about a parallel system operating. He began to parrot the same thing what was being said internationally. Internationally you would hear the guys in the United States speaking about a parallel system, but that was only talk no action. The hospital clinics and the elective surgeries were shut down. Hospital clinic patients were not seen. No system was established so that their chronic diabetes, hypertension and even cancer patients were being treated and seen. Their disease processes were worsening from lack of care and attention. No clinic visits. Patients with ulcerating legs were becoming gangrenous over the three months with possible resultant amputations in this country where over 500 leg amputations are done on an annual basis. Patients with cancers their suffering continued. They were being punished and cancers were worsening from those who had early stage disease, from stage one to stage three and stage four, some becoming almost terminal.

In this country about 12,000 surgical procedures are done electively annually. In that three-month period almost 3,000 elective surgery operations involving breast cancers, bowel cancers, ovarian cancers, prostate cancers, et cetera, were postponed. Some requiring open-heart surgery had to wait and some died while waiting. That is the parallel system that the Minister of Health spoke about gleefully that they had operational. The Minister and the Ministry of Health and the Government have to answer for the loss of lives of these people who did

not receive their treatment. So this parallel system has been a total failure and serious confusion while patients were dying or near death.

You know what is hypocritical of the work of this Government and the speeches of this Government, Madam Speaker? Suddenly after four and a half years Couva Children's Hospital had 250 beds to house COVID patients. Where did they come from? Fifteen ventilators. MRI machines. So this is the same hospital that they said could not open four and half years before, but they suddenly find it. When the COVID virus came in they opened it, so it was functional and operational. For four and a half years they kept this place closed, depriving thousands of children and adults of the lifesaving medical and hospital care. Instead hundreds of patients lining up on the corridors in the emergency departments on trolleys and so on at the hospitals, and some dying while waiting for treatment. The death of scores of patients in this country is on the hands of this Government.

The Arima Hospital is now ready for use thanks to the People's Partnership Government. Point Fortin Hospital ready this month, thanks to the PP Government. The south Debe campus was able to house patients for quarantine. The PP Government constructed it. The Aquatic Centre housing patients for quarantine, all built by the Kamla Persad-Bissessar People's Partnership Government. [*Desk thumping*] You must say thank you, this PNM Government. All these infrastructural projects were constructed during Mrs. Persad-Bissessar's time.

Madam Speaker, the Government has been inconsistent and discriminatory in its policy of lifting the border lockdown to facilitate the re-entry of some citizens. Many people see that policy as prejudicial and inequitable. The

reopening of the national economy is done in a haphazard manner. You would have seen in the newspapers many people commenting on it; without thought without strategic planning and logical thinking.

Madam Speaker, 20 minutes is not enough time for me to speak about the other issues. But I want to respond to the Minister of Finance and say, \$32 billion he has borrowed already so far and this Dr. Keith Rowley-led Government has spent over \$270 billion so far and nothing to represent the expenditure. The country's debt has gone to \$124 billion. The debt to GDP has moved from 42 per cent to 65 per cent. The GDP is falling continuously. Every year from 2015, the deficit budgeting, and too there has been regular downgrading by the rating agencies and negative growth annually. This year is expected to be 4.5 negative. He speaks about the HSF. We moved the HSF from \$3.5 billion to US \$5.6 billion so that the PNM Government could now find funds inside there. [*Desk thumping*] It moved from 5.6 to 6.5 because of the trustees that the People's Partnership Government put in place to manage that fund so that they invested properly and was able to retrieve this money, so that the PNM Government could get the money that they say they are taking from it. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, as I close, our honourable political leader, the Member for Siparia, Mrs. Persad-Bissessar, was the one who took on the mantle of true leadership in this virus. All the people who were suffering, she made attempts to feed all of them. She provided almost 60,000 masks and unfailingly lobbied for businesses to be opened in a safe, strategic manner. It was she who rose to the challenge while those on the other side shut down our borders to our suffering citizens and engaged in some of the most destabilizing conduct in our nation. But now is not the time to debate time. We will have another time.

So the People's National Movement Government could have done this together with us, yet you chose for political mileage and spite to go it alone. Now because you refused to stand together with us and the rest of Trinidad and Tobago, our country is falling apart.

Madam Speaker, when the hon. Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister for us to join in coming together so that we could do the work for the country, she indicated that because we as Opposition is a key national stakeholder responsible for 18 parliamentary constituencies throughout the country, as well as seven regional corporations at the local government level, which places more than half the population under our direct administrative and legislative purview.

So in our nation's history, with good sense and faithful adherence to our democratic principles—

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East, your speaking time has expired.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. We have managed.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have been advised that there is agreement on tea. So now would be a convenient time and we will return at 5.00p.m.

4.30 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Naparima.

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It gives me great pleasure today to join the debate in the name of my hon. colleague from Caroni Central, and it speaks to the Government's bungling of the management of the human aspects of the COVID-19 crisis, about the emergency economic measures which have been put in place, and also the fact that citizens are fearful

for their future and they see no hope of recovery and prosperity under this Government's handling of the post-COVID-19 situation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened earnestly to the Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert, and it is clear that this Government has no plan, no vision, no architecture, no calculus, no trigonometry, to transform this society. It is a question mainly of tax, borrow, sell assets, raid the HSF and spend. When one looks at the profligacy over the past four years, where this Minister of Finance has spent \$31 billion more than he earned in revenues, when we look at significant borrowings that have taken place, primarily to spend on recurrent expenditure, one sees that we are headed for no man's land.

But I heard—the Finance Minister had the effrontery to boast about the performance of his Government, and I think he quoted a report from Moody's which spoke to the fact that we were able to remain stable. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I turn to the March 27, 2020, report of Standard & Poor's this year. We are talking about just a couple of weeks ago. Standard & Poor's has downgraded Trinidad and Tobago's long-term foreign and local currency credit ratings to BBB - from BBB. The rating agency also revised down its transfer and convertible assessment to BBB from BBB +. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I quote:

“The rationale for the downgrade, which places T&T on the lowest investment grade above ‘junk’ status”—was because of—“lower oil and gas revenues over the next”—couple of—“years”—reduced government revenues and increases in the sovereign debt, in the general government's debt.

So here we have a Minister of Finance celebrating the fact that we are just one step above junk bond status. It tells me that he does not understand the agencies and the

ratings and how they perceive the performance of this Government.

Today we face a world seriously impacted by COVID-19. Practically every sector globally has been affected on an unimaginable scale not seen since the last Great Depression between 1929 and 1933. Our oil and gas sector is in a state of what Lloyd Best would call “pre-collapse”. Our manufacturing, tourism, agriculture, health facilities and small businesses are in ICU. Our foreign exchange crisis is especially worrisome given that Trinidad and Tobago relies heavily on imports for all essential items. Our national debt is unsustainable. Poverty is increasing. Crime is out of control. And as I said before this profligate Government has spent \$31 billion more over the past four years than they earned in revenues. So hopelessness abounds.

What we are here to discuss today is the capability of this administration to navigate our country through these uncertain times and insurmountable challenges. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Rowley-lead administration treats our citizens—I am speaking particularly of the 400 citizens stranded on cruise ships—like less than human beings. A TT passport in this post-COVID environment, where we have to rely on everybody, even in the diaspora, and we have 300,000 citizens, a quarter of our population in the diaspora, a TT passport means nothing in this COVID-induced governmental madness.

We had to wait until the matter was highlighted in the international media before the Government would come today to tell us what plans they are going to make for our 400stranded citizens. Mr. Deputy Speaker, Jamaica has reclaimed 1,040 citizens stranded on Royal Caribbean. Little St. Lucia has taken back its 209 kit and kin already. Grenada has accepted its 50 citizens from the Princess and Carnival cruise lines. But our Minister, the hon. Member for Port of Spain

North/St. Ann's West, in his infinite "unwisdom", and what we call in the dialect a sense of feeling "powerful stupid" posture, has effectively waited until the last moment to give born and bred citizens of Trinidad and Tobago hope—hope. I have family who work on those ships. They earn foreign exchange for us. They do not spend from the bounty of the oil industry; they earn. We had citizens in Suriname fired from Petrotrin using their expertise to earn foreign exchange in Suriname. And I got calls every day. Disgraceful treatment of our citizens. It is unparalleled. It must be condemned and it must never happen again.

When we come into government all citizens will know that in this Trinidad and Tobago every creed and race and class and colour has an equal place in this country. [*Desk thumping*] Nobody would say who could come in and who can come out.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as we speak we are in the midst of unnecessary, ill-advised and very public spat with our largest trading partners, the world's largest economies, one of which is home to a quarter of our citizens. We are at variance with Canada and the EU on matters of trade and foreign policy. We have friends in the most unhelpful and unlikely places, and unless the Prime Minister is prepared to take decisive action to rid us of the cancers within, then we all stand waiting, hoping, and praying that our post-COVID economic survival will not be ravaged unnecessarily on the altar of foreign public policy lapses, reckless trading misadventures and the inability to finesse our diplomatic relations to make them more consistent with our national interests.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Standing Order 48(1) please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, I will give you a little leeway but tie in your point quickly and move on please.

Mr. R. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, thus far the initiatives laid out by the Government have given us on this side little comfort in the PNM's ability to ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago are on a path to sustainable development. Right-minded persons would have expected that when businesses were closed and individuals ordered to stay home this Government would concurrently have had in place a proper plan for easily accessible short and medium-term relief. But this Government never had, does not now have, and will never have a plan to take us forward.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you could imagine the frustration felt by thousands of applicants from Naparima for highly publicized COVID relief programmes who applied weeks ago, and up to today we cannot identify one person in Naparima who has received salary relief grants.

These persons are not trying to scam the Government, but are desperately trying to put food on the table. I have text messages: "Mr. Charles, can you help me? I have not eaten for three days. I have three children and no husband." Pleas of the citizenry of the country. And we come today and we are told that they are satisfied that they have met the needs of most of the citizens who need it.

If the Rowley-led Government had only put the needs of Trinidad and Tobago first and engaged in serious discussions with the UNC, and not bewilderingly, pulchritudinous Vice-President from Venezuela, had they sought advice from the start we would be much better off. Under this current Government we have been left with a government that has not deposited one cent in the HSF, but are now using that to campaign.

We have had diminished foreign exchange reserves, increased national debt close to 70 per cent of GDP, and this was one of the reasons why we were

downgraded by Standard & Poor's—70 per cent of GDP. We left it in the 30 per cent range. Borrowing, borrowing shamelessly. Reduced foreign direct investments with companies now operating with high levels of uncertainty, while our ease of doing business record is abysmal. A diaspora who has lost faith in Trinidad and Tobago given the unnecessarily cruel treatment of our nationals who had to fight, suffer, beg and beseech to be allowed to return home. The hovering threats of sanctions, which we on this side hope will never come to pass.

Shortcomings of the roadmap to recovery—when we look at the team they have assembled to plan for our post-COVID future, while it includes well-established, well-qualified and distinguished businessmen we have to ask some questions. Who on the team has a track record in creating and developing a non-fossil fuel and sustainable energy future? Who has the knowledge of managing of a silver economy given the growing size of the elderly population? Who on the team will take us forward in the digital economy, especially putting education systems back on the path of technological advancement for which Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Member for Siparia, was laying the groundwork through the laptop programme? Who on the team will navigate us to increase food security and local agriculture?

And to the Prime Minister's repeated statements about Trinidad not having enough land to increase agricultural capabilities, I want to tell him to research vertical farming and multi-storey greenhouses. Take Trinidad and Tobago forward. I see he has fully copied our political leader's gardening skills, so it tells me that he can still learn, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Economists, especially Lloyd Best, have long said that we must utilize the School Feeding Programme creatively to transform the eating habits of the next

generation away from junk foreign foods and towards a new society that eats what it produces, saves foreign exchange, improves health standards while increasing unemployment.

5.15 p.m.

It is Lloyd Best's idea, not of giving out food grants but tying the food grants to a strategic intent to transform us away from junk food that increasingly relates to us having significant experiences with non-communicable diseases, heart, stroke, high blood pressure, et cetera.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think the Government secretly looks forward to our criticisms because then they can get First World quality advice on the cheap, which they quietly implement while accusing us of being obstructionist and unpatriotic. They steal our ideas and plunder billions left by us in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and come here and tell us that when they came they met fumes, but suddenly they get US \$1.6billion left by the Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government in her wisdom to deal with a rainy day in Trinidad and Tobago.

Furthermore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government is completely out of touch with the realities of the citizenry; heard it today, "We are satisfied that we have satisfied the poor". Well, come to Naparima. Come to Naparima. Walk with me a day in Cunjal and Rochard Douglas Road and Papourie Road. Walk with me and see the poverty, do not stay in Port of Spain and talk about Moody's and ignore Standard & Poor's. We have constituents disabled and not getting grants. They do not know how to apply, some were born in the constituency but not registered so they do not have an ID card, and we put all kinds of bureaucratic obstacles in the way of the poor citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Constituents who have lost homes due to fires and floods and I know there are citizens in

Barrackpore up to this day have not received a single cent from the Government.

Constituents whose children receive box lunches but their names are not on the Ministry's list. Constituents whose savings quickly ran out while waiting for work to resume or help to arrive. And I spoke about messages that I get, the majority of our citizens do not want handouts, they are willing to help themselves. If only the Government would provide the framework for them to do so. We provided 50,000 jobs, the PNM has lost today 70,000, and they call that performance. What we need is a plan to reopen the small businesses sector, not to sell imported goods but to create new wealth by carefully thought-out import substitution initiatives. Maxi-taxi drivers are barely making ends meet because their costs are now almost equal to their earnings given reduced numbers of passengers. And I want to ask the Government, as my colleague from—I think it was Mayaro that asked, what happened to the floating pump rate they spoke about during the last budget?

As energy prices fell worldwide, why not reduce fuel prices at the pump for everyone? Or better still—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes.

Mr. R. Charles:—use the \$1 billion estimated additional revenues from the present high gasoline prices to diversify the economy. But we had our plan, basically it is improving the quality of the service sector, not firing a Minister and replacing him by a visionless transient non-performer. We had about reforming the agriculture sector by putting idle state land, agricultural land to use, dealing frontally with issues of land tenure, land-use planning, predial larceny and the market supply chain. We have had in our plans ensuring a sustainable energy future for Trinidad and Tobago by strategic transformation of the energy matrix of

our country and my political leader spoke about harnessing the digital economy, so that we could prepare ourselves for the jobs of the 21st Century. We must develop sports, recreation and culture by seeing them as income drivers in addition to their roles in developing holistic past times.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in conclusion, the Government has failed to provide reassuring answers to any of the following questions: one, how long can Government sustain handouts especially if no COVID vaccines are found within the next 12 months? Two, what sustainable plans are in place to resuscitate our struggling Point Lisas industries? Three, where will we get foreign exchange to pay for the junk foods and other luxuries that contribute significantly to the prevalence of non-communicable diseases? Five, what are our plans for tourism giving that it will take a while for visitors to feel comfortable to travel in planes? Six, who is giving thought to using the Point Fortin highway and our south-west peninsula as a gateway to South America? Seven, where are the think tanks looking for opportunities arising from the United States' need to reduce its supply chain dependence away from China? And nine, where are the plans for medical tourism and—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member—

Mr. R. Charles: Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*].

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I now recognize the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

The Minister of National Security and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, sometimes it is difficult having to respond to the submissions by the Member for Naparima because, you see, the whole

submission seems to be one of rhetoric, the screaming, the shouting, and the only person believing any word he is saying is himself. I would like to start by the last set of screaming and shouting about, “Come to Naparima. Come and walk with me. Leave Port of Spain. Come and see the poverty. Come and do this. Come and do that.” And I smile because not too long ago in a full page of a newspaper, that is the main support system for the United National Congress, the same sunshine that Naparima talks about and tells his leader, “Sunshine is what dealt with COVID”, and then when he is battered for it, he runs and hands the Member for Caroni East, Dr. Gopeesingh, and hands him his phone and say, “Look, look, look, look. Read this article, is really sunshine.” The same *Sunshine* newspaper had a full page on Naparima that for five years not a constituent could see him, not a constituent could find him, they cannot get help from him, they do not know what he looks like but again, he has the gall, the audacity to stand up here and tell us about, “Come and walk in Naparima”, he cannot even walk in Naparima.

He should tell the whole country about his representation as the Member for Naparima or lack thereof. He sits here now in the final, eleventh hour of this Parliament Session begging, begging, “Please let me back in”, they do not want you in Naparima. They do not want you in here, they do not want you anywhere. The next colleague he has, the colleague from Princes Town, missing in action. Mr. Princes Town was another one who used to come in here and scream and shout and bawl and wail, well he “waylaying” in Miami now.

Mr. Lee: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are not here to debate MPs, we are here to debate a Motion.

Hon. S. Young: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am responding.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hold on. Hold on. Overruled. Again, on both sides have

entered into this situation into the debate. Proceed.

Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much.

You see, it is always so difficult for them to sit and hear anything that sounds like the truth. I am ashamed to say that the speaker before Naparima was talking about the handling of COVID-19. The country has already decided, the country has already decided because the international critics, the international analysis, the objective analysis is, “Thank God for the way COVID-19 was handled in Trinidad and Tobago.” And the Ministry of Health and their experts, and my colleague, I repay the compliment because I have seen Minister Deyalsingh worked with the Chief Medical Officer and all of the public health experts, and they came under tremendous pressure by those in the Opposition because those in the Opposition—and look at Naparima of course getting up to go and run and show *Sunshine* again, I am sure. But the medical health, public health experts are to be applauded for guiding the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in the manner that they did, because, you see, this Government, under Prime Minister Rowley, listened and no amount of screaming, no amount of attempts at distracting the population, because the objective test and analysis is, as at this day, the 22nd of May, 2020, we are one of the only countries in the whole world that does not have a current positive test case in our public health care system. Trinidad and Tobago, take a bow. [*Desk thumping*] But, you see, that did not happen by “vaps”, that did not happen by vaille que vaille; that did not happen waking up one morning. It was very carefully handled from the word “go”. From the time the virus appeared in China, the Minister of Health and his team managed every single move in this country, and fortunately, the leadership in Government listened.

The Cabinet appointed the Prime Minister, the Minister of Health and the

Minister of National Security to work along with the health experts, to listen to the science, to take the right decisions and that is why we are here on the 22nd of May finally in a position with a period of a passage of one of the cycles of 14 days with no new positive cases. So all of the criticism is ill-founded. We have managed the situation well, we are now into another cycle where we are reopening different parts of the economy. It is not easy, you come under pressure from all sorts of people but once again, you have a strong—fortunately for Trinidad and Tobago, you have a strong Government that is prepared, and we have shown it, to take the difficult decisions. [*Desk thumping*]

At every step of the way, the lobbying takes place because you see, everyone believes it should be about them opening and not somebody else, but we know the pain taking place. We know what is going on and that is why from the word “go” there were multisectorial committees set up. There was a committee on education, a committee on how to deal with it financially; the Member of Parliament for St. Joseph and his team leading on the health side; social development and social services, a tremendous job, everyone played their role, and that is why we as a country here today can start to do the things that we are doing. [*Desk thumping*]

And I listen here again at the attempts to mislead the population about the 400 nationals who are on cruise ships and that they are not being—absolutely untrue. I have spent the afternoon communicating and corresponding with some of the owners of these cruise lines and working out who would be the first batch allowed in, and in the next few days, we in Trinidad and Tobago, because we are fortunate to find ourselves in the position where we have no current positive cases in our public health care system that we can start bringing people back in from the cruise ships now.

In the meantime, we are working on bringing those back from Venezuela and still some from Guyana, it is a managed process. You do not compare us to Jamaica. I always have a pain in my stomach when I have to listen to some of the submissions on the other side. They are always quick to compare to this, “Look at St. Lucia.” “Look at Jamaica.” “Look at the United States.” You know what, when we were discussing today in the meeting with the Minister of Health and the Chief Medical Officer and myself, and we were discussing the managed phase of re-entry of citizens, I asked the question, “What is going on in Jamaica now?” And I was shocked, over 800 positive cases in Jamaica compared to none. But I want the population to know that is where Naparima would have taken them. He talks about St. Lucia, same thing. St. Lucia’s revenue dropped from \$110 million a month to \$30 million. Their public servants have had to take 75 to 50 per cent cut in their salaries, not a public servant in Trinidad has not been paid their salary, not a public servant in Trinidad has lost their job and that is because of how this Government has managed the pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic.

And kudos to the Minister of Finance and his team at the Ministry of Finance because it is not easy moving from a budget deficit of \$3 billion to \$5 billion predicted as he told us here the other day to now, between \$15 billion and \$16 billion. But again, absolutely no break in a public servant getting their salary paid at the end of the month. Absolutely no complaints with the Ministry of Health and the services that they have provided, one of the only countries in the world to successfully set up a parallel health care system, and this is the truth. This is the irrefutable truth. So to come here and talk about gangrene and to come here and talk about, “Oh, this was not”—absolutely untrue. But the behaviour of those on the other side, always crying down Trinidad and Tobago, never a good word to

say about Trinidad and Tobago, and as a patriot that irks me. I was not going to speak today but when I heard what was flowing on the other side I asked for the opportunity to join, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because you see, as someone who has been given the opportunity and the responsibility and the duty to play a leadership role in Trinidad and Tobago, I take great umbrage to what I have heard from the other side this afternoon.

As the Minister of National Security, I was charged with the responsibility by my Cabinet colleagues to handle the exemption process, it is not easy. It is not easy receiving the email every single day, the messages every day from people pleading, “My son is here and my daughter is there”; persons who are sick, who are ill, and to hold the line knowing that we are managing our health care system and our quarantine, our state quarantine system, all of those are parts of the formula of why we are successful here in Trinidad and Tobago, amongst the top five in the world, I dare say, in how COVID-19 has been managed. [*Desk thumping*] And all of the screaming and shouting, and that we do not know what is going on on the ground, completely untrue. Unlike some of those on the other side who may not even know where their constituency boundaries are, who are constantly being chastised by their constituents about not being there. Our Members of Parliament, in addition to our governmental duties and responsibilities, are ensuring that our offices are open and we are getting to the people and we are helping where we can. This is not an easy situation for anyone. It is not an easy situation for any Member of Government.

It is not an easy situation for the Minister of National Security to have to read literally hundreds of requests for exemptions of parents saying their children are here. We are getting requests from Russia, from India, from Australia, Central

America, South America, but knowing that ultimately the duty that we had to carry out was to protect the population in Trinidad and Tobago because, you see, what they want the country to forget is COVID-19 was not born here, it was imported and every single case of the 116 positive cases that we had here were imported, so you have to close the border. You had to shut it. No amount of lobbying by anyone got us to change that. So the members, the nationals on the cruise ships, as I said earlier today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, every single one of them will return. All of our nationals outside there, every single one will be allowed to return but in a managed process. You see, it is not a UNC-type free-for-all. As one of my colleagues previously—I think it was the Member for St. Joseph reminded us, just before the election in 2015 they had a fire and, you see, the UNC has this attitude that the Treasury is their personal pocket so they just dip here, “Look, give everybody \$1,000. Give everybody this. Give everybody that.” And what we faced when we came in was a Minister of Finance who came to us and said, “We have enough money for three days”, and we have managed through that.

He talks about the energy sector. I want to remind the population that the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Siparia, who was a Prime Minister of this country—they want to talk about energy—she did not even know the shareholding composition of Atlantic LNG. [*Desk thumping*] They had a Minister of Energy who had no clue if he was coming, if he was going. I do not know even if he could spell “energy”. He did not negotiate a single energy contract. The only energy contract he negotiated was CGCL and as we came in as an administration, we had to go and renegotiate that with Japan because he gave away everything. They jeopardized the whole energy sector by promising that plant gas over companies that already had contracts. Let this country not forget for a single

second, a moment, the state that the UNC left it in. Let them not forget how they pillaged the National Gas Company \$14 billion to \$16 billion in cash. Let them not forget that that highway that they were building to Point Fortin, they used cash. So do not come here and pretend. And you know, it was funny, as I was sitting there people were messaging me that they had to put the TV on mute because everything with the UNC is, “Ah should of, ah could of, we would of. The blue economy. The pink economy. The purple economy.” They destroyed the economy.

They borrowed money to put in the HSF fund and they want to talk about the HSF fund. Under us, the fund grew, the investments grew. Even though we had to dip in it, it grew. They mismanaged the economy. Remember the Beetham Wastewater Treatment Plant, \$1 billion in cash for “mamoo”. David Rudder is a prophet; David Rudder sang a song “I, I, I going to Panama”, and that is “mamoo”, that is how they manage things. [*Desk thumping*] Naparima standing up spinning a wheel, he could ever come here and tell us how to run anything, he could not even run the wheel. They were unsuccessful in everything they did, apart from damaging Trinidad and Tobago.

So let the country make its own decision, as the international objective analysis outside there has done as to how COVID-19 was managed. And this next narrative that the Member for Couva North had the audacity to come with here earlier to start a whole new narrative now, because what they want is they want the country to be burdened with sanctions by the US. So the Member for Couva North here comes now with some false narrative about Iranian ships coming to Trinidad. I do not know where they get this from but every single time a Member for the UNC Opposition stands up, all they do is attack Trinidad and Tobago and seek to

destroy Trinidad and Tobago. That is all that they do. So thank God Naparima is rejecting—the constituency of Naparima has rejected the Member for Naparima. Thank God for that. Right?

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I stand here today and I reject the Motion from Caroni Central. Not a single shred of evidence was put forward by any of their speakers in support of how the Government mishandled COVID-19. And I know it bothers them, because it must bother them that the population recognizes and thanks—and we are moving into different phases. Yesterday we began phase two earlier than we expected only because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the proper management of COVID-19 by the Government listening to the scientific and medical experts' advice. So a whole new line of businesses opened up yesterday and as the Minister of National Security, I want to thank the frontline workers in National Security, in addition to all of the frontline workers in health who had to undergo that scary time of dealing with the positive cases, [*Desk thumping*] the police service, our Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, the coast guard who are out there every night.

You know, they have this way, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have a councillor down in Cedros and it is the most—I was about to use a word I should not use—he makes these submissions that are just incredulous. I saw him on the television the other night saying, “Well, if the borders are closed, how come dey catching people? If we had the OPVs we would be able to do a better job”, but the fact is you are surrounded by water. I do not know if the UNC understands that. There is not a fence or a wall. I know who they like to follow but there is no fence and wall that you could build around Trinidad and Tobago. So kudos to the coast guard and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and the radar system, and them working

with the limited assets they have, and the success they are having in protecting Trinidad and Tobago; and that is happening, the policemen and the defence force men and women who are out there every day, every night, trying to keep people within the confines of the regulations. And I make a plea, because as I was sitting there, the Commissioner of Police was reaching out about people congregating, and I remind the population about our regulations, no more than five persons congregating together in public spaces. These are designed based on the medical evidence and input of science to protect the population of Trinidad and Tobago, and we will continue to do so.

I feel sorry for the UNC because it cannot be easy sitting there, seeing a Government manage a global pandemic in the manner it has been managed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes.

Hon. S. Young: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Seeing that amongst the whole world, our small island of Trinidad and Tobago has done such a remarkable job [*Desk thumping*] that today we are one of the only countries in the world that could stand proudly and say at this time—because it could still be out there, it could still be in our population, and as we begin to bring people back, there is the risk of importation. As we begin to let our nationals come back and entry into Trinidad and Tobago, there is the risk of importation. It is not easy, the Minister of Health can attest to this, when we have to sit in a meeting with our health experts and give consideration to how to move forward next, but we are one of the only countries in the world objectively that could stand here today—and we have a proper testing system—and say, “We have no positive cases.”

The Member for Caroni East made a statement that irked me, he said there is no community testing. I do not know how they could stand up in the hallowed

halls of Parliament and provide misinformation. Community testing has been going on for weeks. They have increased the testing. We set up our own testing facility and we have CARPHA, so why must they come here time and time again and just spread misinformation that is not grounded in any truth whatsoever. So in conclusion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the population, the people of Trinidad and Tobago stand proud here today knowing that each one of them played their own personal part in getting us where we are today that we can stand and say, “We have no current positive cases of COVID-19 in Trinidad and Tobago”, and that in itself is a remarkable achievement. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Couva South. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (Couva South): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I join this debate that has been piloted by my colleague for Caroni Central and all of my colleagues on our side who have contributed in a meaningful manner [*Desk thumping*] to this debate here this evening. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened to the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West and his rantings and ravings here this evening. I can only summon it to be the effects—or his behavioural pattern in this House this evening can only be summed up to the “Delcy effect” here this evening. Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, without any merit, without any data, without any information at his disposal, he has stooped very low to launch a baseless attack, an unwarranted attack on my colleagues who have been in their representative constituencies serving their constituents [*Desk thumping*] in a very diligent and in a very committed manner based on the examples that we have had from the Leader of the Opposition, our political leader, and the guidance [*Desk thumping*] that she has continued to provide to all of us in

terms of fulfilling our sense of duties and responsibilities from a people-centred development and focus and in serving the people.

It is without contradiction that we were able to distribute over 60,000-plus face masks [*Desk thumping*] in our respective constituencies. We were able, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to ensure, not with the support of the Government but through the help of the private sector, based on the assistance of committed citizens in our constituencies, we were able to provide food on the table for suffering constituents based on the lackadaisical approach in terms of the Government of Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley following through on the social support measures.

5.45 p.m.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

So, Madam Speaker, I want to take the opportunity here to respond to some of the issues that have been raised by those on the other side, especially the Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East, when he said that the Opposition was living in a time warp and living in a world of its own and so on, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the reality is that this Government is disconnected from what is happening on the ground and the sufferation, the hardship, the financial stress, the traumatic issues that the people of Trinidad and Tobago have had to deal with before COVID-19, based on the bungling, based on the mismanagement of the economy of this country by their failed economic policies and their failed manifesto, Madam Speaker, and it has been compounded, it has been exacerbated, and it has come to the fore as a result of COVID-19.

And, Madam Speaker, when they speak or attempt to speak about the issues of social support and persons benefiting and so on, Madam Speaker, I simply want to read from an article that was in the newspapers today, Madam Speaker, dated

the 22nd of May, the *Trinidad Guardian* “High demand still for Salary Relief Grant” and it goes on to say that:

“Almost three months after COVID-19 brought an exodus to a sizeable portion of T&T’s workforce, single mothers and young men are still clamouring for financial support.”

And very quickly, Madam Speaker, I want to provide a snapshot in terms of the type of suffering that persons are experiencing on the ground. For example, a casino worker by the name of Rae Jones indicated that almost for her and almost 400 of their colleagues who have collected their last salary at the end of March, and now it is almost the end of May, and they are living on what is called their lil savings:

“She told Guardian Media she emailed her application on April 16 but there was no response.”

And when:

“...she contacted the National Insurance Board for an update on the grant”—she—“was told to call the Social Welfare Office.”

Madam Speaker, and when she went on to call the hotline, there was no answer to her call of distress and her pain and suffering, Madam Speaker.

And in addition to that, Madam Speaker, I want to speak about one Kandace Richardson, who indicated that she dropped off her application at TTPost outlet the following day and she indicated:

“It is stressful. I have a 16-year-old child to take care of and bills’...”
—and she went on to, again, lament the fact that the social support relief that has been promised by the Government is yet to be delivered, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, I could go on and on here this evening.

So when the Minister of Finance speaks about the University of Cambridge and *The Economist Magazine* and so on and the findings or the conclusions that they came to, the Minister of Finance must be able to relate to the suffering of people in Trinidad and Tobago and tell the 100,000-plus citizens who have filed applications and so on, when will they get their relief grants. That is the bottom line, Madam Speaker, at the end of day, because the poor and ordinary citizens who have been unemployed prior to the PNM bungling of the economy of this country, 63,633 people lost their jobs and in this period of COVID, Madam Speaker, the poor people who have lost their jobs—**Mr. Deyalsingh:** Madam Speaker, on a point of order. Could the Member state the source of that 63,000 people please? Thank you. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, that is on official record based on the statistics that the Opposition has been able to collate, the research that we have done, and it is not the first time that we have been able to put that in this House, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] And I want to repeat, because the Member for St. Joseph is on the run, because of one Hunte [*Desk thumping*] and, Madam Speaker, I want to remind him because it is not the UNC that closed Petrotrin and it is not the UNC that closed ArcelorMittal and Centrin. [*Desk thumping*] It is not the UNC that closed and sent home workers at Caroni Green and the Seafood Industry Limited and the Ministry of Tobago Development and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Service and also the Special Security Unit at the Office of the Prime Minister, Madam Speaker. And it is not the UNC, Madam Speaker, that bungled the price of gas in terms of the pricing of gas, Madam Speaker.

It was the Prime Minister and the Minister of National Security who went to

Houston Texas, and in their failed negotiations it has resulted in seven plants at Point Lisas being closed or idle, Madam Speaker, and today they cannot tell the people how many persons have lost their jobs as a result of the closure of Mittal, iron and steel, in 2016, MHTL, M1 in 2017, the closure of Yara in 2019, the closure of Methanex Titan and I could go on and on, Madam Speaker, and they cannot put that down to COVID-19. [*Desk thumping*] It is their incompetence and lack of knowledge when it came to renegotiating the gas price contract, and that is the sad state of affairs that currently exists on the Point Lisas Industrial Estate, Madam Speaker. And if you drive from the Brechin Castle Roundabout to the Marabella Roundabout, the PNM under Dr. Keith Rowley has killed small business, St. Joseph, and that is why whichever candidate you put up in Pointe-a-Pierre and environs, it will be licks coming and going in the upcoming general election. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam Speaker, I want to come back to some of the issues that were raised by the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance spoke at large, Madam Speaker, about the National Insurance Fund and he spoke about the last actuarial report which he laid in this House, and he spoke about the threat in terms of the financial stability or sustainability of the National Insurance Fund. But I thought the Minister of Finance would have told this House today and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, how the revenue stream of the National Insurance Fund had been impacted as a result of the thousands of persons who lost their jobs prior to COVID-19 and how it is further impacted as a result of the thousands of persons who have lost their jobs in this scenario, Madam Speaker.

And, additionally, Madam Speaker, I thought that the Minister of Finance would have told the country that the moving forward with the National Insurance

Fund, what will become of the recommendations of the actuary. What is the Government's decision in relation to whether they will increase the retirement age to 67 years, whether they will freeze the pension at \$3,000 and so on, Madam Speaker, and also from a financial point of view and a sustainability point of view, how the financial assets from an investment point of view has been impacted upon in relation to where NIB has its assets in terms of stocks and shares and so on outside of Trinidad and Tobago? I thought that the Minister of Finance should have come clean as it relates to the current status of the national insurance system in Trinidad and Tobago, but it is mamaguy and old talk, [*Desk thumping*] mamaguy and old talk without coming clean as it relates to the workers' future in Trinidad and Tobago, from a pension point of view. That is PNM old talk, mamaguy and rhetoric coming from the Member for Diego Martin North East like his colleague, Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, during his contribution had nothing to say in terms of the future development of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] from an economic restructuring point of view, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, also, the Minister of Finance must take a page out of the book of the leadership of Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the People's Partnership Government because, at the end of the day, we had the track record, we had the tested leadership in creating 55,000 jobs in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] We had the tested track record of keeping unemployment under 5 per cent [*Desk thumping*] and inflation under 5 per cent in trying times, Madam Speaker. We were able to manage Trinidad and Tobago's finances in a very responsible manner and when we left, we left the PNM with US \$11 billion in terms of foreign reserves. [*Desk thumping*] This is the truth, Madam Speaker, and it is important to note that the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund was increased under our watch and

we did not raid the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in spite of the collapse of oil prices, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] That is tested leadership and that is the leadership that Trinidad and Tobago needs whenever a general election is called in Trinidad and Tobago. And I want to tell the Minister of Finance, and I challenge him to tell the country, how much money did the PNM Government place in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund between September of 2015 and December of 2019? And I will tell you the answer. Not one single cent has been put into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam Speaker, the important thing is that we have been able to already put out a plan for the consumption of the population of Trinidad and Tobago, a National Economic Transformation Master Plan 2020—2025 and it focuses, Madam Speaker, under the leadership of Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Leader of the Opposition, she has outlined that a UNC Government will focus on strengthening our national identity through creative industries. We will create a food secure nation through the development of the agriculture sector; will focus on renewable energy in terms of reducing our carbon footprint. We will be leapfrogging Trinidad and Tobago into the Fourth Industrial Revolution through our focus on the digital economy, Madam Speaker, and we will be preparing Trinidad and Tobago in terms of preparing for the future of work by redefining the needs of our economy, through doing the appropriate labour market research as it relates to the jobs and skills that are needed for Trinidad and Tobago because, Madam Speaker, the writing is on the wall. They have damaged the economy.

The economy cannot recover based on the bungling of the lack of leadership on the part of Dr. Keith Rowley and his incompetent Cabinet, and the reason why he has to turn to a COVID 22 team is because he does not have the expertise and

the calibre that is needed to run Trinidad and Tobago. They have failed Trinidad and Tobago. Five budget presentations, four mid-year review budget presentations and Trinidad and Tobago is no better off today and that is why they are hoping that they could find a solution in a COVID recovery team. They are hoping that they could get a manifesto that will save them. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 53, I beg to move that this debate be adjourned.

Question put and agreed to.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, we now move to the Senate amendments to the Real Estates Agents Bill.

REAL ESTATE AGENTS BILL, 2020

Senate Amendments

The Attorney General (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Be it resolved that the Senate amendments to the Real Estate Agents Bill, 2020, listed in the Appendix be now considered.

Question proposed.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Speaker: So, might I enquire, there are just amendments to three clauses, do we have the agreement to take them en bloc or we are going to do them singularly? En bloc? This is the wish of the House. Proceed, Attorney General.

Senate amendments read as follows:

Clause 9.

In subclause (2), delete all the words after “Registrar General” and substitute the words “that at least one of its directors or partners, as the case may be, is registered under this Act.”

Clause 30.

In subclause (2)—

- (a) in the *chapeau*, delete the word “seven” and substitute the word “nine”;
- (b) in paragraph (e), delete the word “and”;
- (c) insert the following new paragraph:
 - “(f) two persons, each having at least five years’ experience in real estate business, nominated by the Association; and”;
- (d) renumber the original paragraph (f) as paragraph (g).

Clause 54.

In subclause (1)—

- (a) in the *chapeau*, delete the word “seven” and substitute the word “nine”;
- (b) in paragraph (c), delete the word “and”;
- (c) insert the following new paragraph:
 - “(d) two persons with at least five years’ experience in real estate business, nominated by the Association; and”;
- (d) renumber the original paragraph (d) as paragraph (e).

Mr. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I thank my colleagues for agreeing to take these amendments en bloc. Madam Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to bring conclusion to the Real Estate Agents Bill. It is now, of course, a matter of record, that this is ground-breaking legislation. It is certainly very progressive law

to encourage a management of some 2.1 per cent of our GDP as land transactions encompass that incredible amount.

Madam Speaker, the amendments are really quite straightforward. The amendments to clause 9 are intended to match the fact that companies and partnerships engaged in real estate business seeking to be registered as real estate agents. When we are looking to that, the Senate held the view that we should only require one of the directors and not both if you are looking at a minimum number of two directors, and one of the partners and not both if you are looking to partnerships to in fact be real estate agents. This allows us the opportunity to marry people who invest into companies or partnerships to stand alongside the real estate agents industry. It gives us a little bit more flexibility. These amendments came by way of further consultation amongst the players in the real estate sector, in particular, coming from the group known as AREA as well as the group known as TTREA.

In clause 30 and clause 54, we are seeking to do a broadening of contribution from the industry. In clause 30, specifically, as we look to the Real Estate Agents Licensing Committee, and in clause 54, as we look to how we comprise the membership of the Disciplinary Committee, we have sought to raise the total number of people who may participate in either the Licensing Committee or in the Disciplinary Committee moving from seven people instead to nine people, and the two additional categories of people are to be persons coming from the real estate agents arena, that is, persons recommended and nominated by the association.

So both in clause 30 and in clause 54 you will see the amendment including two persons each having at least five years' experience in real estate business

nominated by the association and that is repeated in clause 54 for the same reason. There is nothing more to say by way of a recommendation or explanation on these amendments and, therefore, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I beg to move.

Question put and agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, might I ask if we will be bringing greetings or you will like me to go on to the adjournment?

Madam Speaker: Excuse me. Yes, we will do the greetings but we will do the—

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Go ahead and do the adjournment?

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Okay, thank you. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday, the 29th day of May at 1.30 p.m. At that time, we will be doing a Bill to amend the Interception of Communications Act, Chap. 15:08 and a Bill to amend the Copyright Act, Chap. 82:80.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, as we are aware, Eid ul Fitr will be commemorated on Sunday, May 24, 2020. Before I put the question on the adjournment of the House, I will now invite Members to express their greetings.

Eid ul Fitr Greetings

The Attorney General (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] *Bismillah-ir-Rahmanir-Rahim.* I begin in the name of God the most compassionate, the most merciful. Madam Speaker, Eid ul Fitr which is the

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celebration of the breaking of the fast is, in fact, sometimes referred to as Eid ul Saeed, meaning the second of the Eids, largely because there is also another celebration which is Eid ul Adha. And, in this particular celebration which we come to share with our Muslim brothers and sisters on Sunday, our country is reminded, certainly, of all that is good and of all that is sacred and of all that is beautiful in the practice of Islam.

Whilst it is that I am the child of a Muslim father, the child of a Presbyterian mother, the husband of a Catholic wife and had a very interesting upbringing with a Hindu grandfather and a multiverse of experiences, I have always shared in my heart a deep love and passion for Islam. After all, in Eid ul Fitr, in this month of Ramadan, as we stand now, in this month of Ramadan, being the month where the mercies of Islam were first revealed onto the Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace, by the angel Gabriel or “Jabriel” as we called him in Arabic, in this month of Ramadan, we remember the five pillars of Islam. These five pillars agreed upon both by Sunni and Shia, these five pillars standing as five pillars of Trinidad and Tobago right now, as we are in the midst of a COVID pandemic.

I, of course, refer to shahada or the declaration and acknowledgment of faith. I refer to salat which is, of course, the pillar in reference to prayer. I refer to zakat which is alms, in fact, actually meaning purification. I refer to Sawm which is the pillar of fasting and I refer to hajj which is the pilgrimage that one is obliged, if one is capable of meeting it, of making the trip to Mecca.

These five pillars, really and truly, resonate and are visible in our society, not only, I dare say in the multiverse of Trinidad’s Islamic community, but also something which each and every one of the people of Trinidad and Tobago shall celebrate and recognize. Fasting is something known to our Hindu brothers and

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sisters, to our Christian brothers and sisters. Fasting is a method of purification. And whilst it is that we have fasted, we join in prayer and certainly whether it be prayer at Fajr, which is at morning, prayer during the other four obligations during the day, at Dhuhr, Asr, at Maghrib or Isha, the five times that we pray in Islam, we recognize that all of our country has been engaged in prayer.

Madam Speaker, I wish to say that as we recognize the beauty and strength of our Islamic root, as we recognize the purity that this month of Ramadan has brought, as we recognize the celebration that the breaking of fast will give us not only at every Iftar, but also during the celebration of Eid itself, I recognize that we will be doing it differently.

I recognize and salute that each and every one of our masjids, of our mosques have, in fact, engaged in the novelty of social distancing for Iftar where the less fortunate can come and share in a feast which is delivered with the compliance of our regulations. I recognize that this will be a unique celebration of Eid ul Fitr in Trinidad and Tobago like one perhaps we have never seen, because Islam was not quite recognized the way it is now when we last had a pandemic under the Spanish Flu. And when we look to celebration, I would like to tell our Muslim community on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, that its contribution to the development of Trinidad and Tobago, its celebration of all that is good is shared by us all.

And so, on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, we recognize the contribution of Islam to our society. We uphold the five pillars shared amongst all Muslims. We celebrate Eid ul Fitr. We say that it is Ramadan Kareem. We recognize that it is Eid Mubarak and we recognize that there must be peace that must rest upon us all as we say Salaam-Alaikum to all our

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brothers and sisters in Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Fazal Karim (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to bring greetings on the celebration of Eid ul Fitr on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, my colleagues on this side of the bench and the United National Congress. It gives me great pleasure, Madam Speaker, to salute the Muslim community, especially in the way they managed the restrictions that came with the pandemic due to COVID-19. In normal circumstances, celebrating Eid ul Fitr which comes at the end of the month of Ramadan, the month of fast, in the usual grand way, would have brought together families, friends, co-workers and neighbours.

6.15 p.m.

Indeed, all Muslims have been commanded in the *Holy Quran*: Sura Al-Baqara, Chapter 2, verse 183, in which it says:

Oh you who believe fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you so that you might attain God consciousness.

Building up to this occasion, Muslims would be decorating their homes, business places and even our airports. This year we have been forced to rethink our plans. Families would have been invited to their dear ones to partake in sumptuous meals and delicacies and the electronic and print media would have filled with videos and photos all their programmes covering the open-air Eid celebrations and at various mosques all over the country.

Madam Speaker, fourteen hundred years of Islamic traditions that came from the time of the beloved Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace, were suddenly halted by an unseen virus, a virus that changed the way things are done, a virus

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which, in my view, is invisible, but formidable. Physical distancing is now threatening to become the new norm. Muslims worldwide love to embrace, shake hands, and even exchange friendly kisses. We were unable to attend congregational prayer at the mosque and to pray throughout the night on which the verses of the *Holy Quran* were first revealed; the night of Laylat al-Qadr, the night of grandeur, which is said to be equivalent to 1,000 months, or 83 years and three months.

As Member of Parliament for Chaguanas East, I feel extremely proud about the relationship I share with the faith-based organizations. From imams to Muktadi, Muslim leaders, to those being led, I have proudly partnered with all to make this little geographic space one in which we can feel the love shared as a family. And I am sure I say this, as I do so similarly as my colleagues would have done.

This year Muslims had no congregational night prayer called Taraweeh, no Jummah prayer, no public Eid ul Fitr prayer and no festive gatherings to commemorate this occasion. If you pass in front of any mosque, you will be familiar with the sign "Pray at home". Some argue that this deprivation lends to a greater appreciation, so much so that it is predicted that after this pandemic is over, the mosques will be filled for the five daily prayers, the Friday congregational prayer or Jummah would be attended by even larger crowds and face-to-face communication with families would be preferred over the social media option.

We remain a people who are ready to teach the world as a cosmopolitan nation. We educate and demonstrate harmony in diversity and this remains our signature for all to emulate. In Trinidad and Tobago, every creed and race continue to stand side by side as one people, celebrating each other's culture. And

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in this festive occasion of Eid ul Fitr, we will continue to do so in our own unique way. May Almighty Allah shower upon all of us his choicest blessings as we continue to observe the new normal.

Madam Speaker, I wish to take this opportunity to extend to you, your family and to all of Trinidad and Tobago, Eid Mubarak, as I started on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, my colleagues and all of us on this side. As Eid will be celebrated on Sunday—we expect—the 24th of May. Eid Mubarak. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I stand to extend Eid ul Fitr greeting to our Muslim community. Eid marks the end of the Holy Month of Ramadan, a period of self-reflection, abstinence and sacrifice. Therefore, to the followers of Islam, Eid is a joyous, yet reverent recognition of the strength and endurance received from Allah during Ramadan.

Muslims celebrate the day in prayer and doing acts of charity and good deeds, as it is one of their foundational beliefs that good deeds are rewarded tenfold. The significance of the teachings of Islam, as it relates to Ramadan and Eid cannot be overlooked by us in the wider community, in light of the pandemic of COVID-19, the fight against which has required us all to make sacrifices, requires us all to be selfless, and requires us all to respond to the needs of the vulnerable and the lesser circumstanced amongst us.

As we in the national community join with our fellow citizens of Islam in commemorating this Holy day of Eid, may each of us embrace the virtues of selflessness and charitableness as more than of seasonal import but as vital elements to be demonstrated in our everyday lives in the sharing of our time, talent and treasure.

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Madam Speaker (cont'd)

On behalf of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago, and on my own behalf, I wish up all Members and all citizens a peaceful, prayerful, beneficent and joyous Eid. Eid Mubarak.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.21p.m.