

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, September 30, 2022*

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2023) BILL, 2022**

[Second Day]

*Question proposed.***Madam Speaker:** Leader of the Opposition.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]**Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC** (*Siparia*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Good morning Members of this honourable Chamber. I am very pleased today to participate in the budget debate, to have this opportunity to response, and I thank you for it on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I intend to attempt to give a voice to the voiceless here in this Chamber.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And I want to thank all the persons who participated in our pre-budget consultations. We had several of those throughout the country. I want to thank my MPs and Senators.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I want to thank our staff in the various offices and I want to thank the Opposition staff for their very hard work in helping us prep for this debate.

Following upon the Minister's four-hour presentation, a giant wave of despair and anger swept over society's poor and working class sections. The *Newsday*, reporting on reactions to the budget 2023, accurately put it, in my respectful view, and I quote:

“...big businesses generally sweet on Imbert's fiscal plan for the next 12 months; while average Trinis said the budget left them feeling very sour.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Painful is how the *Express* fittingly summed up the presentation. Very few were spared this budget's wrath. Farmers, trade unions, maxi-taxi operators, petrol dealers, senior citizens, passengers of the Inter-Island Ferry Service, the travelling public, mothers, housewives, all have flooded the newspapers, flooded the social media and in their own communities with pleas of anguish and grave concerns over Prime Minister Rowley's hateful 2023 budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I ask the question today: Prime Minister, why does your Government brutalize the poor? The poor have feelings too. So, come down from there and face the reality, people are suffering in this country and your budget will only increase their suffering. This budget is a vicious frontal attack on the poor and working classes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It also reeks of classism. Its wicked policies are designed to benefit the PNM upper class at the expense of the poor and working class. Only some greedy, predatory individuals and organizations would genuinely support such policies which heap suffering on the poor and working class. It was so sad to see, post-budget, some fearful persons and organizations praising these

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measures which bring pain to the majority of the population. And they did so because they feared victimization from this PNM Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Government continues to treat the private sector with contempt and disdain because the PNM weaponized access to payments, access to contracts and refunds to instill fear of loss of livelihoods to suppress criticism. This is the most wicked act to perpetrate against the business community.

This budget is also an unnecessary provocation of our poor and working class citizens. There is this seething anger building in the country against an entrenched unfairness being perpetrated against citizens to benefit a few. Our economy is in crisis, our business sector is heavily polarized and the SME sector remains severely challenged. International studies, and of course we know from our own experiences, all these report that citizens are suffering very badly. So, for seven years, this Minister repeatedly cried that falling energy prices had challenged revenue streams of the country and that was his justification for the wicked, heartbreaking measures perpetrated over the past seven years. That was his justification for reduction and removal of subsidies, for including multiple times they raised fuel price, laughing while citizens suffered.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That was their justification for not increasing the value of social grants, pensions, public assistance to realistic levels. That was their justification for stalling projects in specific areas, such as schools, pre-schools, highways, university expansion, hospitals, bridges, drainage, road repair, police stations, in every area of life. That was their justification for Government's

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inability to conclude negotiations with unions offering zero and one and four per cent salary increases even as the cost of living continued to rise. That was their explanation for raising taxes and adding new taxes. So, logically, like everyone else, when world oil, gas and ammonia prices skyrocketed, as it has done in the past 17 months, dramatically increasing revenue, people expected an opposite response, at the very least a softening of the severely constrictive policies Government had instituted over the past 84 months.

Like the rest of the population, we were hoping for a budget to address the realities in our country. What happened instead, Madam Speaker? The Government's reaction was to introduce and raise even more taxes, remove even more subsidies, raise fuel prices yet again and offer unions almost less than minimum wage. Instead of sustainable measures for growth, development and an increase in the quality of life of people, their presentation was a long, tiring, misleading diatribe, laced with statistical deceit, bluff, and outright manipulation and falsification of data.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, I observed and you may have observed that after that long—during that long speech, many Members on the other side were looking half asleep. It appeared they were falling asleep and the only time they came to life and appeared to be very elated is when the Minister finished and then they thumped their desks as if to say, “Thank God, he is finished, he is done”—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—after that long diatribe. Today I intend to analyze the budget presentation and the budget documents, and to show that this has been

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an evil act of brutality against the poor and working class. I say, Prime Minister, poor people have feelings too, withdraw this budget and call an election now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In my response, I propose to provide analytical evidence of the data available to demonstrate what I have said, that this is a brutal act against the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I will do so by firstly looking at a brief overview of the Minister's presentation, then I will look at the macroeconomic fundamentals and the state of economy. I will then look at sectorial details and failed, broken promises. I will then look at the ongoing deliberate failure to deliver on promises for seven consecutive years. I will talk a bit about our track record of unparalleled progressive performance—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and delivery of good and services in our term in government. I will also propose some UNC solutions for when we form the next government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I say without doubt the UNC will indeed form the next government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I turn now to a brief overview of the Minister's presentation. Madam Speaker, I will speak at large and in the whole and my colleagues will develop with respect to the various sectors and present more details. If I take a brief overview of the presentation last Monday, I noted that the Minister began by lamenting that on assuming office he faced challenges ranging from the fall in oil prices, the fiscal concessions my government gave and the

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pandemic's effects. The Minister, however, did not speak to the fact that unlike most economies in the Caribbean, he inherited from us significant financial buffers, such as foreign reserves of more than US \$10 billion, one of the highest in the region.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: He also inherited as a financial buffer US 5.6 billion in the HSF. While we recognized that COVID affected every economy negatively, the US dollar financial buffers and the low debt-to-GDP ratio that the Minister inherited from us, that is what took us out of the crisis, helped us out.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: As usual, the Minister stated there had been a turnaround in gas production. The Minister has been consistently wrong—I think one reporter, Curtis Williams, called him out on it—in his projections about gas production. So, he talked about a turnaround giving the impression of full recovery. The Minister did not mention, again, that he inherited gas production of 3.8 bcf a day from us, which under his Government has shrunk to 2.4 bcf per day. This is what caused the closure of LNG Train 1. Even if all the Minister's promised gas production comes on stream, he is still projecting 2022 and 2023 gas production figures substantially lower than what he met when he came into office when we left in 2015. The Minister also gave no credit to the fiscal concessions granted by my government which produced a Juniper field, without which—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—the 2.9 bcf a day that he says is now being produced, that would not have occurred nor did he give credit to the Savannah and Macadamia fields which also came out of our fiscal concessions and which will

contribute in keeping output of gas up over the next three years.

The Minister also made much of the renewable energy projects intended to produce 10 per cent of the output from alternative sources but this is a promise that he had made in 2016. His goal when he made the promise in 2016 was to achieve it by 2021. Yet, Monday this was surreptitiously adjusted to become a reality in 2023, and now even that goal of 2023 achievement is in jeopardy.

Nowhere did the Minister state how much electricity is consumed in T&T annually. I am sure that he will be astounded when he finds out and he will then have to better project what the milestones are to achieving his goals about not using fossil energy but to have renewable energy. He does not tell us about the other projects that will get us there for that goal he has now for 2023. As usual, it is just more glib speech aimed at fooling the population into believing that the Government knows what it is doing. It is very clear the Government has no clue about what it is doing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

10.15 a.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The pièce de résistance in his opening was to use some nominal GDP to say that the economy's performance, that we were doing well and to provide guidance on what is happening. It probably does the Minister's ego good to say that he has growth again after six years of contraction under his stewardship. However, Madam Speaker, it must be noted no economist, no Minister in the world uses nominal data to evaluate performance and determine the economy's way forward. Was the use of this methodology an attempt to mislead the population? The Minister concealed that there would be a deficit in 2022, although he tried to justify this by saying that he had transferred moneys into the

HSF.

It is instructive to note that under my Government in 2015, which was an election year, the price of oil dropped to an average of \$48 per barrel. The economy had in that year the lowest deficit in 10 years of \$2.7 million—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and all this was possible under the guidance of our country's best finance Minister, Mr. Larry Howai.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Minister also did not say that under his negligence the deficits on a cumulative basis amounted to \$32 billion between the years 2016 to 2019, and when 2020 is included his deficits totalled close to \$50 billion more than three times the level incurred under the Government I led. This, he, and some business chambers, call fiscal prudence. How can that be fiscal prudence when your deficits amount close to \$50 billion? It is yet to be explained by them how doubling the deficit is fiscal prudence in the same way they still have to explain how moving the debt to GDP level to 88.7 per cent is prudent management and prudent fiscal management. Where is the prudent management in that?

The Minister made much of the fact that he contained Government expenditure reducing it by up to \$9 billion. What he did not say is that this figure has increased. And what is more important is that the reduction in expenditure was achieved by a decrease in capital expenditure with seriously constrains the productive capacity of the nation. It is also amazing how proud the Minister seems to be of the so-called upgrade in the rating outlook by Standard & Poor's—upgrade. The Minister said in the first time in 15 years Standard & Poor's made a

change. Madam Speaker, that was not an upgrade in the rating. That was an upgrade in the outlook.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar, SC: And what is more important is the Minister inherited an economy from us that was rated A by Standard & Poor's and he has piloted it into just above junk status now, and that has been staved off by a further downgrade not because of any magic, or any plan or policy that he had, but because of the Ukraine/Russia war and increase in commodity prices. The economy was an investment grade economy under my watch by both Standard & Poor's and Moody's.

Interestingly, the Minister discontinued showcasing Moody's rating after they had showed how poorly he was managing the economy and they reduced us to junk status. You remember in the past when he was unhappy with the ratings, he said he was going to hire a third rating company—what was it? Fitch. He was going to hire Fitch to do another rating. Whatever became of that? I never heard of that third rating. Maybe the Minister will tell us if he got a different grading from Standard & Poor's and from Moody's.

The Minister continues to lament the cost of the fuel subsidy. That was introduced by a previous PNM administration, but apart from laying the burden on the population what is this Minister and Government doing to ease the burden? So we lament—you lament each time the subsidy and what a burden it is to the State, and you will share it with the population and so on. But what are you doing about it? It did not just happen. This has been going on for years. My Government, again under the guidance of my then Minister of Energy and my then Minister of Finance, we recognized the impact of the cost of the subsidy, and what we did we

began introducing natural gas as a fuel for vehicles.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: While we acknowledge that the world is going to hybrid and electric vehicles, we have a legacy inventory of over 500,000 vehicles which are petrol driven and which will benefit from conversion to natural gas. So we recognize that. We saw this as a possible solution to facilitate this conversion. That we realized we will have to have network of natural gas stations throughout the country, and we set about establishing that. However, another initiative that they killed and did away with, and now then come to cry about the subsidy without any solution as to how you are going to deal with high price of natural gas and all fossil fuels in the world economy.

I turn now to the state of the economy. Now this is a very important aspect of any budget presentation and what I have noticed, Madam Speaker, is that in many instances the data has been cherry-picked, the data has been falsified to some extent—not necessarily by the Minister—and just to try to fool people into thinking, “Hey things are great”. Remember when the Minister told us, “I can see clearly now?” The Minister told us about turnaround, every budget everything is going great, but yet the economy has contracted every single year under the watch of this Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Every single year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: One of the most widely used measures of a country is stability and growth, what is known as GDP (Gross Domestic Product). That is the value of goods and services corrected for price increases caused by

inflation. When there is economic growth then your real GDP increases.

GDP as I mentioned about nominal before, you can report it in the nominal dollar value of all goods and services. However, nominal GDP is misleading because output value can increase only because prices have increased as opposed to increased production of goods and services.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That is why I said nobody uses nominal GDP. The international standard to measure economy growth is real GDP. I believe any attempt to use nominal GDP to compare over the years to claim economic growth is either based on intellectual dishonesty, statistical fraud, or academic professional incompetence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And yet—

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, Ma'am.

Madam Speaker:—some of those words are in my view imputing improper motive. So I will ask you to withdraw those words and find another way to put over what you—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam, I am guided. I am not saying the Minister has done this. I am saying in my respectful view if this is being done, that is how I view it in my view. I have not said that the Minister is guilty of any of this.

Madam Speaker: I ruled. I have asked you to withdraw it and find another way to say it.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Certainty. I hope this does not continue for the

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rest of the morning.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar, SC: So what did the Minister do?

Madam Speaker: Member—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker:—as you know you have freedom of speech within the confines of the Standing Orders. So withdraw and please proceed.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I withdraw the statements. They are not made as against the Minister. It is against the use nominal GDP for growth. I withdraw the statements.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In April 2022 the Minister used nominal GDP to boast that all sectors grew in 2021. At that time the Minister had data until the end of that 2021 year and, therefore, he knew the truth based on the data. But having announced in his 2021 Budget Statement that the economy would return to sustainable growth that year, the Minister used the nominal data, which as I said, is misleading to be used.

Let the share the truth in terms of GDP which is not being disclosed to the population. Information I downloaded yesterday from the CSO website clearly shows that real GDP had fallen by \$37.5 billion between when this Government took office and 2021—fallen by \$37.5 billion. The last full year that the CSO has data for is 2021. The data also shows that the Minister was wrong in claiming that GDP grew in 2021. May I remind, Madam Speaker, that in calendar 2014, the last full year under my Government, our country produced \$187.1 billion in GDP, one of the highest in our nation's history.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar, SC: By 2020, real GDP had dropped to \$151.1 billion, and in 2021 the CSO stats clearly stated GDP had fallen yet again by another \$1.55 billion.

Now I have searched, Madam, to determine where the Minister got the figure from and realized that that was his own figure since the CSO only has reference to the first quarter of 2022 which showed a continuing contraction of GDP. I will ask the Minister to tell us that the figure quoted if you will give us the source of that data.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I say further, Madam, after seven years and spending about \$393 billion, the Government still has not been able to generate the level of production in this economy as we did and which he met when he came in, in 2015. Seven years later he is still billions away from what he had at the start, and that in my respectful view indicates failure on the part of this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The fact is that far from GDP being the highest ever, the actual figure show that output in T&T has shrunk to what it was decades ago.

Under this Minister and this Government the country's production of goods and services has collapsed. One year ago in this House the Minister announced his projection for the TT economy of overall real economic growth of up to 5 per cent. At the recent spotlight event the Minister continued his narrative and again claimed an increase in the country's GDP. He claimed the TT economy was enjoying a strong recovery. Ironically, Madam, hours later, the CSO revealed the economy

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had contracted during the last quarter of '21 and again in the first quarter of 2022. I believe the CSO data, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and I have to ask the question if that is why there are some who were hell bent on removing the CSO and want to create a statistical institute that will be under the control of political operatives. So the CSO has given us the numbers and those are the numbers that we accept. The Central Bank also reported economic contractions in the energy sector in the second quarter signalling likelihood of another year of contraction in 2022. So where is the stability?

The Minister puts as his theme “Tenacity and Stability”. The only tenacity I see is to continue to fail. That is the only thing you have tenacity for.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Where is the stability when the economy continue to contract year after year as evidenced by real GDP? In fact in every metric, Madam Speaker, in every metric and in every sector there has been a decline in everything in the country. One year ago the Minister in this House had for the umpteenth time plucked a random number from the sky predicting real economy growth in 2022 of up to 5 per cent, premised on the energy sector growing on 13 per cent.

On Monday in his 2023 Budget Statement the Minister boasted that Government policy in the last two years paved the way for a recovery in all economy sectors. Nothing is further from the truth. The review of the economy produced by this very Minister, Ministry of Finance 2022, that we got this week, showed contractions in multiple sectors. Minister says we paved the way for

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recovery in all sectors, the review of the economy is showing that there were contractions in multiple sectors in 2021 including mining and quarrying, a minus 5.2 per cent; trade and repairs, minus 4.7 per cent; accommodation and food supplies, minus 5.9 per cent; information and communication, minus 0.5 per cent; professional and scientific services, minus 2.1 per cent.

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The data, first quarter for 2022, show contractions in the same sector. So in 2021 and in 2022 but yet the Minister was projecting recovery and growth. Contrary to the Minister's claims, the TT economy is not growing, it is declining.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And contrary to the view that these contractions were caused by first Kamla and the UNC and the policies of our government, then by COVID, let us remind ourselves, there was no COVID in 2016, there was no COVID in 2017, there was no COVID in 2018 and the GDP declined in each of these years. So it is evident that the cause for economic collapse lies not with COVID but something much more substantial which lies squarely at the hands and feet of this Minister and his Government. While GDP growth does not measure individual benefit from the national output, it provides a framework to assess the general level of opportunity in the country.

I turn now to GDP per capita. One of the critical elements of Standard & Poor's reviews is the GDP per capita as a rough measure of the potential spread of economic development and the potential impact on socio-economic stability. Any investor looking at this metric cannot help but note that, under my five-year tenure, our developmental plans, policies, sectorial and geographic distribution ensured the broadest possible participation in the national economy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So the metric will show under my Government GDP per capita increased by almost \$40,000, real GDP per capita was \$140,110 during our last full year in office. This increase resulted in an elevated standard of living across the board. Within five years, this PNM Government has effectively erased that as evident by the fall in GDP per capita under their watch. According to the latest available data at the CSO 2021, real GDP per capita stands at \$109,391. This means every citizen of our country has become poorer by \$30,718 because of this Government's policies and practices. Under this Government, real GDP per capita has fallen by 22 per cent which shows in the reduction of the standard of living of the vast majority of our citizens. These are irrefutable facts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I find also in the Minister's projections an alarming GDP growth claim. This was used in the growth estimates produced by the staff under the Minister of Finance. The Minister claimed in his 2023 Budget Statement Monday and I quote page 15:

“...our economy is projected to recover with real GDP growth of 2 per cent for the full year.”

I repeat:

“...our economy is projected to recover with real GDP growth of 2 per cent for the full year.”

The challenge is that the CSO did not produce this 2 per cent growth claim. The Ministry of Finance makes it clear that this year's *Review of the Economy* where he states and I quote from the *Review of the Economy*, the books. This is one of the books put out by the Minister of Finance. I quote:

“In 2019, the CSO stopped producing current year estimates of GDP in keeping with the guidelines of international good governance practices in national statistical reporting. This ensures a separation of activities related to GDP compilation which is the responsibility of a National Statistical Office, from activities related to forecasting, preparing GDP projections which lie with another agency.”

The note in the RoE continues and I quote:

“...the Ministry of Finance has taken responsibility for the current year forecasts.”

“...the Ministry of Finance has taken responsibility for the current year forecasts. However, due to the limited availability of data, the Ministry is constrained in its ability to prepare forecasts for the full gamut of sectors that constitute the new ISIC Rev. 4 methodology of the CSO. As a result, the Ministry has relied to a great extent on...”—on guess what?—“qualitative data to give its best judgment of real economic activity.”

Minister, I do not believe you. I do not trust your numbers. I do not trust the numbers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What it means is that the Ministry of Finance has placed a guesstimate on the public record, not an estimate of GDP growth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And to make matters worse, it is not one that the CSO can approve given that the Ministry of Finance admits in that same quote that I gave you, they do not have the capacity to make proper projections. I therefore advise, with all due respect, all Members present and the nation at large, to follow

the advice of the technocrats at the Ministry of Finance and not compare GDP data from CSO with the guesstimate of this 2 per cent growth presented by the Minister.

As an overall macroeconomic direction, Madam Speaker, the Government has no clear policy direction to signal to local and foreign investors where to place their capital. Citizens do not have a clear focus on what sectors will be growing and how to prepare to take advantage of potential growth sectors through education, training and for employment. Domestic and foreign investors rely on GDP growth as a back-of-the-envelope indicator of economic prosperity in a market when conducting their due diligence and whether to enter, increase investment or to withdraw.

Investors will look on with grave concern at an energy-based economy which continues to record declines in the face of very high prices in the energy sector. Foreign investors will form one conclusion, the environment for business is not favourable, and this is the critical reason why the economy continues to slide downwards under this Government. No amount of marketing can mask a failing economy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Worse, the fact that the Government continues to misrepresent the facts will not instil confidence in the domestic or foreign investors.

I turn to credit ratings, Madam Speaker. Credit ratings, we have used over the years Standard & Poor's rating and they find that the rating has fallen under this Government, as I said before, from an A grade under our tenure to a BBB plus, then BBB and then BB minus under the management of this Government. In fact, in 2020, the agency downgraded the country to a BB minus rating which it

maintains in the July 2022 assessment of Trinidad and Tobago. And yes, S&P made a minor change in July 2022 shifting its projected future outlook—I make the point again, outlook not rating—to stable based on expectations of structural developments in the economy promised by the Government. Based on that minor change, the Minister, as I said, seized the opportunity to claim Trinidad and Tobago is a safe haven for investors. Chooses once more to ignore the fact that the actual rating has not improved and the outlook was not positive but stable, suggesting at worse, the hope for no further deterioration.

On page 37 of his Budget Statement, the Minister told this country and I quote:

“...as S&P puts it:

- the stable”—report—“reflects their expectations that high prices of key exports will more than offset the impact of lower than expected energy production...”

Since when has this Minister or this Government been setting world energy prices and why is it that the Standard & Poor’s is of the review that energy production will be lower than expected when the Minister boasts in every forum, including last Monday, about increased energy sector production? The S&P, why are they talking about lower than expected energy production? I will come back to that in a moment.

We look at the Moody’s credit ratings. The Minister does not mention our ratings from Moody’s in his speech on Monday and we are not surprised. The Minister did not tell us that the *2022 Review of the Economy* published by his Ministry outlines that Moody’s assigned credit ratings of non-investment rates of BA1 and BA2 for 2021. So he would not sing about that, not seeing clearly about

that at all. In 2022, Moody's ratings have been rebased to a 2021-base year and as expected are unlikely to change substantially since it would be influenced by what is known to be temporary windfall in earnings generated by external market forces. What do these ratings mean? They mean that TT issues are judged to be speculative and of substantial credit risk. It means that international lenders and investors would note that we fell from an investment grade under this Government. We are now at the point where we are viewed as having a substantial risk of default on principal or interest payments for Government debt.

I turn to the forex which is another very troubling issue especially in the light of the Minister's claims on Monday about the EximBank and how much it had achieved. The devil is always in the details, Madam Speaker. Accessing foreign exchange remains a severe challenge except for a chosen few. In the 2022 budget, the Minister boasted that one of access to STR Covid support of US 644 million propped up the failing foreign exchange reserves. Repeated raiding of the HSF would also have added some currency liquidity to the overall figure. However, average users have not benefited from that liquidity. The distribution of foreign exchange remains a carefully guarded secret by this Government and their Governor of the Central Bank.

However, based on previous revelations by a more forthright governor of the bank, it became clear that certain financial institutions still have first right over available currency from the Central Bank. These institutions are part of conglomerates earning foreign exchange through trade, forward and backward linkages and subsidiaries. The Central Bank has been pumping an average of US \$100 million into the domestic economy every month for the last two years. And this the Minister tells, he claims, that 114 SMEs out of a total of 136 companies

have been able to access US \$395 million in 2022.

With the greatest of respect, Minister, that figure tells us nothing. Tell us how much of that 395 actually went to these SMEs because it is likely that the 24 large companies out of that group you talk of consumed the lion's share. So it is not enough to call the numbers but to disaggregate according to the quantum that each received. Who are these large manufacturers? What business are they involved in? Are they importing raw materials, say pasta and ketchup? I ask the question. In this very next sentence Minister told us that 87 importers got US 488 million. To do what? To supply the nation with food, to supply the nation with pharmaceuticals, to supply the nation with sanitary products, PPE and what the Minister termed "other essential supplies". I ask the Minister to tell the country whether any of these companies, whether a subsidiary or parent are part of the same conglomerates receiving foreign exchange under the other Head, under both Heads therefore. Tell us whether these large companies are also part of the banking sector and have access to foreign exchange there as well.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am asking for a friend because we all know that the mega company in charge of the pharmaceutical sector in this country is owned by a close associate of the PNM and a friend of the big man himself and this company is also a manufacturer of food products. So on the other hand, you have the manufacturing sector receiving, on the other hand, you are receiving because you are importing.

Now when the EximBank was set up, and I checked it on the website just last night, when the EximBank was set up and up to last night, it says its purpose is to deal with foreign exchange for exports.

10.45 a.m.

So now its mandate has changed because now you are giving foreign exchange for exports, but also for imports. And, therefore, we need to know the breakdown and the companies involved. I challenge you Minister, if there is nothing to hide, provide a comprehensive list of the companies who have been in receipt of the US \$883 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This, when a friend recently told me his mother was going abroad and went to the bank and he asked, “Can I get US \$500? My mom is going for some medical attention.” And they took a week and they gave him US \$100. The poor have feelings too, you know. Come down from there. The poor have feelings too.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It is important to note that in 2015 the total US dollar equivalent of foreign currency sold to the public by all authorized dealers was \$7.4 billion and despite that, even though we sold \$7.4 billion, we had the foreign reserves of US \$10.5 billion.

Under this Finance Minister foreign currency sales to the public dropped to US dollar equivalent of 4.97 billion as for 2021. So we sold 7.4 billion. They have sold 4.97 billion. I found something strange and perhaps the Minister can tell us why this is happening; that while sales of many of the traditional currencies, Canadian, Japanese, Euro, et cetera, decreased, the sales of Jamaican dollars more than doubled over the period. I cannot say why.

I come back to saying that access to foreign exchange is critical consideration for any foreign investor, essentially for repatriation of funds. The

reduction in sales is not because of low demand. The reduction in the forex sales is not because there is low demand. The media is replete with stories about businesses, especially small traders, seeking but unable to get foreign exchange. One group, LJ Williams Limited, has been so severely affected by the shortage of foreign exchange, they have been forced to reconsider investments in Trinidad.

In the financial report for the period ending December 31, 2021, they state and I quote:

“The continued shortage of foreign exchange restricts our growth and has resulted in reconsidering investments in Trinidad for the time being.”

This story is being replayed in every company in our country, of course, except with respect to those with access. So except people who have been the lucky few individuals and businesses receiving the billions in US dollars distributed annually, despite the 30 per cent reduction of foreign currency sales, and the hundreds of millions of US dollars sourced through the HSF withdrawals from IMF's SAR allocation and other US denominated loans access over the last few years, the forex reserves today are at now \$6.8billion, as at August2022. Remember, they inherited over \$10 billion from us when they came into office. They have now taken that down as at August '22, to 6.8 billion, which is even lower than it was at the same time last year.

Over this Minister's tenure, the country's foreign exchange holdings collapsed by 33 per cent, and that is also an indisputable fact. So what is the real legacy of this Government, when it comes to foreign exchange? Has it been to destroy foreign exchange generators to protect private interests? Who can ever forget the greatest tragedy to hit Trinidad and Tobago was the close down of Petrotrin, which was a foreign exchange earner. Now we have to find foreign

exchange to buy fuels from outside of Trinidad and Tobago. What a tragedy for the people and the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, I say this year's budget offers no hope that the Government has a plan outside of remaining dependent on the declining energy sector, hoping and praying that we will get high world prices. They have no other plan to grow revenue streams and earn foreign exchange in Trinidad and Tobago. Again, this provides no confidence to persons seeking to invest funds in our country.

I turn to the ease of doing business. Madam, I am looking at these as a review of the economy before I go on to look at specific sectors and the management and performance of the Government. These are important indicators that could tell us the story about why we are where we are today.

Last year's budget the Minister committed to improving this country's pitiful showing on the ease of doing business. We were ranked at 105 at the time. But investors will be shocked to see that in terms of specific constituent parts of doing business, our country was ranked even worse. So to register a property, ranked 158. What was done in the last year or seven years to address this? Nothing. What is there in this budget to address this? Nothing. Dealing with construction permits, our rank was at 128. Again, what has been done to address this? Nothing has been done. Trading across borders, ranked 134. Again, nothing done to address this. Paying taxes, imagine we were ranking at 160 to pay taxes. When I know the Minister was always gleeful, joyful and elated every time he talks about taxes. We ranked at 160. What has been done about this? Nothing has been done. Enforcing contracts, ranked 174; almost last in the world. Again what

has been done to address this problem? Nothing.

Only very confused incompetent persons would believe the Government made any improvement to the ease of doing business. This rating was discontinued last year. But we did not need the rating to tell us the horrendous conditions for doing business in the country.

One year ago, the Minister conceded that there was a critical need to take urgent steps to improve the ease of doing business; once again. On Monday the Minister advised the nation the Government was putting high priority on improving the ease of doing business. Incredibly, whilst the Government is saying, through its Minister, high priority in the ease of doing business, the Minister announced two initiatives to help with the ease of doing business. One, a website to give online advice on the regulations for starting or expanding a business. The other was to upgrade the single electronic window. That was established years ago, upgraded multiple times and repeats are being upgraded. This was to facilitate payments for services already administered on the same platform. So there is no real attempt to fix the problems when it comes to ease of doing business.

Earlier Monday, the Minister spoke about the creation of yet another new vehicle, a trade and investment promotion agency. And what is this? This is a merger of the functions of four agencies, which the Government has been spending hundreds of millions for, over the years. This merging all of these, how long is that going to take to bring it all together? How much more are you going to spend to get it going? So the Minister boasted now about 78 lots and five factory shells to be ready for occupation in January at the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate. Does that sound new? I am sure we have heard this before. And I wonder who is

marketing this, given that the trade and investment promotion agency is still not functional. You are now talking about creating that and establishing it. The Minister tells that a mere of 11 of the 83 options have been committed and there are only 90 days left to go in this project. The Minister is boasting about that, 11 out of 83.

In fact, without even knowing who and what would eventually occupy these premises at Phoenix Park, the Minister boldly declares that about 4,500 new jobs will be created whenever the park becomes occupied in the future. When is that, Minister, 4,500 jobs? And I am reminded, many of us in this House we remember the Minister came with the repeated broken promise of a La Brea dry dock. Remember that? And told us thousands of jobs would be created. Well, up to today, no dry dock and no jobs. The Minister also told us about a ply board factory. Remember that? How many jobs. Again PNM, promises never materialize.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I turn now to look at public sector debt. And this is a very troubling issue, the escalation in the national debt. And that national debt is not the Ministers and the Government, you know. That debt is to be paid by tax payers of this country. On Monday, the Minister finally recognized, but he dismissed the public concern about the level of Government debt and our fear of the country's rapid descent into the debt trap. The Minister advised the country, and I quote:

Based on the current borrowing and repayment schedule we expect no significant increase in our total government debt in the 12 months between December2021 and December2022.

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Despite these bold utterances, I note the Minister chose not to tell the population that he had in fact borrowed \$7.3billion in fiscal 2022, \$7.3billion. Those books, the devil is in the detail in those yellow books. And when you look at the estimates of revenue, I think page x in that yellow book, borrowed 7.3billion in fiscal 2022. And guess what? The Minister plans to borrow another \$8.2billion in fiscal 2023 to fund expenditure. Question: When exactly did this borrowing take place in 2021 and '22? When did this take place?

Curiously I also noted the revised figure for total financing needed in fiscal '22 to fund the deficit was 2.43billion. Listen carefully, I noted the revised figure for financing the deficit for 2022 to fund the deficit was 2.433. My question then: Why did the Minister borrow 7.33 billion in fiscal 2022, which is 4.9billion more than his financing needs? Why? Why did you borrow 4.9billion more? Where has this money gone? Where has this money gone? This is a very serious issue. You borrow for financing of your deficits, and so on. And your revised figure for financing needed for '22 was 2.43 billion. Why then did you borrow 7.33billion in fiscal '22? You see, it is not enough to come to the Parliament and boast that total debt is unlikely to change during the calendar year. I challenge the Minister to explain why he borrowed 200 per cent more than he needed to finance his 2022 deficit? Why? What did you do with that money?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Where has that money gone? You have to tell the country.

And again the projection for 2023, the Minister boasted that he will have a deficit of 1.501 million, a deficit of 1.501million. You know, on Monday when I did the press interview a reporter asked me, "This is going to be the most balanced

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budget ever, the closest to a balanced budget”. I do not believe a word of that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: 1.5—I do not believe it. Because if that is so, again, the Minister has questions to answer. Why do you project in your revenue estimates, at same page x in the Estimates of Revenue, why do you intend to borrow \$8.2 billion if your deficit is 1.5 billion? What is that money for? What is that money projected to be used for? That is four and a half times more than the value of the deficit that you will be borrowing to finance. What is this 8.2billion projected for? What is it for? The Minister owes us an explanation. Because for financing you either have borrowing or for deficits you do borrowings. You do extraordinary receipts like sale of assets, and so on. Why are you borrowing 8.2 billion, when you tell us that your deficit is \$1.5billion?

11.00 a.m.

And on top of that, if my memory serves me right, the Minister told us on Monday also, there will be some sale of assets. In the Revenue Estimates nowhere does it tell us which assets are to be sold. If you are going to sell assets, you must tell the country what assets. It is their patrimony.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What are you selling? What are you going to sell? What is expected amount that you will get from the sale of assets? And then, how much—what is that for when you already have financing of \$8.2 billion, which is four and a half times more than the value of the deficit that you project? Something is—the maths not “mathsing.” Something is very, very wrong here. Once again, the maths is not “mathsing”. What is this additional borrowing for? Is this to service debt? If so, which debt? What is this for? On the backs of the Minister’s

unsubstantiated '22 projection, the Minister also boasted that the Government's fiscal consolidation process defined, and I quote, as:

“...revenue enhancement and expenditure restrain...”—was—
“bringing...”—the country's—“debt back on a downward trajectory...”

How that could be back on a downward trajectory when each year you continue to borrow. Every year you continue to borrow. In seven years, let me tell you, Madam Speaker, the Minister raised our net public debt by 50 per cent over what he found in 2015.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Fifty per cent. But he is saying we are on a downward trajectory. The Minister obviously has a different concept or understanding of what is downward and what is upward, downward trajectory.

Frankly, the Minister could come here and talk all he wants about the debt-to-GDP ratio dropping. The fact is that the public sector debt increased every single year since they assumed office by billions of dollars; every single year. And this is in spite of raids on the HSF; in spite of withdrawal from the NIF which total TT 21 billion to fund expenditure, which otherwise you would have had to finance through borrowings.

So, I mentioned, you know, you ever wonder—people tell me about “sprangers”, so you really have to wonder what is going on. So, you are borrowing to finance, you drawing down from the HSF, you drawing down from the NIF, you are selling assets and yet, the money is never enough, you are still with a deficit.

The debt continues to rise although the country has already paid over \$62billion in debt servicing over the last seven years. That is taxpayer's money, \$62billion in debt servicing over the last seven years because they are borrowing

more than they are paying back yearly. As the debt burden rises, they are effectually borrowing to pay debt. That is what it means. They are borrowing to pay debt which you will have to borrow again to pay for and it will continue in a vicious cycle. I am reminded of a book, *The Children of Sisyphus*, that we will be pushing a boulder up a hill and as soon as it reaches a little way, it just rolls back down again. That is what is happening under this Government.

The 2023 Estimates of Expenditure place charges on account of public debt, that is debt servicing, at 9.62 billion for 2022; debt servicing. Not paying the debt, you know, just to service, 22.2—9.6 billion. Do you know what the estimate for 2023 for debt servicing is? \$15.075 billion. So, where is the downward trajectory? Where is all this taxpayers' dollars going? Because you just borrow, borrow and spend. You have no clear plan, no policies for growth, for sustainable development, for the creation of jobs. All you do is borrow, borrow, borrow, tax, tax, tax and spend with not a care in the world.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And so, you have pushed our country into debt trap. Instead of frontally admitting the truth, the Minister keeps spending money that is not his, putting generations of citizens into debt. That is the state of the debt packet under this Government.

I look at the HSF. The Minister boasted he put a deposit. Well, that was the first time they ever put a deposit, eh. But let me tell you what the details are. During the time when they were recklessly indebting our country, they were also drawing down on our ability to repay those debts using our savings.

I am advised the net asset value of the HSF as of September 14, 2022 was US \$4.788 million; US \$4.788 million. In September 2015, the value of our saving in

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC (cont'd)

the HSF was \$5.65 billion; 55. So under us, US 6.55 million. Under this Government, 4.788.2 million.

Over the last seven years, the fund has generated a solid stream of income. If left alone it would have been valued at more than US \$8billion; 8 billion—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—lending strength to our national savings and international foreign exchange buffers. And since the Government changed the legislation—remember, they came to this Parliament and changed the legislation. They mismanaged the economy. They facilitated the extraction of US 2.5 billion from the savings in the HSF, almost half the optimal value of the HSF in just seven years. Took out almost half out of the HSF. That works out to TT \$17 billion withdrawn in seven years. That was money working for citizens by generating millions in interest and dividends annually to add to the total annual value—total value of our savings.

So, let me put this in perspective too. Last Monday, the Minister gleefully boasted, after seven years of withdrawing, they finally deposited US \$163 million into the HSF. Do you know what that works out to be, Madam Speaker? That works out to the Government having deposited to the HSF a paltry 6.5 per cent of what they had withdrawn from the HSF over their term, their seven years. Six per cent of what you had in total withdrawn. I make it very clear, during my tenure, in an era of falling prices, recognizing the need for intergenerational savings, my government had deposited US \$1.2 billion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Do the maths, we deposited over 600 per cent more than this PNM Government. And guess what? We never withdrew a cent

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from the HSF.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What does all of this mean? At the end of the day, it is about job creations, it is about joblessness. I turn now to the issue of unemployment. There remains a significant query about actual employment and underemployment in T&T. Based on NIB reports submitted in Parliament, some 113,000 persons with jobs contributing to the NIB in 2015 were no longer contributing in 2020. What does it mean? Does it mean they no longer have a job? Does it mean they died? What does it mean?—113,000 under my watch who were making contributions to the national insurance, come 2020, no longer making contributions. This implies that 113,000 persons were added to the unemployment pool although this was never reflected in CSO employment data which reported low unemployment levels.

Interestingly, the NIB in 2021 changed the method of calculating the total ensured contributors and this is very suspicious, Madam. The net result when they changed the method was that the figures are showing from 2015 to '21, 70,760 had lost jobs, no longer ensured contributions, and this raises suspicions. There would be persons who would have dropped out because of death, et cetera, but new contributors would have also balanced this out, but here we are. If we accept the NIB narrative—and let us not forget the Chairman of the NIB is, in our view, illegally hand-picked and appointed by this Government, eh.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: According to NIB reports, the total contributors increased by 41,000 from June 2020 to June 2021. This is suspicious as it would mean in the height of lockdowns and business closures, 42,000 jobs were created.

It just does not make sense. In the height of the lockdown, the figures are saying, look, 42,000 people are now back on the employment roll. Available CSO statistics also show a fall in the number of persons employed by 54,000 under this Government. So, that is why I am saying, it is very uncertain from the CSO and from the NIB what the real figures are. I want to make it very clear, this matter of joblessness has received very little serious attention from the Government over the last seven years.

My government prioritized the creation of well-paying sustainable jobs, the creation of new initiatives designed to transform the economy away from the over reliance on oil and gas, and the creation of training opportunity for students to develop and fill roles being opened up for them. In that five-year period, we are able to create 54,500 new jobs—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and to maintain the jobs of those already in employment. And guess what, Madam Speaker? We did that without raising a single tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In fact, we took the tax off the food items, the VAT, we took the tax off 7,000 food items. Not a single tax was raised. And we were able to create 54,500 jobs. Why? Again, it has to do with the strategies, the policies and programmes of the then Government. It was based on a clear understanding that our citizens want opportunities to earn their livelihoods. They want to work for a living. They want to make a fair income for their work but this Government does not understand that.

This Government has been directly responsible for the loss of tens of

thousands of jobs, from the closure of Petrotrin, to the shutting down of state companies, to the job losses in TSTT and elsewhere, and soon WASA, and the port and other places. If the Minister proceeds with their plans outlined in his budget statement, more job losses to come. The massive level of unemployment also has severe social consequences for current and future generations.

Madam, I turn to the impact and the troubling status of the National Insurance Fund, which is a fund to help those in need. People contribute each week or each month, as it may be. So, if and when they fall sick, if and when they have to get a punch pension, that was a contributory scheme that they could fall back upon.

Today, we are faced with an NIB which is increasingly challenged because of the falling number of contributors and a rising value of disbursement—the value of disbursements. So, falling numbers are being put in but you have to pay out more.

Instead of dealing with this matter frontally, the Minister's obsession has been to undermine the integrity of the NIB. I ask again, how can a person be a government nominee, representing the Minister and his Government for years on that board, and overnight he is appointed as chairman when the law requires him to be essentially independent of labour, business, and government?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Again, political interference or a semblance of political interference. Same NIB, same national insurance, the decline in contribution income.

The suspicion is bolstered by the fact that the NIB reported a decline in contribution income to the tune of 175, 48.4 million to 4.5 in 2021. So, the number

of contributors increased but the contribution value decreased by more than 175 million. Do the maths. How is this possible?

Until Monday, I come to the issue of inflation as a serious matter which is threatening the lives and livelihoods and survival of the families of Trinidad and Tobago. Until Monday, I thought everyone in this country would agree that prices had risen substantially, whether in transport, hardware items, clothing, entertainment, food, prices had risen. You could therefore appreciate my amazement when I heard the Minister state on Monday, and I quote:

“...inflation...was kept at bay during the pre-COVID years at the very low level of 1 per cent has been trending upwards to 4.7 per cent in 2022.”

“...inflation was kept at bay...”

—is this a joke? Are you so out of touch with reality? How out of touch the Minister must be to claim that inflation was at bay? And by the way, you know, Madam, I believe his entire Cabinet seems to be out of touch with reality.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When one Member who racks up \$60,000 in monthly salary, bills, roaming bills in thousands of dollars, drinking almond milk and yoghurt, and could glibly speak about sacrifice. Where is the sacrifice? Shame, shame—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—shame.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Another Member takes to Facebook to complain about being cut out of a picture in a newspaper.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I mean, are you for real? Is this real? Are these the people who are running our country? Are these the people running our country? And then the Prime Minister talks about misbehaving. The only misbehavior I am seeing as part of that Government, their Cabinet who have totally mismanaged the economy—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —and put our citizens at risk. I tell them, wake up and smell the coffee, come down from there, face the reality.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And what is that reality Madam Speaker, if you do shopping for yourself, sometimes you will have seen it yourself. Food items, as I said before, no VAT on them rose in price by 12.5 per cent in one heartbeat when they put VAT back onto those 7,000 food items.

This Government presided over several hikes in fuel prices, which caused increased prices and every single good or service with a transportation cost. The cost of manufactured products increased due to increased fees, due to runaway crime, higher costs of imported products, higher duties and so on. And the Ministers in this clueless Government must be the only persons who do not know this. Maybe they do not go shopping for things in the market and in the grocery, they just do not know.

I looked at the components of a typical basket of goods used in many homes in this country. I compared the prices of those products in September 2015, which is when I was last there and September 2022, which is now or just before—well yeah today is the last day of September. And what I found is that some food items had increased by as much as 90 per cent over the last seven years. Many of you

with households will tell you, people tell you, some had increased by over 90 per cent. An economy pack of chicken increased from \$33.98 in 2015, now, to \$44.56. An increase of 31 per cent.

If you had a baby, you had to buy infant formula—one of the cheaper brands was priced at \$165.41 for a 900 gramme package now, that has jumped to \$223.21 this month, an overall price hike of 34 cents. The price of a two kilogramme package of rice increased by 48 per cent from 2015 under my watch at \$18.21—you know what it is now Madam?—\$27.02, \$27.02. The price of a two kilogram pack of flour increased by 50 per cent over the seven years from \$13.44 to \$20.16. Smoked herring with bone raised by 57 per cent. A container of table margarine increased by 90 per cent. Bread, biscuits, soap, salt, onion, garlic, macaroni all increased in price over the last seven years and the Minister says they kept inflation at bay.

The prices of fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, fish have also skyrocketed. The escalation and inflation and the effect on all goods and services produced is even more critical because the Government has refused to settle wage negotiations. So the net effect is what? Salaries have employed persons' wages have been devalued because your purchasing power of your dollar has deteriorated—your wages have deteriorated because of this inflation. For pensioners, those on grants, this is especially difficult and would have resulted in a substantial fall in the standard of living of the working class, the underemployed and the unemployed. And I will come to in a moment, Madam, the little handouts the Minister is going to give to help the poor and people on social grants and so on, I will come to that in a moment. So it is evident that this Government believes its own narrative that the price impact of its policies has been low. This is why they have taken absolutely

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC (cont'd)

no action in any way in this budget, including this budget to deal with increasing financial burdens that they have placed on the backs of our citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Remember the poor, the poor have feelings too. And so, I turn to the overdraft and this is a very troubling matter and I will ask the Minister to tell this country whether he broke the law by going over the legal amounts in overdraft. Remember when they came into office, they said my Government had maxed out the overdraft. They were running on fumes and that was totally untrue—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —it was totally untrue. From the Minister's own words, when the Minister said in August this year, his budget speech he reported current account balance would be in surplus, at the same time citizens accounts are negative. The Minister omitted that the exchequer account as at 30 September, 2021, was overdrawn by \$42.6 billion—page 52 of the Auditor General's Report 2021. As for the seven years he has been in power, the overdraft facility was mapped out and he crossed the limit when he became Minister he maxed out that facility and so that is why he came to Parliament. By Finance Act 2017 he came—the Minister came and the Government came and increased the overdraft limit from 15 per cent to 20 per cent. So when he could not take out any more because the limit was 15 per cent, he then increased the limit so he could take out more—take out more on the overdraft. What was shocking about the Minister's presentation is he admitted that he had crossed his overdraft limit. I quote the Minister on the spotlight:

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Sometimes we had to tell the Central Bank just ease up a little bit. Sometimes we went over the overdraft by 1 per cent in the 2016—2018 period.

This is the Minister, the great spotlight.

Sometimes we had to tell the Central Bank just ease up a little bit. Sometimes we went over the overdraft by 1 per cent in 2016 to 2018 period.

Is it here that the Minister is confessing that he broke the law because the overdraft facility is prescribed by law?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Section 46 of the Central Bank Act, which Government this overdraft facility provides that the bank and only advance with the increased limit now what the Minister had changed, advance 20 per cent of the estimated annual revenues of the Government. Therefore, it is illegal if the Minister was responsible for taking out anything above the 20 per cent overdraft. The fact that the Minister had to break the law shows the level of desperation due to the financial incompetence and fiscal ineptitude of this Government. The Minister must be held accountable.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Now that Exchequer account has been overdrawn since 2003, when the Minister took office in 2015, the account was overdrawn by 20.1 billion—note 2015 when he came into office 20.1 billion. In '21 under his watch, the account is now overdrawn by \$42.6 billion. They have overdrawn the account by \$22.5 billion and have little to show for it—little to show for it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And all of this, review of the economy, the state of the economy under this Government can be compared, really starkly compared, to the state of the economy under the Government I led. In our five years in Government we invested in people, projects and we could show development in every sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I ask today, given the state of the economy which I said you have placed the economy on a deathbed, it is not just unhealthy is on a deathbed. What are the measures in this budget to transform and revitalize the economy? Where are their measures for dealing increased prices, especially food prices? The economy under the UNC-led Government move from minus 4.4 per cent in 2009 to recovery and growth by early 2021.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We left the highest levels of foreign reserves ever, US\$10.46 billion—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —with 11 months import cover. We left sizable sums in HSF which I mentioned before. And as we are on that HSF, you know the Minister on Monday boasted about putting money into the HSF, but what the Minister did not tell us, what is the NAV? What is the net asset value of that HSF today? I quoted a number that I was advised it was at a certain level, which means that it plummeted from where it was in 2015. I think the Minister must tell the country what is the net asset value of that HSF today and why—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —and why it has plummeted? There was a report recently that it was down by \$1.84 billion. Minister you owe the country a duty to be honest and tell the country what is the NAV in the HSF today. And yes, I think it is only when MP Charles sent a pre-action letter, the Minister hastened to come to Parliament to tell us that he had deposited money. But the Minister still has not told us what the net asset value is in that HSF. So is that another breach of the law? Are you not supposedly to lay a report in Parliament? And would you want us to send another pre-action letter before you do so?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I go back, we had a low debt to GDP of 45 per cent. In our five years in office, we tripled foreign direct investment in T & T.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It was at 500 million when we went into office and over our time, increased a 1.5 not million \$1.5 billion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Since then, under this Government there has been no FDI, instead there is outflows, outflows—not inflow of FDI, no foreign direct investment is coming in but going out, that is where this incompetent Government has taken us. That helped us to shield—sorry—we work to diversify the economy, we grew non-energy real GDP by \$6.45 billion, or 12 per cent and that also helped us, to shield us from the energy price shocks—energy price fluctuations. We raised the minimum wage, not once, we raised it twice—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —from \$9 to 12.50 and then to \$15. And as I said before, we created over 54,000 jobs. We brought the unemployment rate from the 10 per cent we had met down to 3 per cent—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —that was the work we did. Today, I say without fear of contradiction, we built the economy, we improved the quality of life of our citizens and we will do that again when we form the next Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Now every year, every budget, there is a segment in the budget statement and in fact, if you take one budget statement to the other, the table of contents is almost identical. You will find the same words and one of these recurring nightmares is the heading, “institutional building”—“institutional building”.

Now this Government has done the most to retire the independence and integrity of institutions. From its control of the Central Bank, to compromising of the Office of the President, the illegal appointment of the new NIB Chairman, the interference of the Police Service Commission, the lack of implementation of procurement legislation and the list goes on. So under institutional building, the Minister list of procurement—institutional building each year, procurement, procurement—recurring broken promises, every year promised implementation of the procurement legislation. According to the Chairman of the Office of Procurement Regulator, Moonilal Lalchan—not Roodal Moonilal—Moonilal Lalchan [*Laughs*—I do not know if they are related. On 14th of January 2020, the Procurement Regulator stated the T & T loses a conservative figure of 5.2 billion per year on corruption, which he said could have been used to deliver better health

care, but he did not say it but better health care and education but it instead it could have been used for schools, settling salary and wage negotiations with all the goodies in the public sector.

11.30 a.m.

This meant that we would have lost \$36.4 billion to corruption over the last seven years because this Government refuses and continues to refuse to implement the Procurement Act that is sitting on the law books since 2015, which my government had passed. But we should have known, because when we brought that Bill to Parliament, in our time in office, they walked out the JSC. They did not want to participate in the JSC and so on. So, they were never in favour of procurement legislation. It is clear they are still not, because seven years later, they have failed to proclaim that piece of legislation, and the amounts of moneys lost to corruption—every dollar lost to corruption is a dollar that could feed a child, a dollar that could buy textbooks, a dollar that could buy laptops. But no, they do not want to do it.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: For seven years, they delayed in bringing the regulations to Parliament. Now, the regulations have been passed but, guess what? A new reason for delay now. First they said we have to get the regulations passed, we cannot proclaim this, you know. But now, what it is? They are now say that the new AG has to review the work of the fired AG. Another delaying tactic. And somehow the Chief Justice gets embroiled in sending some piece of paper to the new Attorney General, which they will not disclose to the population, and use that now to say they cannot implement the procurement law. They will not procure. They will not do it.

And I noticed there is some money for a house for somebody in the budget estimates, you know. Somebody is getting a lot of money for a house. I call no names. For seven years it delayed. For seven budgets, we heard about the Procurement Act to be operationalized, but this year was different. This was a repeat, repeat. This year, guess what? It was not mentioned at all in the four-hour presentation, 180 pages speech, not a word about procurement. It has vanished. It has vanished off the face of the earth. They have no intention of bringing procurement legislation.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: None. So, it is all mamaguy, when the Minister speaks about institutional strengthening. This was one of the aspects of institutional strengthening. Today, I give the commitment that when the UNC forms the next government, we will move swiftly to proclaim the Procurement Act.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And in spite of all the delay, delay, seven years, you know what they also did Madam? The Government gutted the procurement legislation. They removed billion-dollar contracts from being scrutinized. They removed from it—they came and watered it down during these seven years and they are still not happy, you know. Even though they watered it down so much, they still do not want to put it into place. They changed the law, so it would not apply to the disposal of state lands. Are we disposing of the Caroni lands? Are we disposing of the Petrotrin lands? To whom and how? To whom and how? Why do we not want this to be scrutinized? The country needs to know to whom these lands will be sold, leased, given away. So they took it out so they could sell cheaply to their friends, family and financiers. They can now give contracts,

because they took away this from the law—contracts to their lawyers and bankers, because the law no longer applies to legal services, financial services, auditing services, accounting services and medical services. Not to be scrutinized. These contracts are not to be scrutinized under the procurement legislation.

So, they are spending your money, but they do not want you to know to whom it is going. Ask yourself, why? Ask yourself, why? We know about some financial services in the tune of millions to billions of dollars that these contracts are going to a relative, a family member of a Cabinet Minister. We know of it. The Minister has to recuse himself umpteen times from the Cabinet. These should be opened to public scrutiny under the law.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In our democracy, it is not government by secrecy and should not be. And now in this budget, Madam, they talk about public/private partnerships. Several of them, billion-dollar deals, but they had taken that out of the procurement law, so they can enter into public/private partnerships with family, friends and financiers without the scrutiny of the procurement legislation, because they gutted it and took it out. Budget 2023 speaks to many such projects for public/private partnerships.

I want to ask again to tell you ask yourself, why? So no procurement legislation, millions of dollars going into corruption, and what is happening? You cannot buy laptops for our children. You cannot put medicine for the CDAP in the hospitals—in the hospitals or in the CDAP. You cannot provide textbooks for the children. You cannot settle wage negotiations. You cannot help the poor, but you are getting million/billion-dollar contracts without scrutiny.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This is intolerable. You should be ashamed of yourselves.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Ashamed of yourselves. You know, I want to ask the Member for Arima, we had the fortunate circumstance of attending the law school together, a very decent lady. I want to ask her, Member, would you be voting for these policies and programmes, these wicked policies and programmes that bring hardship on the poor? I will ask attorney Scotland, will you be voting for these programmes and policies that are wreaking hardship on people? We wait to see. When you talk, would you do that or do you have a conscience or a heart that you will stand for the poor people and the most vulnerable in the country?

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, procurement under institutional building, and, as I said, this Government has no interest in building independent institutions with integrity.

Another repeating, repeating promise under building institutions is the National Statistical Institute. This non-performing Government keeps making this promise year after year and this year was no different. In fact, the Minister did speak about this one on Monday in his statement. Like a broken record, the Minister comes year after year, he promises the Government will implement the National Statistical Institute since 2016 and, again, repeated in 2023 budget. Year after year, the Government continues to make critical decisions without any proper data.

In last year's budget, we were told that they would bring the law to Parliament, but they did not. What are the facts here, because there seems to be a

body of persons who want to blame the Opposition for the failure of this piece of legislation to be passed in the Parliament? Let me give you to facts, Madam. That NSI, the National Statistical Institute Bill, was laid in June 2018 in the Third Session of the Eleventh Parliament. There was no debate on the Bill for the entire session. Thereafter, in the Fourth Session, after many months, the Bill was debated on the 01st of February, 2019 and then referred to a joint select committee. The committee did not complete its work in the Fourth Session, so it was carried over to the Fifth Session.

On the 2nd October, 2019, the joint select committee was given until the 31st December to report to the Parliament. The JSC never completed its work and never reported to the Parliament. Coming down now to 2020. On the 3rd July 2020, the Parliament was dissolved and that Bill lapsed. There was never a final report of the JSC. There was no debate on the Bill from the JSC and no vote was ever taken.

We are now in the Second Session of the Twelfth Parliament and no Bill is in sight, none has been laid. So, the Government has deliberately stifled the Bill and some want to blame the Opposition. The Minister of Finance shamelessly has the nerve to come to Parliament again, and promise this NSI. While we understand that there needs to be a modernization of the CSO, the creation of any alternative body must be an independent body, free from the control and influence of politicians.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And this is so vital, because you do not want a politician or politicians telling what statistics to print, because then they will come every year and say: “Turnaround, they can see clearly there is growth, there is

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC (cont'd)

recovery, everything is booming, things are great.” You have to have an independent statistical body in a country to get data that you can rely upon, and then you could be data driven in making your policies and programmes. So, we understand that we need to have a modernized statistical office. This year, the Minister then jabs he hopes the Opposition supports the law. Let me tell you Sir and tell the Government, we will support the NSI, but we had concerns with the Bill, the original one, and if these concerns are not addressed, you will not get our support.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Our concerns included that the Minister had too much involvement in the NSI in that Bill where it was proposed that the Minister appoints all six members on the board of the NSI. How can you expect any reasonable, right-thinking person to support that where the Minister will appoint all the members of the statistical board? Then the Minister calls up and say, listen, we will get a growth rate of 20 per cent. Listen, I predict we will get gas production up by 100 per cent, all production. No. You must have an independent statistical institution. So, we could not support that. We could not support it.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The second, the process of appointing the director, the power and jurisdiction of the director, and the defined relationships with the board and other entities required greater clarity. Thirdly, financing for independence and autonomy, a direct fiscal allocation for the NSI.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You cannot go begging cap-in-hand as so many other Ministries and people do. I think some Ministers even say they are not

getting no money from the Minister of Finance, not getting no money. They should have an independent vote, fiscal allocation, to keep their independence. There were many other issues but, as I say, the Opposition is willing to support, provided that the concerns are met. And it is not only the Opposition who has raised concerns about this Minister's political influence over the statistical institute. Retired statistician Lance Busby lamented in a LoopTT article after reviewing the Bill that there needs to be more autonomy for the institute.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This Government is not serious about improving data collection in the country. All talk and no action and no institutional building in this regard.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Another area for institutional building is the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. The Minister spends a lot of time talking about the TTRA, seems he finds joy, as I say, in taxing the population. By Act 17 of 2021, this is what happened. The Government unscrupulously removed the special majority—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: I rise on Standing Order 49, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you for the break.

Madam Speaker: This is under challenge?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Yes, it is under challenge.

Madam Speaker: All right. So, Member, I allowed you a lil leeway, but if this is under challenge, please do not go into any depth with respect to this matter.

11.45 a.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: I am guided, Madam Speaker. So the Minister

removed the special majority and that has become a modus operandi of the Government. They will bring a Bill that requires a special majority; they will remove the special majority clause and then pass it. That is why I would not use the word again, but that is why I find something is wrong with operating in that manner, but if that is how the Government operates, that is how it operates. So the Government removed the special majority requirement and with a razor-thin majority in the Parliament they passed the TTRA Act.

The Government has paid no heed or regard for the Constitution. They have removed the independence of the board of the Inland Revenue and substituted it with a political—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.:—hand-picked revenue authority.

Madam Speaker: Member, and that is what I was trying to guide you away from because that is the challenge. So up to before you embarked on this it was okay, please go on to something else.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: Okay. Madam, I thought they were objecting to the word, “unscrupulously”, because that was all I had said up to that point. I had said, “The Minister unscrupulously removed the majority”, and the challenge came at that point.

Madam Speaker: And then you went on to the issue about the constitutionality. So, please, leave that and go on.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: Thank you. So what we object to in this matter is the fact that we are talking about institutional building and so under that TTRA Act the independence of the Board of Inland Revenue has been removed. That is our respectful view—

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2022.09.30

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.:—but what is wrong with that, that is my view?
How is it unparliamentary?

Madam Speaker: No, it is not unparliamentary, we are under the sub judice
Standing Order. Okay? And that is the whole basis.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: Okay.

Madam Speaker: So, please, go on to something else.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: Okay. So we are saying we are not happy with
the provisions of the TTRA Act and it does not seem, in our view, something for
institutional building. Is that acceptable? That is my respectful view.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: We have already placed our position on record
that we are not in support of the TTRA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: We note that the Government has now found \$20
million allocated in their Estimates for fiscal 2023 to establish the TTRA and again
cannot find money to help the poor people of this land.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: We are of the view that we should strengthen the
capacity of the BIR so that it would become more efficient. I know that the
Government—any Government wants to collect taxes so we should strengthen the
BIR and not interfere with it.

So, Madam, as I move on, the Minister admitted in this budget, due to
administrative changes implemented at the BIR, they have increased revenue
collection in the non-energy sector by 1 per cent of GDP or 1.5 billion without that

TTRA. Therefore, we can improve tax collection in the country with the strengthening of the BIR. I turn now to another aspect of institutional strengthening, the property tax. Again the Minister comes to tell us that this year he is going to implement the property tax. The Minister said that they are busy updating the valuation rolls to ensure that citizens take out what little money they have to give to the Government. They have raised gas, they have raised the cost of living; food prices are soaring and now persons would have to dig deeper into their pockets to pay property tax. There will be a corresponding increase, Madam Speaker, again in the cost of living; in renters and so on. In 2009, when things were not as bad as now, the hon. Member for Diego Martin West—I see he is not in the Chamber—the hon. Member for Diego Martin West, when he was fighting the then Prime Minister, he said this—*Newsday*, 20th December, 2009, and I quote—and this was about the property tax then:

“In my constituency there is anger, anxiety and resentment, at both ends of the spectrum.’

‘Stop taking your own advice that nobody is annoyed...’—The Member—“...advised the Government. He said they have brought the tax at the worst possible time, alluding to tough economic times.”—The Member—“...repeatedly said that people were not against the idea of paying taxes but”—they—“were upset that this measure could have been averted if the Government had acted differently previously, in its expenditure.

Rejecting claims that the property tax won’t cause hardship...”

The Member said—the Member for Diego Martin West:

“I know a lot of people for whom \$100 is a lot of money. A lot are struggling to make ends meet.”

Prime Minister, people are struggling to make ends meet. The economic times are worse now, review this tax. Withdraw this property tax, now is not the time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: Now is not the time to implement the property tax. And therefore if the Government had operated differently in the expenditure patterns and in the revenue-earning streams to gain revenue, this would not have become necessary at this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: Digital transformation is another aspect of institutional strengthening. On Monday the Minister repeated the failed and broken promises of a fully digitized society by 2025. Now, this is the latest buzzword, everything is “digital”, “digitalization”, a digital society by 2025. This is what the Minister told us. Instead of reporting to the nation on how far the Government had reached, we are becoming a fully digitized society, we heard excuse after excuse as to why none of the products in ICTs have been completed or even started in most instances.

The Minister abandoned his previous announcements for business development outsourcing centres, cybercrime legislation, completed e-Biz links and job creation in this industry. Instead, the Minister focused on creating a cashless society and a fintech ecosystem hub, both of which we have heard about before in previous budgets but with no results up to this time. The Minister spoke about the benefits of these two projects while partnering with Government

majority-owned TSTT to make it a reality. This is the same TSTT, Madam, that up to a few months ago they could not receive payments for phone and internet bills at their own outlets due to the collapse of internal software, security and hardware systems that took them weeks to resolve, but this is the same TSTT Government wants to partner with for this project.

What is even more shocking, Madam, is that the Ministry of Digital Transformation is not digitized. It is often said that the devil is in the details, let us look at page 163 of the 2023 *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. We know after two financial years have elapsed the Government now places an allocation of 3million for this Ministry of Digital Transformation. And, yes, you have heard me right, according to the budget documents this Ministry has not been digitized since it was created two years ago. So do we have any hope for the rest of the country and the other Ministries? It demonstrates the Government's lack of political will and commitment.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: As I say, it is nothing more than a charade and a sham and nothing more than “clickbaiting”. The Minister has mastered the art of what is referred to by the techies like as “clickbait”, and this is true in this area of this Ministry.

I want to spend a little time now, Madam, because the Minister talked a lot about the fiscal measures in his budget presentation; I would like to spend a few minutes on those because at first glance they appear to be very good things, and, yes, in some instances they are, but again the devil is in the details. First of all, I want to say that the Government plans to collect from taxpayers, \$40.5billion in tax revenue. So out of the taxpayers they are going to collect—that is their

projection—\$40.5 billion in revenue from the Revenue Estimates at page VII of the Estimates book. And they plan to take over 1 billion from the increased fuel prices, but what do they offer instead, some measly fiscal handouts. Nothing in these incentives appear to be part of a comprehensive plan for making specific sectors more competitive and they just amount to tinkering with the economy. First, the proposed increase in personal income tax allowance amounts to just \$4.10 per day. You cannot even buy a “doubles”, far less a “bake and shark”.

To make matters worse, the Minister demonstrated how out of touch he was by stating that this \$4.10 increase per day would help offset the increase in fuel prices, but you are taking over \$1 billion through increased fuel prices from taxpayers. This is ludicrous since fuel prices affect the cost of virtually every product or service citizens must purchase. Just as his colleagues chastised citizens for not making sacrifices, they now realize they were never in charge of anything and now they cannot deal with it. The Minister of Finance and his Government are also not in charge and they cannot deal with the economy or manage the economy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: Another fiscal measure the Minister mentioned was the increase in the VAT threshold and this has a negative effect on businesses who wish to participate in the VAT regime. Instead the Government should have provided enhanced technical support to enable companies to comply and participate in the scheme. This increase in the VAT threshold has two knockout or knock-on effects. It is an insignificant measure given that companies earning just under 42,000 per month must participate. So this has been increased to a minimum of 50,000 per month.

What it means is that companies who will no longer be able to get VAT

refunds because they are no longer meeting the threshold will not be able to claim back VAT, so again the smaller companies are going to suffer. Even though they pay VAT on things, they cannot claim back that VAT. The renewable energy rebate is aimed at the larger commercial farms, not small farmers. Small farmers are not in a position to invest thousands of dollars in solar energy or wind energy as the case may be and this is what the renewable energy rebate is for. Farmers, they are saying you can now apply for a rebate, not for money, but a rebate to build solar plants and wind plants, and so on. They are not going to, they can barely make ends meet and they are the bedrock of sales in various markets. The small farmers cannot do this so this is aimed at—whom?—the big famers, not the small farmers in the country.

As for the apprenticeship programme, that is a joke. The existing On-the-Job Training Programme offers the same service to an even wider group of participants between the ages of 16 to 35. However, Government has callously reduced the OJT programme by almost 50 per cent instead of enhancing and strengthening that OJT programme. So you will see as of June 2015, when we left office there was a total of 7,533 trainees under the programme, the OJT programme. Under this Government as of July this year, they have been reduced the 4,070 active trainees participating.

Then when we look at the allocations, there has been a 36million reduction in Actual Expenditure for this programme. This Government decreased from \$308million in 2015, when I demitted office, down to \$271 million in 2021. So in two ways this is a joke because you have the OJT, a wider pool of persons, you have not been supporting that programme. You have been underfunding that programme and now you want to set up another apprenticeship programme; I do

not think you are serious at all and this will go the way of all the other promises that have been made.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar S.C.: We come to the manufacturing tax credit, again I think this is nonsense, if I may use that word, “nonsense”. No one would invest \$5 million or \$10 million because the manufacturer would get back a 50,000 tax credit. So it does not make sense.

12.00 Noon

Further, this will not be of value to companies with tax losses. They will have absolutely no value. The fact that this is a one-time measure will only benefit those companies that have been lucky to be resilient against the onslaught of COVID lockdowns. Madam Speaker, 6,000 business closures and loss of market opportunities have already occurred.

The tax incentives for upstream and deepwater production is not going to cause anyone to accelerate their plans for this sector. The incentives in the energy sector will not have a significant impact—and I will come back to that in a moment. The tax credit for financial providers does not make sense. They require more details on how it will work. The Minister said it is to help develop a digital economy.

The Minister raised fuel prices again. No concern, as I said, for ordinary citizens, and then he comes with a “mamaguy” grant. He said, “I am going to give you a \$1,000 fuel grant for persons earning under \$7,500 a month registered with BIR or NIB.” And the Minister is saying he is going to give back in total 240million to the citizenry, but he is taking back, as I said, over 1billion from the same citizenry in return. So, you can fill your tank with this \$1,000, Madam,

maybe you can jump and fill your tank three times with the \$1,000. And another point, this does not kick in until next year, but the fuel prices kicked in on the very day the Minister read the budget; the very day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, I guess you can apply for this \$1,000 but let us be reminded that there are still so many people waiting on COVID grants. So, these applicants would have to jump through all the hoops in order to try and access this grant. I wish them good luck.

Another fiscal measure that sounds good on paper but, again, does not match the reality, is with respect to the GATE programme. The Minister is providing—promising to expand the GATE programme to provide tuition assistance for students who have already accessed GATE at the diploma, associate degree or lower TVET level to pursue baccalaureate level degree programmes, page 173, Budget Statement 2023. But let us be real, Minister, there has been no increase in estimates of expenditure for GATE for fiscal 2023, none. So, where are we going to get the moneys? Are you going to come in a midterm and vire and supplement and so on? No estimates—I think this is just a promise to make people feel good, “I am giving out a handout.”

No moneys estimated for this, for '23, and that estimate remains the same as it was last year. So, where is the increased money going to come from for this increase the Minister is talking about? How exactly does Government intend to fund this expansion of the GATE programme? Will they cut back on funding for the current number of beneficiaries, that is, to give less of them to service this expansion? It is another example of Government's use, as I say, of clickbait and “mamaguy” to deceive the population.

Further, this Government has the gall to boast about expanding GATE after they discontinued that programme in 2020 for postgrad students, making tertiary education unaffordable and inaccessible to thousands of students. Additionally, under this Government, the number of students benefitting from GATE dropped, decreased, by an astonishing 68 per cent, compared to when my government was in office. You have cut the programme. You have closed the gate on so many young people.

In June 2015, under my government, there were 59,605 students benefitting from the GATE programme; 59,605 students. In 2022, this number has dropped to 40,464. You have closed the gate on about 19,141 students, and you want us to believe that you are going to expand the GATE programme as described in your budget statement. I do not believe you. I do not believe you. The evidence does not point to that.

Further, there has been a reduction of \$1 billion in actual expenditure for this programme, decreasing from 3.3 billion; 3.3 billion. We spent \$3.3 billion on GATE. You know why? Because we believe education is the passport out of poverty.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We still believe that. Education is the only way to a better quality of life. Many of us sitting here know that and that is why we invested heavily in education. So we spent \$3.3 billion in 2015 and today, when they come into office in 2015, they dropped it to \$2 billion under their present Government, 2016 to 2020. So, can we believe you? Do we believe this Minister, he is going to expand that GATE? No, they have shut the gate on so many young people, not just in—shut education—not just their education we will talk about—

and MP Haynes will deal a lot more on the whole education sector, but we do not believe you.

And then the Minister in fiscal measures talks about some nuisance taxes to raise revenue, again putting more pressure on an already pressured population. I guess the greatest nuisance tax must be what is about the fifth fuel price increase since the Government came into office. They have raised the price of fuel so many times that driving is no longer within the reach of so many persons. Apart from the extra cost to drivers, there are already announcements of price increases by taxi drivers due to the cost of fuel to their operations. The recent reports of food price increases will be updated as some distributors are already stating that their accountants have informed that the 13 per cent increase in diesel will result in an increase of 1 per cent to 3 per cent on total costs. So, it is going to put an extra cost on the price of food and other goods and services. Because of this, there will be the expectation of varying food price increases over the coming weeks for all food items.

The impact of a further 1 per cent to 3 per cent price increase for food means that a family who would have paid between 1,000 to 2,000 per month in groceries can now expect an increase in cost, ranging from 10 to \$20 on the lower end and 30 to 60 on the upper end, all because of the fuel price increase. This does not take into account other things like property taxes and so on.

The fuel price increase also hurts our fishermen. Fishermen in Cedros and Otaheiti Bay say the recent price hike in gas, diesel and kerosene would put many of them out of jobs. At Fullerton Beach in Cedros on Wednesday, fisherman Rakesh Ramdass said fisherfolk were shocked there had been another fuel hike so soon after the last one. He added that fisherfolk may have no choice but to moor

their boats and find alternative arrangements.

At Otaheiti, fishermen also expressed despair and hopelessness.

“Ramcharan Partap said after the Government increased the fuel prices earlier this year, fisherfolk tried to cope by purchasing kerosene engines which were cheaper to fill. But now, with kerosene also increasing by \$1, Partap says they may soon be unable to go fishing.

He said fishermen from Cedros and Moruga were facing an even more difficult time, particularly those with gasoline engines.”

So, these incentives, in my respectful view, are a continuation of the “mamaguy”. They cannot help themselves. They are just tinkering with no clear thinking or vision and understanding of what needs to be done. These unnecessary fuel price hikes will bring immense pain and suffering to already burdened citizens.

The cost to fill up your tank now, I am told that for a 40-litre sedan, for example like a Tiida using super, this year alone rose from 199 to now 279, an increase of \$80 each fill up. Diesel for 60 litres, from 204 to 265, an increase of \$61 each fill up. The monthly bill for the average person who fills their tank once per week will rise from 795 to \$1,115 for super, an increase of \$320 every month in this year alone. For diesel, it will increase from \$818 per month to \$1,058 per month, an increase of 240 every month this year. Now, we must remember that for drivers using super gas in 2015, their monthly bill would have been \$432. Now they are being asked to pay 120 per cent more, or 683 every month. This will bring really severe suffering on an already suffering population. The Government must reverse this measure with immediate effect. We call on the Government to reverse this fuel price hike with immediate effect.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: As we talk about that fuel price and the subsidy, I will now turn, Madam, to some of the sectoral areas. As I say, my colleagues will develop more on those areas.

I turn to the energy sector. The Minister was very clear on that the energy sector is the cornerstone of the country, and I believe it. It is the economy's engine and partly because, yes, we used to have a competitive advantage in that area, but also because this Government has failed to provide any other revenue streams, so we remain dependent on the energy sector to generate revenue streams, to generate foreign exchange.

The global commerce and travel rebound in 2021, the Russia/Ukraine war has led the world into a period of high oil, natural gas and ammonia prices. These high prices are directly responsible for the increase in revenue Government experienced in fiscal 2022. We should note, however, that oil and gas prices in recent weeks have been falling on fears of a global recession. Further speculation surrounding a potential OPEC output cut next week resulted in markets settling yesterday at prices generally below the US \$90 per barrel the Minister projected. This alone merits a reduction in the target price in the budget. If the Government keeps the budgeted oil price at that level, it is now then one can only conclude they are doing so to enable them to raid the HSF once more in fiscal '23.

Reuters noted yesterday, and I quote:

“Brent crude futures settled down 83 cents at 88.49 per barrel, after rising as high as \$90.12 during this session. US crude futures for November settled 92 cents lower at \$81.23 a barrel.”

So, it would be wise, Madam, to temper expectations of windfall extending into

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2023. As was made clear by the many graphs presented at the September Spotlight event, even with these high energy prices in 2022, government revenue is not back to 2014 or 2015 levels. The Minister based the budget on an oil price of \$92.50 per barrel and \$6 per MMBtu for gas. While these are the highest price assumptions ever used in preparing a budget, the expected revenue for fiscal '23 still does not equate to what was collected by my government in fiscal '14 and '15, when total government revenue was 58.4 billion and 57.2 billion respectively. It is reasonable to assume that the Minister selected these high price assumption to avoid having to make deposits into the HSF.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Now, I mentioned before there is decline in every metric, and this is especially so in the energy sector. Why is our revenue not back to its highest levels in spite of the highest price assumptions? The answer is because of our falling level of production in oil and gas. There has been a consistent decline in the production of oil and natural gas in Trinidad and Tobago under this Government.

The fact that natural gas production has fallen to lows last seen 19 years ago did not get the attention of the Minister at all. Nothing was talked about that. In the last seven years, natural gas production has fallen by 32 per cent. On every measure, in every metric, the evidence is irrefutable that the energy sector has declined and the decline has not been marginal. It has been substantial decline in the energy sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.15 p.m.

The decline in the sector is a direct—is directly related to policies of those

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on the opposite Bench, to the PNM. The decline is directly the result of the work of the PNM. That has been—that has had direct consequences for all of the people of Trinidad and Tobago especially we talk about the man or the woman on the maxi taxi. Any man or woman on that maxi taxi, the ordinary man has really severe consequences because of the failure and decline of the energy sector, which the Minister said was the corner stone, I would say, the engine of the country. So if you are declining then it is going to impact every single thing in the country.

From 2015 to 2021 CSO data indicates that the economy contracted by 19.4 per cent and half of that GDP contraction came from a declining energy sector. The energy sector decline by 28.8 per cent in terms of real GDP from 2015 to 2021. Now get this right. The energy sector has declined by 28.8 per cent from 2015.

Regarding employment in that energy sector, we talk about job loss and a lost decade. Regarding employment in the energy sector, CSO data in quarter three of 2015 we are told that there were 22,500 persons with jobs in the energy sector under my watch. By quarter 01/2022 that figure collapsed to 10,600. In seven years a 53 per cent decline in persons with jobs in the energy sector. What a shame. Thanks to that PNM Government on other side. So where have these people gone? I am told that many have migrated to Canada, others seeking jobs. Some have found jobs in Guyana and Suriname. And it is a worrying sign of the decay of the energy sector. This goes beyond, it goes beyond the tragedy of the closure of Petrotrin. These are not numbers from the Opposition. The numbers I am giving you are numbers from the CSO in their quarterly labour force survey bulletin. Our energy sector professionals are fleeing the reign of the incompetence of this PNM Government and that Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. The

period 2015 to 2025 will become known as the lost decade of the Trinidad and Tobago's economy under the energy sector under the PNM Government.

In the decline, in the contraction we have seen plant closures, many plant closures under this Government. I mentioned the closure of Petrotrin. And by the way, that now four-year closure of our once proud refinery, what has happened with that refinery? We were supposed to sell that refinery to someone. What has happened? We do not know anything further about it. The last time we heard there was buyer and then the buyer disappeared. Somebody up in the United States somewhere. So after four years of closure of the refinery, is it now a case of "buying scrap iron or old battery buying"? The case of refinery closure—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—the case of the refinery closure must be prosecuted and we must get to the bottom of that decision and determine who is the owner of that tragic decision. Who put the light out at Petrotrin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must come to the bottom that. Today, in world of great supply-chain uncertainty we have to import gasoline, diesel and jet fuels. And so that is the closure from Petrotrin.

We also had the closure of the Mittal steel complex in 2016. That was the first industrial sin of this Government. Then it was the closure of Proman M1 plant in 2017. Then there was the closure of the Yara ammonia plant in 2019. The closure of the Titan methanol plant in 2020. And now the infamous closure of Train 1 in 2020. Plant closure. Shame. Shame. Incompetence of the PNM Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The closure of these plants has led to the idling of billions of dollars in capital in the energy sector. Idling, these plants are just sitting there, as I mentioned before, related job losses.

The mother of all ironies is a Minister of Energy and Energy Industries appearing on CNN's Quest Means Business, Quest Means Business and boasted that we would ramp up natural gas production to meet the shortfall created by the Russia/Ukraine war. Wow. We reach, as they say. Trini reach. And while the Minister was saying that, ammonia, methanol, energy plants right here in T&T could not get the volumes of natural gas they needed. Train 1 had to be shut down because they could not get the gas. And the Minister is boasting, we are going to supply gas on the world market because of—oh God, false, false, false dreams. The Minister is obviously dreaming or is not aware of the reality in the energy sector.

And so despite flying to Houston, London, Zurich, the Hague or Doha and parts unknown over the last seven years and meeting with international energy companies, the reality is, our natural gas production has not improved but has fallen.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The situation would have been much worse had it not been for the natural gas projects I mentioned before that were initiated under the Government I led.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It would have been much worse. The current level of supply cannot meet the total demand of all in the customers in the country and it is for that reason we have had plant closures. Understand it. It is not because

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anybody is wicked or bad mind or anything. It is because your policies and your projects and programmes have all failed to keep the energy sector going.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You have failed. Just last week Fertecon, an international ammonia publication by IHS Markit reported and I quote:

The supply of natural gas to industrial consumers in Trinidad is curtailed currently reportedly by around 25 per cent.

Curtailed. You know what that means?—cut down.

The impact on ammonia output is not crystal clear, though operations on nutrients plants at Point Lisas are said to have been up and down.

Minister where are you getting this gas? Where are you getting these energy products to sell on the world market? Were you truthful when you spoke to that CNN people on that programme? Because you have not the capacity nor the ability, nor the competence to do so.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So in spite of the glowing rhetoric, in spite of the tips abroad, Point Lisas and Atlantic continue to limp along. In the '21/'22 budget speech, Minister boasted that oil production was on the rebound. He said, natural gas production was improving. He said:

...natural—

And I quote:

Natural gas production would rise to 3.37 billion standard cubic feet in 2022.

Nothing is further from the truth. Nothing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: He then said, it will stabilize at 3.60 billion

standard cubic feet. All of this is just pie in the sky wishful thinking. The Minister comes in 2022 he gives a conservative forecast for '23 of 3 million cubic feet per day. And given his well-established track record of wrongly forecasting natural gas production, one could assume those numbers he is giving are also untruths but the unfortunate reality is totally different from the fanciful imaginations of the Government. The unfortunate reality is that this Government has facilitated the decline of natural gas production, and you know why? Because he reversed the suite of incentives that have been put in place by my Government. That is what happened.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They reversed it and had no idea what to do except to tinker, as I say, here and there. The PNM is now in its eighth year of government and must take the blame for the condition of the energy sector especially the unacceptable levels of natural gas production. They must take the blame.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Seven years going eight down. Stop blaming Kamla. Stop blaming the Ukraine and Russia. Blame yourselves for your failure to manage the sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Last year the Minister said, oil and condensate production would increase to 86,000 barrels per day in 2022. Another untruth. I know I cannot lie but this is another untruth, did not increase. For the first eight months of '22, oil and condensate production averaged 59,000 barrels per day. What did the Minister say? 86,000 barrels, average 59,000. What a big difference.

Yet again the Minister is wrong.

Last year the Minister bet heavily on the Woodside BHP Ruby project but that project disappointed greatly, so he did not get the gas for there. Broken promises on fiscal reform. So what is problem? Why do we continue to have falling oil projection and falling gas production in Trinidad and Tobago? I wonder if those on the other side remember and therefore should hang their heads in shame, that we were so blessed in this country to have one of the oldest oil industries in the world, over 100 years old. And you put the light out on that industry. You have decimated the energy sector. You have placed the entire nation at risk because you do not seem to have an idea or a clue of what to do. What is the source of this decline? Talk to people in the industry? Did you talk to anyone? Talk to people in the industry. That is what I do. I am not an energy expert but I talk to people I know in the industry and they will tell you, it is all due to what they call above-ground factors. All due to what they call above-ground factors.

The fiscal regime that underpins the energy sector is the main deterrent to the levels of investments needed to increase production of oil and natural gas. It is the fiscal reform that you promised repeatedly and failed to honour. Before 2010 the oil and gas industry told the then Manning administration that there was a need for reform of the fiscal regime. From 2011 to 2015 we met with a lot of the oil companies when we formed the Government and they asked for the fiscal reform and because of that we introduced a range of incentives including harmonizing the SPT, Supplemental Petroleum Tax, increasing cost recover levels with deepwater and introducing accelerated capital incentives for development drilling and exploration drilling. The accelerated allowances for exploration drilling caused BP

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC (cont'd)

to drill two exploration wells in 2017. So it was not because of you. It was because of the accelerated allowance for exploration that were given by the Government that I led.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: These wells were successful. One of them, the Savannah well gave us the Matapal project. The other gave the Macadamia project and is part of the SIP project that the Minister is now boasting and talking about. All that came from the Government I led, from under my watch through a good Minister of Energy—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—who was knowledgeable in the sector and by one of the best finance Ministers, as I said, Larry Howai.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What can this Government boast about? What new exploration? What new drilling? None. There is none. And the failure on your part, explaining that you failed—well you did not keep your promises for reform of the fiscal regime governing the sector. Because companies make investment decisions based on economics, based on net present value, NPV and internal rate of return, IRR, these three things. Investment decisions are made taking them into consideration. Economics, net present value, internal rate of return. These international companies do not make decisions based on trips to London and Zurich, as I said, parts unknown. Parts unknown.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In the last seven years the Government has promised in almost every budget to do exactly that, reform the fiscal regime to get

more investment. So what did the Minister finally do in this budget on Monday or what the Minister said he would because so many times things are said and they never materialize, as I say, PNM: Promises Never Materialize.

The Minister said that he will make changes now to the investment tax credit. Of course again, we have to bring legislation but so many times we are promised legislation in a budget and years later the legislation is not brought. So as we say, seeing is believing. So the Minister says, now he made some changes to the oil and gas fiscal regime last Monday.

12. 30 p. m.

These changes can best be described as tinkering, piecemeal and ineffective. First change was the change to the Investment Tax Credit for oil and gas companies, increasing it nominally from 25 per cent to 30 per cent. So you have a 5 per cent increase in the Investment Tax Credit. And it is a tax credit, so it is not yet getting money. It is a tax credit, so it is an incentive. This will have little impact on the attractiveness of this incentive, and will have little impact on getting in more oil and gas companies to invest. I will tell you why. I am not saying this, I am quoting Ernst and Young. Their publication came out after the budget. I do not know if it is the same Young as Minister Young. Is there any relationship? Ernst and Young has noted, and I—

Mr. Hinds: Ernst is the—[*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Okay, thank you Sir. Very important. It does not change the price of cocoa or the price of oil.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They had noted, and I quote that:

“...in order to claim the ITC”—the Investment Tax Credit—“the

development activity undertaken will have to be approved and certified by the Minister in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries.”

The same Minister Young, for the time being.

“Whilst the enhanced proposal is welcomed”—this is the same company I am quoting from—“historically, obtaining such approvals from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries has proved challenging.”

This change to the Investment Tax Credit will have little or no impact.

The Minister also made changes to the SPT, the Supplemental—the SPT regime and introduced a new SPT arrangement for new oil wells in shallow marine areas, whether in existing—what is the stop time, please?

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. Talking about the SPT regime—there is a fundamental misunderstanding here in this change that the Minister proposes for new oil wells in shallow marine areas, whether in existing or new fields. For new oil wells. First of all it is only for new oil wells. So, how long does it take to get a new oil well going, explore, to find, to drill and so on?

But that is not the problem I see here. SPT is not computed on a well-by-well basis. Did you hear that? Minister wants to give you this SPT for new oil wells, but the SPT is not computed on a well-by-well basis, so how are you going to ever get this SPT they are talking about? SPT is computed on the aggregated production of an oilfield that is fiscalised quarterly. In other words, you are not going to get it. It talks about wells. It does not work like that. The SPT is calculated, as I say, on the aggregated production of an oilfield. So this provision is almost impossible to administer.

Secondly, the Minister offers new SPT rates on a sliding scale for shallow

marine areas. So for example, the middle band of US \$70 to US \$90, in this band, Minister is proposing an SPT rate of 20 per cent. However, at present, companies producing oil in mature marine areas pay SPT at 33 per cent. But guess what? They get a 20 per cent discount; it is supplied for mature marine fields. So it brings down this SPT to what?—26.4 per cent; 26.4 per cent. So the benefit to companies from this new incentive is only 6.4 per cent, even though the Minister is saying, which he is going to give an SPT rate of 20 per cent. When prices are in the \$70 to \$90 range—where they are expected to be most of the time—so it is a 6.4 per cent only. Therefore this change to the SPT regime will have little or no impact.

Coming now to changes the Minister made to the Petroleum Profits Tax (PPT). With regard to changes in the PPT for deepwater, this too is ineffective. This provision will only apply to companies holding exploration and production licence. It will have no impact on those holding production and sharing contracts. The majority of deepwater acreage, I am told, is under the production sharing regime. So Minister, this is spinning top in mud. The way of production sharing contracts—the way they work, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries pays the tax liability of the operator out of his share of petroleum profit. So changes in the PPT really have little impact, and therefore this change is moot.

The point has been further confirmed by Ernst and Young in their 2022/2023 budget commentary, and I quote. They say:

“...only companies engaged in petroleum operations under an Exploration and Production Licence will benefit, as Production Sharing Contracts typically include a tax indemnity whereby the taxes of the energy company are paid out of the Minister’s share of production...”

Therefore, this change to the PPT regime will have little or no impact.

Again, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Let us see if these incentives will impact in two or three years. Indeed, what they have done before 2022 to reverse the significant incentives introduced from 2011 to '15, and what they did was introduce a one-size-fits-all royalty in 2017. That has collapsed drilling and production, and the data bears this truth out. Here is the data:

- In 2015 the country recorded 2,859 rig days.
- In 2021 there were just 1,161 rig days.

That is a massive 59 per cent decline in drilling, which has ramifications for the oil and gas industry and the maritime services sector in Chaguaramas and La Brea. That decline in drilling is the main factor behind the fall in natural gas production by 32 per cent in the same period. That fall in natural gas production caused planned closures, as I mentioned, including the closure of Train 1, for which 10 per cent shareholder NGC—remember that? They blew away \$250 million on maintenance when the major shareholders BP and Shell opted out of that Train 1. So the fall in oil and natural gas production has everything to do with the incentives structure industry, and the Minister has failed spectacularly in that regard.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Now three days before this budget was to be delivered BP and NGC announced a new gas supply contract. What an amazing coincidence. On the same day BP announced that it had approved its SIP project, yet another amazing coincidence. All this seemed strangely choreographed by BP, the NGC, and the Government. The question is, did the Government push BP to sanction the SIP project? And what is the condition for that sanction, a new

contract with NGC? Is the Government so desperate for good news on the energy sector? If so, what concessions were made by the Prime Minister and the Energy Minister when they met with the BP leadership in London? What were the concessions?

The Opposition has also noted that the recent European tour was conducted in the absence of public servants. The question is why do you exclude the technocrats and public servants, and two politicians go up to meet in a room somewhere in Europe with these companies? Is the Government aware that these energy companies are subject to many anticorruption legislation in the UK and the EU? The same was done in 2017. The Prime Minister and then Minister of something met EOG and BP. It is worrisome that the recent BP/NGC contract is shrouded in mystery. We can understand confidentiality when it comes about price, but the public has not even been told what volume of our gas will be sold to BP—will be sold by BP to NGC. So what is the way forward in the energy sector? Because the Minister admits repeatedly, it is the cornerstone of the economy. It has remained the engine of the country and of the economy, and if you are doing nothing else well you must have to do something.

The Prime Minister recently warned that if no new improvements are had in the investment profile of the oil and gas sector there will be far-reaching consequences for Government revenues and the quality of life for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The Prime Minister is seeing these dire consequences manifesting by 2022, but I think they are already manifesting now. How did we come to this point, and why did it take the Prime Minister seven years to have this Damascus moment? The position of our energy sector is a direct result of their misunderstanding of the same fiscal regime they are now tinkering with after

seven years. There will be some minor improvement in natural gas in 2023, but anything is an improvement after you fall into a hole, deep hole, in '21 and '22.

The Government has also placed a lot of its effort on seeking natural gas from Venezuela, and that has not materialized, and it does not seem to be likely to materialize anytime soon. In this very budget Monday, page 22, it talks about production beginning in 2025. So that is not going to help us in '23, '24. Production to begin, and again projected, and as I say you do not believe anything this Government tells us. It is foolhardy to bet your economy on removing sanctions on Venezuela. Unless there are radical policy interventions to improve the competitiveness of the energy sector to truly stimulate the exploration, as was done in the 2010 to '15 period when we received record levels of acreage awarded, the downward trajectory of the energy sector will continue apace with very serious consequences for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This is a very, very urgent matter that needs to be addressed, and I trust the Minister will be able to answer the quotations I gave about the various changes to the fiscal regime, and tell us how are we going to revitalize and resuscitate the energy sector if you want to keep it as the engine of our economy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: As I said, Madam, I would just do a few points on some of the sectors. My colleagues are very competent and well-researched and follow up on other sectors.

One I would like to turn to now is the health sector, because that is one of the worst that we have. Health care in this country now is at its worst. Before I go there I want to talk a little about the businesses who are owed all these VAT refunds, so millions. Value Added Tax refunds continue to be a bane to

businesses. Despite Government claims, there are still large sums outstanding, negatively impacting business activity. And we saw recently, following the budget presentation, business leader Arthur Lok Jack, Chairman of ABL, they have six factories in Trinidad and Tobago. They have reported to have stated:

“The main thing has been the VAT refunds because...when we go into the export market, we are paying VAT and we need to get those refunds back...”

Lok Jack lamented that this withholding of their VAT refunds was a tremendous blow on their cash. However, the Minister failed to deal with the Government holding on to people’s VAT refunds. When speaking at page 31 of his statement, the Minister talked about the size of the fiscal deficit and he stated:

“By way of example, we were able to pay out \$4 billion in VAT refunds in 2022, significantly more than...planned.”

So business owners could be pardoned if they got the impression the Minister would have preferred to keep the money, not pay the VAT refunds at their expense merely to give the appearance of a smaller fiscal deficit. I have repeatedly warned Government against using private sector VAT refunds as an interest free loan. In our consultations, we met and engaged with several stakeholders from business chambers. One such chamber proposed that as a solution for VAT refunds, the Government should allow companies to net off the VAT refunds with taxes to prevent from encountering cash-flow challenges.

The Minister spoke of the amount of VAT refunds being paid, \$4 billion, but that is beside the point. When the question is, just how much? What is the quantum? How many more millions are owed to businesses? Why does the Government refuse to give the people their money? Give them back their own

moneys. It is their money. They need their money to recover and to grow. What is required of this Government is a consistent reliable process whereby businesses can receive their VAT refunds on time. This is not science for any willing Government. And in fact, for this Government with their agenda, yet unable to ensure refunds are paid on time, is a clear indication of their priorities being misplaced.

12.45 p.m.

I want to commit today that the UNC government will immediately ensure the full resourcing of the office responsible for VAT collection on processing to eliminate the long wait for refunds with stifled business confidence and compliance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Further, the UNC government will introduce a system which allow businesses to discount the value of VAT up to the value of outstanding refunds from the government with appropriate approvals. This will rapidly clear up the backlog of outstanding VAT refunds while introducing a more efficient VAT processing system.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I turn now to national security because we cannot talk about lives and livelihoods without addressing the fact that crime has totally spiraled out of control in Trinidad and Tobago. We see approximately 3,434 persons have been murdered since the PNM assumed office. To date, the murder toll stands at over 442. Daylight killings and drive-by shootings using high powered weapons are now the norm.

During our consultations at San Juan we heard from Mr. Ramchandra

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC (cont'd)

Temal, President of the Aranguez Taxi Drivers Association about taxi drivers being robbed, one person being murdered in broad daylight. Ms. Noreen John, a small business owner from Port of Spain, told us about how she was robbed, her home invaded and to this day justice was not served. In every single one of our consultations the issue of crime, spiraling crime was raised numerous times. Prime Minister, something has to happen, something has to give, but in this budget there was nothing that gave us hope that you have any plans or programmes or policies to deal with the spiraling crime.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What I can tell you is that your biggest mistake was when you caused Gary Griffith not to be appointed as Commissioner of Police. That is one of your biggest mistakes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I hold no grief for Captain Gary Griffith, but at least when he was there your crime numbers were going down. And I worked with him, we worked with him, and under my watch we brought serious crimes down to the lowest in decades by 2014.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We slashed them by 2015 by 50 per cent compared to 2009; by 2015 we saw the lowest number of serious crimes reported in this country since 1984. The current situation is critical, it requires urgent attention by Government. We expected as I say for the budget to bring some hope for citizens, you know, really suffering with the scourge of crime.

Now this Government had promised a border security agency in their manifesto 2015 and then promised it in several budgets. What did they then do?

They watered it down to a what? A security task force. In this budget statement what did we hear about plans and programmes to deal with crime? The Minister told us they plan to spend money to facilitate accommodation for two Cape-class vessels that they rushed to buy even though they already had a good fleet of vessels, the Damen vessels that we purchased, they rushed to buy these two Cape-class vessels, so what are they going to spend money on? How are they going to fight crime? They are going to fix up a place to park up these Cape-class vessels because that is where the Damen vessels are now. There are parked up there doing nothing, they are not using the vessels but you run and you bought two more vessels.

The Minister in his presentation spoke of improved technology throughout the national security service in his budget presentation. I note with concern that in the wake of several high-profile cyber-attacks on public and private institutions and report of sophisticated crime, such as, card skimming, cyber security programme under the Ministry has been allocated only 150,000 for fiscal 2023. One would expect that this programme which was introduced in fiscal 2015 by my administration would play a role in combating the emerging threat.

What has happened I think, that is contributing to not being able to deal with the escalating crime, is that we had conceptualized the National Operations Centre to be a high-tech entity aimed at accelerating the states response to critical events and at the same time feeding real time inter-intelligence to all agencies. But when this Government came into power, they lumped the NOC together with SSA and they had been granted expanded spying powers and that is what they are doing. I am told today by a gentleman that they have evidence on paper documents that their phone is being intercepted, they are being spied upon and he is planning to go

to the High Court in order to expose what is taking place by the SSA and with agents in the TTPS.

So we gave it the SSA and nothing has happened. They promised a national forensic science centre, repeat promise; 2020 we were told there was an agreement signed between TT and China for the centre, two years later we are told on Monday Cabinet is now approving lands and conceptual drawings. So we are nowhere nearer to this forensic science centre. Four years since this was announced and nothing is happening, nothing is happening. So now new measures, CCTV camera again, you collapsed the whole—when you came in, we had put in about 500 CCTV cameras, they all became, most of them are non-functional under your watch. So Minister, there is no hope in your budget for people to take comfort that you are in fact dealing with crime.

Another failed sector is that of the health sector. Under your Government citizens have experienced the worst health care in our countries history. Your pervasive criminal negligence has resulted in the deaths of thousands of persons—

Madam Speaker: Member, Member, Member—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, Ma'am.

Madam Speaker: I would ask you to withdraw that word and find another way.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Which word, Madam, please?

Madam Speaker: You said “your pervasive” and you said some words after that, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Government's pervasive negligence has resulted in the deaths of thousands of persons not only from COVID but also uncared for patients with chronic NCDs, such as, diabetes, hypertension and cancer. Over 4,200 unfortunate citizens became casualties of the woeful

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incompetent mismanagement of the pandemic. In your budget statements, every one of the last seven years, you promised scientific networking through a network of modern facilities, and again up to today you promised the Central Block at Port of Spain General Hospital, that is still not constructed after seven years of your government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You boast about other hospitals we gave you, my government, we gave you the commencement of the Point Fortin and the Arima Hospitals.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We gave the people of Trinidad and Tobago the Couva teaching hospital, the San Fernando Teaching Hospitals.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When you came into office you rolled back the closing time for most health centres, we had increased those to 9.00 p.m. in order to give working people the opportunity to come there after work for health care. You rolled that back down to 4.00p.m. So all people who are working, you cannot get to the health centre because you work until 4.00 p.m. We had initiated that. And so you are depriving working people the opportunity to have primary care in these health centres. There is a worsening CDAP programme, unavailability of life saving medicine and anti-cancer drugs and insufficient medical and surgical supplies.

Patients are dying in your so-called parallel health system while they await urgent major surgery, including cardiac surgery. Some persons have suggested it should be renamed not a parallel health system but a death system. Patients are

dying in the overcrowded emergency departments unable to have a ward, bed, even after waiting 48hours lying in a trolley or sitting on a wheelchair. They are uncontrolled and the worsening NCDs. Sometimes there is only one CT scanner functioning for the entire country. You have repeatedly promised to establish and implement a national health insurance since 2015 in your manifesto and then in your various budgets. Seven years later that remains a promise which never materialized, PNM, promise never materialized.

Presently, there is a worsening in CDAP programme with a lack of essential medicines. Medical and surgical supplies for major operative procedures are not available; there are thousands of delayed surgeries; there are unacceptable waiting times for critical CT Scans, MRI and ultrasound. Severe overcrowding in emergency departments at hospitals; there is an acute shortage of medical, nursing and paramedical personnel; children are dying awaiting assistance from the Children's Life Fund which still requires a promised legislative change seven years ago. There is acute storage of medical and nursing personnel. This sounds like a horror story or a war zone. That is the state of your health care under your watch. These are just the tip of the iceberg of your government's abject failure to provide adequate health care for our citizens. But then, why should you care?

When you get sick you or you want to get checked out you fly off to Miami, you fly off to LA, so why you should care what is happening to the honourable people here. You boasted Trinidad and Tobago has the best health care but when you become ill, where do you go? You fly off to LA, fly off to Miami, fly off to other parts unknown for health care. I want to give an assurance today that this is a sector that touches and impacts upon every man, woman and child in our country. And when the UNC forms the next government, I see now we have many doctors

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC (cont'd)

in our fold. Right now in the Parliament we have three medical doctors with us and there are many more that we can call upon for help. When the UNC forms the next government we have several plans to improving and restoring the nation's health care to first world standards. Yeah, I just would mention a few today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will immediately make the necessary legislative changes to the Children's Life Fund.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will implement a patient charter with waiting times, guidelines and timely care guarantees.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will re-implement the extended hours at the health centres.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will implement a way to do non-urgent surgeries on a weekend to deal with backlogs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will explore the potential of the capacity of the private sector to compliment these initiatives.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will implement a health card to monitor dispensing of medication and detection of abuse.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will reduce waiting times for diagnostic tests.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will introduce a mobile diagnostic unit with MRI, CT to ease the backlog and improve accessibility for non-urgent cases. These are just some of our plans for when we form the next government to effect true transformation and inclusion in the health sector. I want to give the commitment again that we will also establish a commission of enquiry into the mismanagement of the COVID pandemic.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I turn now, just briefly, on public utilities because this is an area where there is a lot of buzz and buzz words taking place and a lot of concern. The Minister has essentially said to the country that the funding needed to invest in upgrading the utility sector can only be achieved by raising water and electricity rates. There has been no capital investment in the public's utility sector by this Government over the past seven years. Today, they will have you believe that they have the panacea to the problems in public utilities. Instead of investing the patrimony of oil and gas dollars in infrastructure of our country, the taxpayer is now being told to carry the burden of the cost by paying higher rates for water than many of them do not receive and for an electricity supply many of them cannot depend upon.

Last year's budget cut major cuts to WASA, \$350 million in maintenance, materials and supplies, and employment. Today we feel the effects of that with dry taps.

1.00 p.m.

We saw nothing to reduce the financial challenges that T&TEC is experiencing concerning the billions in debt it has to NGC and we saw the continuation of TSTT assets being sold out to their friends and financiers of the

Government. That sums up most of the activities in the public utilities sector over the past year.

Now, a few days ago, I received a document entitled, “WASA’s Strategic Plan”. This plan is the policy document formulated by the Government to be sent to the RIC to make a case for increases in water rates. So, even though the Government denies it, that is your document that you are going to send the plan to the RIC to make a case to increase water rates. What is contained in that document is not surprising at all, but it is something Government has denied over and over again.

On page 53 of that plan is the Government’s commitment to the RIC—and on page 53 of that strategic plan is the Government’s commitment to the RIC to send home, fire and put on the breadline, sack, axe, however you want to put it, 2,500 employees of WASA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The joblessness is already so high and the Government is hell-bent in seeing and creating more joblessness, more unemployment in this country. That is the bottom line of that document as an aim of WASA to reduce the head count and personnel cost. As I say, more unemployment and more hardships. Respectfully, I firmly believe that the Minister and his Government are taking the people of this country for fools. It is illustrated in the abandonment of their previously announced budget promise of a cash utility card. Where did that go? What became of that cash card? With great **gusto and bravado**, the Minister last year announced the introduction of the cash utility card designed to assist the most vulnerable in our society to offset the cost of utilities. In this budget, there is no mention at all of this initiative. When one looks at the

Social Sector Investment Programme and the expenditure estimates, there is no line item or explanation of a cash utility card, hence making this another bogus promise of the Government.

Madam Speaker, I turn now to infrastructure. Again, in our budget consultations, this was an area that was most bemoaned and complained and lamented about. That issue was one that almost every citizen can agree upon and that is we have some of the worse roads in the world; worse roads in the world.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This was another central point raised by citizens at our consultations. At Chaguanas, a Mr. Kenny McIntyre, he lamented the deplorable conditions of our roads. He said the citizens are now purchasing materials and repairing roads on their own due to neglect by the Government and no money being given to regional corporations.

In the Prime Minister's constituency, in Diego Martin, we heard from one, Mr. Darren Le Fleur. He highlighted a recurring landslide on the Carenage Main Road. He said that every time this happens it causes a major traffic issue, damage the vehicles and complete blockage for the neighbouring school, and this is in the Prime Minister's constituency. Prime Minister, something has to happen, people have feelings too.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Minister of Finance made several promises again in this statement about improvements in our failed and crumbling infrastructure. Minister, I do not know—the Minister has a really brass or boldface, as they say, to come again to make promises. All these promises are repeated year after year. PNM, promises never materialize.

I want us to remember this is the seventh budget. Six budgets came—this is the eighth. He has presented six before this. In 2016, they promised to remove all traffic lights from Arima to Port of Spain. They promised to construct ring roads and implement other traffic solutions in built up areas such as Chaguanas, Grande and Scarborough. He then promised the Toco port since the first budget. I think he may have lost that copy because clearly he forgot. This has been promised again and again. Again, in '16 and '17, the Minister promised the same Moruga port, promising again this year.

The point is your promises for infrastructure are hollow at best. Promised the Toco port again, nothing has happened to date and so, you will not deliver on anything because that is just the nature of PNM, Promises Never Materialize. Another promise with the completion of the Solomon Hochoy Highway. I want to remind you, Madam, that it took the UNC Government to start the extension after decades of being promised this extension of this highway.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: As soon as the Government came into office, they stopped the project, redid the scope of works, gave the contractor to whichever friends, financiers, or family, and what happened? The road crumbled down on the creek like what one said, a Crix. It crumbled like Crix. We yet have to find out how much did that cost us? How much more it will cost us to fix it? So, it is crumbling infrastructure everywhere. This extension of that highway was poised to go to two PNM strongholds, Point Fortin and La Brea, but they stopped it. They halted the work.

Now we get to this new state company. This new company will fix all the potholes and repair all the roads. Well, we wait to see that. In terms of real issues

affecting daily commuters, nothing for them. Two hundred million to set up a new state company for PNM and their friends and their family and financiers for board members. On any given day, hundreds of thousands of citizens travel on the northbound lane of the Uriah Butler Highway, Sir Solomon Hochoy Highway and at the same time, the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway. Almost six hours a day citizens have to spend sitting down in traffic. How productive do you expect these people to be where after they reach to work they are miserable? They hate everything after suffering in that traffic. So, why was there not any allocation made in this budget to address that problem? Is the only solution what the Prime Minister said?

The Prime Minister talked about work from home and then change his whole mind about it. He talked about it some time ago. Now he is talking about saying, "Save fuel by not getting caught in traffic and choose a different time to avoid traffic." So, how can you do that? How can you do that when you force people back to work into the same routine after you promised a work from home policy and then said, "No, it cannot happen"? In your 2020 manifesto you promised a work from home policy. PNM, Promises Never Materialize.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The majority of funding allocated in this budget for the Ministry of Works and Transport is for existing incomplete projects. No new initiatives. Just the same old broken promises again and again. So, when you hear the allocations or you watch it in the estimates it sound like so much but it is the same repeated promise from year to year.

I turn for a short while to housing. And I read an *Express* editorial recently about the shambles the HDC is in, the fact that there is over 119,000 applying for

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houses from the Government and so on. And I see the Government cause a further hurt to the poor and vulnerable by slashing home improvement grants. Fiscal '13 and '14, we disbursed over 1,200 home improvement grants to families through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: For fiscal '21—we did that each year, of course, from 2015. For fiscal '21, a meagre 389 grants. So, we have slashed that too. In '22, 368 grants under this Government. There are, I am told, over 191,000 persons applying for housing. So, we will wait to see what happens under this Government. The number of housing, our shadow portfolio Member, MP for Oropouche West, will deal with some more on housing.

Education, a very important sector. The true wealth of our nation is not in oil and gas. It is in people. And so, the issue of sending our children to school was another key takeaway from our consultations. We heard Ms. Gillian Ramsaran from Pasea saying that how they struggle to send children to school is now overbearing. Maria Pierre from Tabaquite told us how expensive it is now to pay for transport to send children to school, \$50 per day. In Biche, Whitney Pacheco questioned if the ICT access centres will be reopened because children do not have access to the technology. That is what our government aimed to do, give our children access to the world at their fingertips with our laptop programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Now that the visionless PNM has dismantled the laptop programme, they cannot even ensure properly functioning ICT centres. Prime Minister, I say again something has to happen, poor people have feelings too.

The SEA and CSEC level results show students could not cope with the changes of the pandemic. This could have been caught and rectified before the exams if the Government had used a data-driven policy approach, that is, if Government had been proactive, ensuring our students were prepared during both the online and hybrid systems.

About physical opening, information coming to me from sources at the Ministry of Education says the Ministry has 350 tickets earmarked for school repairs. However, only 84 have been executed by the start of the school term. That is simply appalling.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Is the Government allowing our nation schools to fall into disrepair like they have destroyed our road network and other infrastructure? How can our children learn in a classroom that is falling apart? And let me remind you, during our watch we built over 100 schools. Can this Government point to schools that they have built in seven years? I believe it is seven schools in seven years. That is what I am told. But then they boast they built school, secondary, ECCE. My information is you have built only about seven schools; seven schools. What else have you done? The high cost of getting back to school; the absence of a proper school transport system regime; the fact that so many have been unemployed; the rising cost of living had all lead to some children dropping out of the school system because parents could not afford to send them to school. And what will happen to these children who drop out? Some may be permanently unemployable, others may turn to crime, others may become homeless. So, we are creating, in effect, a lost generation.

I will make the commitment again, when we form the next government, we promise we will make educating the children of our nation a number one priority again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I turn now briefly to the labour sector. In the labour sector, we know job security is a myth under this Government. They boast they kept so many persons in jobs and yet so many persons lost their jobs. After seven years in charge they cannot point to a single project, a single policy, a single development which has created jobs for the people of the nation. Not one single project or policy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In this year's budget, the Minister told the public servants, I quote:

“We are...”—of the—“view that our current offer of 4 per cent over the period 2014—2019 for mainstream public service...”—is prudent, practical and judicious.

This is with food prices rising, inflation, fuel prices, property tax, a meagre 4 per cent, an insult to the hardworking public service who have kept our nation going.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This should now be evident to the working class and trade unions that the policies of this Rowley-led Government are to undermine, weaken and completely dismantle the trade union movement.

The employment of strategy devices and mechanisms, inclusive of closures of state-owned enterprises, Petrotrin; privatization, for example, TTRA; and the rampant proliferation of contract labour in the public sector at the expense of

permanent and long-term employment are being all utilized. Their utter failure to settle over nine years of outstanding wage and salary negotiations in the public sector with every public sector and public service, trade union and association, you failed to do that, all except for one.

1.15 p.m.

What they did instead, they offered 100,000 workers a trail of bread crumbs falling from the master's table and the unions have so far rightfully rejected. I am very proud to say and remind you that the Government I led, in a five-year period, settled over 135 wage negotiations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In the labour sector, I speak of the betrayal of a decision given to the nation by the Minister in his Budget Statement of 2022 when he said he will regularize the employment stage of over 3,400 nursing personnel who would have been given temporary continuous employment where these workers secure neither gratuity nor pensions.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

And I know both the Member for Naparima and the Member for Couva South have raised this issue repeatedly in Parliament about the status of regularizing these nursing personnel. The Government was supposed to settle the matter. Questions were asked of the Minister and of the Prime Minister and they said it is being worked out. By December 2021, it was supposed to be done but they have failed so to do. Again, a betrayal of these workers. What did they do instead? They have filed an appeal against the judgment handed down by the Industrial Court that was supposed to dispose of this matter. On September 12th of this year, they filed that appeal, betraying the promise to the nursing personnel of the nation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Now, over 30,000 daily-rated workers are still waiting to establish their contributory pension plan that the Government promised to take effect in 2020. Now the Minister tells us—so that is 2020. Where are we now? 2022, 2023. The Minister tells us now a consultant is reviewing these plans for the following year. Yet again, yet again, a betrayal of the workers. Tens of thousands of public officers were sold a dream that this promising Government will review public service pensions to index to their entitlement. That was expected to be completed by 2020. Almost two years have elapsed and public officers are still awaiting the indexing of their pension. Another broken promise by PNM: Promises Never Materialized.

Madam Speaker, I turn now to workers, the CEPEP programme. In 2015 when my Government demitted office, there was a total of 11,069 persons employed under the CEPEP programme. In 2021, under this Government, that has dropped down to 9,108 persons; dropped down by 9,108 persons so you have reduced the number of workers, again, creating more unemployment, more joblessness. For fiscal 2023, there has been no expansion in the programme, this is seen in their estimates. The programme was revised downwards from 425 million in 2022 to 410 million in 2023, meaning more of these workers will have to go on the breadline.

We look at URP, another form of employment, labour, they have cut expenditure by \$0.5 billion, 2016 to 2021. For the past seven years, this Government through its Minister has come to Parliament to appropriate billions of dollars of public moneys. They have consistently refused to account for how they are spending the people's moneys and so this new year, we expect the same. We

await the debate and the start of the debate. From evading Opposition's queries and expenditure to non-disclosure contract agreements, the exemption of State agencies from public scrutiny, the Government remains unwilling to account to the nation transparently.

A few words on agriculture because this is a very, very important sector to drive the economy for revenue streams, of course, and to help us with food security. I have spoken before about the decline in the agricultural sector under this Government. I have noted that the studies show growing food insecurity in the region due to a lack of production and high food prices. When people say they are not making a living anymore, believe them. When many go to supermarkets, they are forced to compromise and take only the bare minimum to get by. In some cases because as I said before, the exorbitant food price.

At our UNC pre-budget consultations in Princes Town, Mr. Mahadeo Ramnarine of Navet of the Dasheen Farmers Association lamented how difficult it is for farmers who sometimes do not have proper agricultural access roads, no retention ponds, no sluice gates available. He spoke about the lack of technical services from the Ministries extension department for pest control amongst other things. How can we reduce our food import bill if we continue to dismiss the plight of our farmers?

Mr. Javed Rahman of the Jerningham Junction Farmers Association told us about the issues of flooding, praedial larceny, poor infrastructure. Mr. Imtiaz Khan of the Carli Bay Fishing Association spoke of the neglect of fishing facilities and community. He explained that the fishermen used to have VAT returns on engines and vehicles, gas subsidy and an enforcement committee visiting the sites and caretakers. He says all these things have now been discontinued.

Government has treated this sector with more contempt than any other Government in history. Yet what did they do? They want to pappy show themselves with a fancy big expos and photo-ops. Remember that? Big—what was it? Agri-expo and the farmers down on the ground were not even invited. I wonder how many people sitting down in that place would indeed farmers in that expo. Government held the Agri Investment Forum in Port of Spain. A month later, the HDC is talking about pushing ahead with turning the St. Augustine nurseries into a housing development, destroying the agricultural aspects there. Prime agricultural land with a history of supporting farmers for decades.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Standing Order 49, please, Ma'am.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am sorry.

Madam Speaker: Okay. Again I will give you a little leeway but this is sub judice so please be careful.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Not sure which one—oh, or the nurseries. Okay. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I do not see what I would say will influence any judge but I will be guided. I cannot influence any judge, I am sure maybe some of the other—

Madam Speaker: Let us get on with it.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Okay, Ma'am. I am guided. So we are seen the Government has no history of supporting farmers and now we see what is happening there at those nurseries.

Nothing in the budget, definitely, Ma'am, I have seen for the scourge of praedial larceny, very small budget allocations for flooding which destroys so

many crops and drive up the cost of local foods. Again, the allocated 300 million that will never be used to benefit farmers, this might be used to buy hampers again. We saw what happened with those hampers and the vegetable boxes.

The UNC's plan, Ma'am, I want to share a bit of this before I close to ensure food security. Now remember when I spoke about agriculture before and the fact that we have to delve into agriculture as partly as a revenue earner but also for food security, the Prime Minister said there was no land, we do not have land and the Prime Minister does not understand given all the vertical ways of farming now that can be done, so many ways. Not everything is done flat down and—he has no idea. Absolutely no idea as his Government of how you can do agriculture with very little land but it is not true to say we do have land for agriculture, we do have farmers who are farming and need to be supported.

So I say our plan to deal with food security, our National Economic Transformation Plan, we place agriculture as the central pillar of our diversification strategy. This would lead to massive job creation and help us re-establish food security. We propose initiatives such as creating agricultural parks with all necessary infrastructure and focusing on local crops, organic super foods and non-traditional export crops. Indeed, our plan includes implementing an agriculture insurance protection system to protect farmers from losses incurred through flooding, drought, pest and disease and praedial larceny, fire and business interruption.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We propose investing in R&D, research and development and encouraging innovation in agricultural practices, processes, technology and commercialization of new products. We propose working with

farmers in the private sector investors to capitalize on global demand for non-traditional food crops which offer lucrative opportunities such as hot peppers and I think the last time I spoke, I talked about the fact that we have the scorpion pepper, which is one of the hottest in the world. I spoke about the fact that peppers, any peppers that you can grow can be easily exported so that is why I talk about this could be a revenue earner, a forex earner, job creation as well as help us with food security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We propose to inviting private investors to establish an agro-processing complex to process the supply from agricultural parks. This will be created through the lease of about 25,000 acres of former Caroni lands to registered farmers and private investors.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: There must be a focus on policies that would spur economic growth. Our nation desperately needs innovative solutions in this crisis.

I must say a word about Tobago, Ma'am. I would like to, not I must, I would like to. The Minister acknowledged that the change in admin in Tobago was a good thing for the development of the island.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When he stated and I quote:

“Madam Speaker I am in broad agreement with the socioeconomic agenda advanced by the new administration by the THA in its June 2022 Budget Statement for fiscal 2023.”

The Minister continues:

“The policies, programmes and activities that have been announced, if

implemented properly, will improve the economic well-being and quality of life of the people of Tobago. We anticipate the creation of more jobs in the private sector as well as the maintenance or preservation of existing businesses and the generation of new ones.”

End of quote. Madam Speaker, it seems to me that even the PNM seems to be happy that the PNM lost the elections in Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Minister acknowledged the lockdown measures and closure of the economy would have devastated the tourism industry on the island and there would be the need to kick-start. Tobagonians are not coming to Trinidad to go to Maracas Beach and rest and relax. They are coming here because there are services and goods which are not provided in Tobago. Notwithstanding the THA’s best efforts, they are not in control of the airbridge and the seabridge. These are controlled by central Government and we have to wonder that this price increase now whether they are trying to punish Tobago because of their loss in the elections.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: There have been recent complaints about the number of flights on the airbridge. Citizens have been clamouring for Government to increase flights to ensure those who wish to travel to Tobago will have an access to the opportunity. The solution this Government presented, as I said, was to raise the price to reduce the demand without resourcing Caribbean Airlines to be able to increase flights to Tobago. The increase in fares goes against the tourist agenda in Tobago because a large segment of travellers to Tobago are domestic tourists from Trinidad. Maybe this difficulty to travel between the islands is what the Prime

Minister meant when in the heat of the election, he stated that he will never forgive Tobago if they do not vote PNM. They will never forgive Tobago if they do not vote PNM. The increased fares will not encourage persons in Trinidad to staycation in Tobago.

Finally, Ma'am, the UNC's plan to rebuild and restore Trinidad and Tobago. There is no question in spite of the Minister's false narrative that we are doing reasonably well. The reality is our country's future is in peril under this Government. Our economy is tanking and the Government to oblivious to what needs to be done. The Prime Minister's call on citizens to stay the course but of course, that course we are headed on is for disaster. The UNC is ready, willing and able to steer our country into calm waters. Our track record speaks for itself.

Under the Government I led, the economy was on a stable growth path. We had initiatives in train to increase revenue generation and as I said, we created jobs, over 56,000 jobs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.30 p.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We have completed a comprehensive plan to help rebuild the economy and restore stability. The first recommendation we have is, one, reduce tax burden. Reduce the tax burden. We believe reducing the heavy tax burden on our citizens and businesses most affected by the COVID-19 will help citizens start to regain their footing.

I mentioned before about the VAT regime and the fact that we will again remove basic food items from the VAT net and improve the efficiency of the tax system by strengthening the BIR, the VAT office and Customs and Excise. We will also simplify the personal corporate income tax regime as well as the VAT

regime.

Our second bolster to the economy to help the economy to recover, is to jump start food security; and I just mentioned some of those initiatives. We believe there must be a jump start to the agriculture sector, and I gave some of the plans there. And we commit that we should spend at least 10 per cent of the PSIP to develop the agricultural access roads, irrigation and drainage for agricultural parks. We will also incentivize the private sector to establish an agro-processing plant. There will be no wastage or dumping of produce, which is a bane for many of our farmers.

The first strategy we are proposing is to restart Petrotrin to regain fuel security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We believe Government must re-examine its plan for Petrotrin. We are proposing to restart that refinery. By reopening Petrotrin, we will have greater fuel security. We will save foreign exchange. We will provide meaningful jobs and, of course, we will gain foreign exchange revenue and continue to contribute to the Treasury.

Our fourth proposal is for our Government to invest in renewable energy. Now, the Government speaks of it but it is just lip service and just never happens. Our initiatives in renewable energy and recycling, such as the establishment of a solar energy park at Tamana, an industrial recycling park across the East-West Corridor to reduce our carbon footprint while adding to environmental resiliency.

Our fifth economic booster for the economy in this recovery is the creation of three innovative funds to mobilize financial resources. We believe the Government should now adopt the approach and start the national food security

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fund—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—a national infrastructure fund and a national climate trust funds. These funds will not raise our public debt. We recognize that the citizens of T&T are critical to achieving our goal of recovery, sustainable growth and diversification. Our plan is built on three interconnected principles. Principle one, people-centered development; getting people back to work. Most important; getting people back to work.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Principle two, pro-business.; Allow the private sector to grow, drive growth and development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Principle three, resilience. Deepen economic reforms but with a human face.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Principle four, local content. Give people a sense of ownership and independence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Principle five, sustainability; promoting environmental stewardship.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And so the UNC's national economic, transformation plan lays out a comprehensive suite of policy initiatives and programmes to steer our economy towards a more sustainable development path. Our plan again is to create more jobs to focus heavily on diversification and new

business development so that people across the country will benefit. The plan has diversification and prosperity engines. With the economy in sharp decline, we must focus on new revenue-generation schemes and programmes. So we cannot continue to put all the eggs in the energy basket given the volatility of this sector. We have identified several prosperity engines to create new jobs, transform the economy and create more revenue.

1. A Brechin Castle agro-progressing complex.
2. A sugar-manufacturing facility.
3. An East-West biotechnology manufacturing corridor.
4. Sevilla digital innovation park.
5. Tamana solar tech renewable energy.
6. West Port of Spain Trini creative arts street area.
7. East Port of Spain steelpan manufacturing facility.
8. Piarco aircraft maintenance, repair and operations hub.
9. Cedros/Moruga southwest peninsular economic zone
10. Point Galeota energy logistics hub.
11. Plymouth international cruise ship complex.
12. Make Tobago a duty-free zone.
13. The Port of Spain Port revitalization.

These prosperity engines will mobilize and engage the private sector, both local and international, and their implementation will have large positive multiplier effects in kick-starting the economy.

Kick-starting economic recovery, fostering growth and supporting transformation. What is needed is a government and a leader who will put their shoulders to the wheel; a government that will see private sector and stakeholders

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as partners in the process of development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We recently marked our nation's 60th anniversary of Independence, our 46th anniversary of a Republic. We made significant progress on our journey. But successive PNM Administrations have stymied further development. This latest PNM Administration has been the worst in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We cannot go on this way. Our country and people deserve better. We deserve a government that cares about citizens, that will take decisive action to improve circumstances. I repeat that the UNC is ready to get to work to rebuild and restore our nation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Some of these programmes I have mentioned for economic transformation and recovery and rebuilding, I have mentioned before. And I still believe that they are very viable and workable and definitely in need.

For the past seven years, the Government has branded anyone who dared to speak truth as treasonous. Well the entire nation can see this proposed budget by the Government is nothing short of a betrayal of the people of our country. The budget will do nothing but work against the people of our nation, condemning them to hopelessness, to a cycle of poverty, to joblessness, some to criminality, violence and despair.

Budget 2023 has fully exposed the Government for what they are; a Government of incompetent and unqualified persons who have no desire to work to improve the lives of the people of our nation. A failed budget, a failed

Government will produce failed budgets. Failed budgets will produce failed nations. The entire nation now knows that as long as this Government sits in office, the greater the danger to economic stability, peace and prosperity.

To citizens of this great land, the salt of the earth; citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, I say take heart and have faith. For as sure as the day follows the darkest night, the sun shall and must always rise again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I know we are experiencing very difficult times, and as a result of this failed budget, it is going to get even worse. But we must remember that a people united can overcome any adversity. In times of crisis I often think back to the comforting words of my mother who would always remind me that everything in life is temporary, even troubles, and that that too shall pass. So please have faith. This too shall pass. Soon these seven years will be nothing more than a bad memory. We will overcome the crisis if we believe in the potential within ourselves. I will never give up on the people of Trinidad and Tobago and I ask you please do not give up on our nation.

It was the great freedom fighter, Mahatma Gandhi who said, and I repeat, when I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall.

Trinidad and Tobago, I say to you today, this Government is now tipping over on itself. Prime Minister I ask: Why do you continue your Government to brutalize the poor? Poor people have feelings too. I again call upon you, withdraw this wicked budget and call the election now. I thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I am very proud to rise today and this afternoon to respond to the Leader of the Opposition as a proud Member of this People's National Movement Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: First, let me go on record, Madam Speaker, on behalf of the constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West, to endorse this fiscal package presented by the hon. Minister of Finance on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago; this fiscal package themed Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, I have listened carefully to the contribution by the hon. Leader of the Opposition and I must say, Madam Speaker, that as I listened to her, it gives me good encouragement. It emboldens me, Madam Speaker, that the people of Trinidad and Tobago must be grateful for the People's National Movement, because if we do not stand in the gap for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and offer good, stable, honest, decent government, then the alternative is chaos and confusion, chaos and confusion.

As per usual, Madam Speaker, as per usual, the Leader of the Opposition stood there for three hours and as in her normal self, had nothing good to say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We stood here in this Parliament. We spent two years in this Parliament and she led her team at every single moment filibustering.

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker—[*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Overruled, the Member said the Leader of the Opposition and then said she.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, two years in this second term of the PNM Government, we came here. We presented policies. We presented Bills to protect the people of this country to increase our revenue standing and at every opportunity the Leader of the Opposition and her hon. Members opposite, they stood and they obstructed every opportunity and every attempt that we have made to improve the living conditions of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

1.45 p.m.

Today she came here, and she presented her response to the national budget, and I must say it is nothing but shameful because she believes—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—because she believes that the people of Trinidad and Tobago forgot her. She believes that the people of Trinidad and Tobago forgot the term—

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, ruling on 48(5).

Madam Speaker: So again, Member, it might be artificial to be saying Leader of the Opposition all of the time. And it will be artificial for us not to allow “she” sometimes, but please remember to populate your contribution with either the hon. Member for Siparia or the Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. M. Gonzales: I am so guided, Madam Speaker. And Madam Speaker, let me say that I will not stand here and disrespect any office holder, any Member of this House, but I will be guided by your ruling. But Madam Speaker, let me say, that when the PNM came into government in 2015, we came recognizing that there are serious challenges in this country, and oftentimes some serious decisions to

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make for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, very, very serious decisions.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Leader of the Opposition will have us believe that when we came into office in 2015 the circumstances that existed then from 2015 to 2022 were different from 2010 to 2015. She talked about her gross domestic product and all the policies that they pursued to advance the economic interest of this country. But the hon. Leader of the Opposition believes that the people of Trinidad and Tobago all forgot that when the UNC was in office between 2010 and 2015, the oil price then was hovering US\$93 per barrel. The price of gas was averaging \$4—US\$4 per MMBtu.

When the PNM came into government, declining oil prices, declining revenue production, declining gas prices, thereby resulting in billions of dollars being lost in revenue position in this country. As a matter of fact, between 2015 and 2020, 2015-2020 this country lost over \$18billion as a result of global prices. And this Government had to buckle down and pursue decisions, and pursue policies, to protect the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

In 2020, Madam Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition spoke for three hours. Three hours, she made absolutely—and the hon. Leader made absolutely no reference to the fact that Trinidad and Tobago faced economic whirlwinds and headwinds. The Leader of the Opposition made no reference to the fact that we as a country had to battle a global pandemic.

So when making comparison when the PNM came into government in 2015-2022, take into consideration that when the UNC formed the Government in 2010 to 2015, the UNC did not have to manage difficult circumstance as we have managed. And we leveled with the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We leveled

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with the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And the people of Trinidad and Tobago understood fairly well, fairly well, that as a government facing difficult circumstances, we had to make decisions to protect the interest of their interest.

It is the hon. Prime Minister, Madam Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister who told this country and told this Government that under his watch we will not go to the IMF. He said that. He said that as a country we will make the necessary decisions to protect our interest as others have done in the region where they went to the IMF, and of course it resulted in all kinds of social dislocations because of loss of jobs and other difficult decisions. But we as a country, we have decided that faced with difficult circumstances we will make decisions to the best and the interest, the good interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*].

Hon. M. Gonzales: And despite difficult circumstances, despite difficult circumstances, Madam Speaker, this Government spent over \$5billion through COVID relief for individuals and businesses, \$5billion. Let us look at other social and humanitarian support that we provided because the Leader of the Opposition spent three hours trying to paint this Government as wicked and detached, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Nothing could be further from the truth. A government faced with a global pandemic and difficult economical headwinds protecting the less vulnerable people in the society, the most vulnerable groups in the society, 25,100 grants for existing beneficiaries of food support at the value of \$17.1 million. They believe that the people of this country forgot all about that. Madam Speaker, 20,497 grants valued at \$510 each, at a value of \$31 million for households that

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receive meals from the School Support Programme. Madam Speaker, 42,450 grants valued at \$22.5million, at public assistance, disability assistance grant, Madam Speaker. Two thousand eight hundred and eighteen grants, valued \$1,500 each totalling \$12.7 million as food support to persons who approved for senior citizens pension. Does that represent a government that is detached? Does that represent a government that is wicked and pursuing policies? I say, absolutely not.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: They are a bunch of hypocrites. Emergency food hampers, food vouchers, rental assistance grants for families impacted by the closure of businesses or loss of income—

Madam Speaker: Member.

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, 48(4) please.

Madam Speaker: Continue.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you, thank you. Because you see, they prefer to sit here and pretend that this Government is not pursuing policies to the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And in the face of truth, they cannot sit there and listen and understand because they do not want us to remind the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we are continuing to pursue policies that are in their best interest. She spent—the Leader of the Opposition, sorry, spent three hours trying to paint this Government as being detached and not taking care of the people. And therefore I, as a PNM Minister of Government have to respond to her, and to remind her, and to remind all the people of Trinidad and Tobago of the policies and the programmes that we have put in place for the vulnerable people in our society.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Rental assistant grants for families impacted by the closure of businesses or loss of income. Fuel relief grant to maxi taxis and taxi operators, financial assistance for non-scholarships students staying at UWI, credit unions have been resourced with a reimbursable amount of \$100 million to provide emergency income support loans to their members. Policies pursued by this People's National Movement Government on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Salary relief grants to citizens whose employment has been terminated or suspended without pay. Religious bodies being given over \$40 million to assist with food distribution. Madam Speaker, 139,906 market boxes to the value of \$81million for all 41 constituencies, both PNM and UNC and all of them benefited from it, and all their constituents.

But today, the Leader of the Opposition comes to Parliament because she believes it is—the hon. Leader—I do apologize, that the people of Trinidad and Tobago forgot all about this and she must read from a prepared speech to paint the impression that this Government is detached and wicked. I say they are all hypocrites.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, in this 2023 fiscal package 300,000 individual taxpayers stand to benefit from new tax exemptions to the tune of \$450million annually. We have increased the Housing and Village Improvement Programme from \$145,000 to \$165,000, \$170,000 and \$175,000, to people in depressed communities so that they can improve their living circumstances. And the reason why this Government could pursue this, is because over the last seven years we have exercised fiscal prudence on behalf of the people of Trinidad and

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Tobago, and that we can now utilize some of the extra financial resources that are made available to us, so that we can benefit some of the most vulnerable people in society. That is not the example of a government that is wicked or detached. The person or any Member who gives that impression is not leveling with the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the school to work apprenticeship allowance to encourage businesses to hire some of our young people 16 to 25 years, the hon. Leader of the Opposition made absolutely no reference to this programme. Madam Speaker, \$200million to compensate health care workers, the Leader of the Opposition stood there, and she could not bring herself to even congratulating all of our health workers who worked tirelessly to protect the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: As a matter of fact, the Leader of the Opposition is now threatening, threatening a commission of enquiry as though health workers perpetuated fraud against the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Dr. Roshan Parasram and his team of medical practitioners, they are shining examples of what citizens and what we can do as a people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: But yet still, yet still, the Leader of the Opposition stood there and threatening a commission of inquiry as though things have gone—that is very shameful. Very, very shameful. And therefore, I want to take this opportunity and congratulate and thank Dr. Roshan Parasram and his team of medical professionals.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: I want to congratulate the Minister of Health, and all the team

of medical professionals who worked tirelessly for the Government and for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, thereby resulting in a country that has been spared the worst effects of this global pandemic, especially when we compare to what has taken place with some of the most even powerful countries in the world. Thank God, we have not seen bodies lying down on the streets and in containers, we have not seen that, and we have not seen it because of the hard work of some of the medical professionals.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*].

Hon. M. Gonzales: And the team of doctors and everyone who put their hands and their head together to protect the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And whilst we did that, Madam Speaker, whilst we did that, hon. Members opposite took every opportunity and opposed every single programme to obstruct this Government from protecting the people of Trinidad and Tobago. But today, the hon. Leader of the Opposition stood there and called for a commission of inquiry. Why do you not call commission of inquiry into the operations of the UNC between 2010 and 2015?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Call for a commission of inquiry on the conduct of every single Member of this Parliament who stood and conducted themselves in such a way to prevent policies from being pursued for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Call a commission of inquiry on all of them opposite. All of them.

Madam Speaker, thank God, the people of this country know the hon. Leader of the Opposition. Thank God, we know the Member for Siparia. We will not be lured. We will not be misguided. We will not be distracted. And as a

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matter of fact, as I listened to the hon. Leader of the Opposition, I remember that very beautiful poem by Mary Howitt, 1829, *The Spider to the Fly*:

“‘Will you walk into my parlour?’ said the Spider to the Fly
 ‘Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you...’—may—“‘...spy;
 The way into my parlour is...a winding stair
 And I have many curious things to shew when you are there.’”

The spider to the fly—the spider to the fly.

Hon. Member: “Ohhhh.”

Hon. M. Gonzales: “‘And bidding you good-morning now, I’ll call another day.’

The spider turned him round about, and went into his den
 For well he knew the silly fly would soon...”—come—“...back again:
 So he wove a subtle web, in a little corner sly
 And set his table ready to dine upon the fly.”

Dr. Seecheran: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(1). Relevance of Speech.

Hon. Member: Very relevant, very relevant.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rowley: Brilliant!

Madam Speaker: Members, Prime Minister, Members please. Continue.

Hon. M. Gonzales: And so the spider goes:

“For well he knew the silly fly would soon be back again:
 So he wove a subtle web, in a little corner sly
 And set his table ready to dine upon the fly.”

Hon. Member: “Ohhhh.”

Hon. M. Gonzales: “Then he came out to his door again, and merrily did sing

‘Come hither, hither, pretty fly, with...pearl and silver wing:

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Your robes are green and purple; there's a crest upon your head;
 Your eyes are like...diamond bright, but mine are dull as lead!
 Alas, alas! how very soon this silly little fly
 Hearing his wily flattering words..."

Flattering words we heard this morning, Madam Speaker. Flattering words:

"...came slowly flitting by.

With buzzing wings she hung aloft, then near and nearer drew
 Thinking only of her brilliant eyes..."

Thinking only of her—

"...green and purple hue;

Thinking only of her crested head—poor foolish thing! At last
 Up jumped the cunning spider, and fiercely held her fast.

He dragged her up his winding stair, into his dismal..."—UNC—"... den..."

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: "Within his little parlor; but she ne'er came...again!

And now, dear little children, who may this story read

To idle, silly, flattering words, I pray you ne'er give heed:"

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And I want to commend this poem to the people and to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago, be careful of the political con men and political con women.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: They have lovely words, they dress beautifully. Some put powder on their faces both men and women. Some wear wigs looking beautiful, but the cunning spider who trapped a spider who its web of death, seduction, and

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manipulation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: A cautionary tale, Madam Speaker, against those who use flattery and charm to disguise their true intention. That is who they are. And I warn the people of this country of political conmen and political con women who are busy spinning their web of deceit to trap the unsuspecting few in our midst. And that is all I have to say in response to the Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: We will not be trapped by that. We will not be trapped by that. The Leader of the Opposition, her ways, and the things that happened under her control between 2010 and 2015 have all rendered her and her team unelectable, unelectable.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And if there is one thing, if there is one thing that encourages me to stay here and soldier on with my team on this PNM side, is that we will fight to the bitter end on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, because the alternative to the PNM remains chaos and confusion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, I now turn my focus on the Ministry of Public Utilities. Madam Speaker, it has been a very challenging year, a challenging period for the Ministry of Public Utilities. The public utilities sector, Madam Speaker; it plays an integral role in the development of our nation and the provision of a certain quality of life for our citizens.

Both TSTT, WASA, are undergoing restructuring and transformation because at the end of the day we have to ensure that this country is water secured,

that all of our citizens and our communities get a reliable supply of water. In the same way we would have seen, Madam Speaker, that in the throes of the pandemic, digitization, digitalization, telecommunications, played a very critical role in holding our citizens and our country together, especially our students and our young people.

And therefore, moving ahead we ought to ensure as a government, that our telecommunication sector, and our water sector, the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, the postal services, all play a critical role as we seek to advance the economic well-being of this country.

The utility sector, Madam Speaker, has been experiencing unprecedented changes driven by rapid technological developments, which require utilities to move to agile delivery models using smart networks and increased adoption of digital services and capabilities, as they digitize their grids, infrastructure, and improve the customer's experience.

T&TEC, Madam Speaker, is the sole electric utility company that has overall responsibility for the generation, and the transmission, and the distribution of the supply of electricity to customers all across Trinidad and Tobago. The Commission's national grid covers 99.9 per cent of the country, providing electricity approximately to 512,000 customers on a 24-hour basis.

But before I go on to talk of some of the major projects happening under T&TEC, Madam Speaker, let me first give an update on the implementation on the recommendations of the report contained in the island-wide outage on Wednesday the 16th of September, 2022.

Madam Speaker, you may recall, in this House I laid very bare for all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago the findings of that report and the

recommendations contained therein. And therefore today, I am presented with an opportunity to report to the people of Trinidad and Tobago on the outcome of the works that are ongoing in the implementation of the recommendations of this report.

In this report, the committee noted inter alia that the country's electricity grid or network is robust, very important, that the country's electricity network is a robust one with reasonable redundancy, and generally well operated, and that no electricity grid is without risk or immune to failure. Very, very important observation.

But Madam Speaker, some of the actioned items mentioned in that report speak to the completion of the 220 kilovolt Union Gandhi line. A contract for the construction of this line was issued in March 2021 and the expected completion of this Union Gandhi line is February 2023. Very early in 2023 we will complete this project. Construction is in progress and the towers have been all installed.

The second recommendation: To develop an emergency response plan for power system failure which must incorporate an incident commander. Madam Speaker, this recommendation was acted upon, and it has been completed, and the incident manager has been assigned his responsibilities.

To identify the third recommendation: Identify power system vulnerabilities that can lead to catastrophic failures. In response, Madam Speaker, a steering committee has been convened comprising of representatives from the various IPPs, the National Gas Company NGC, the Ministry of Public Utilities, the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission.

The fourth recommendation: To develop power system restoration

procedures, completed. We have acted upon this recommendation.

The fifth: To develop a proper communicate protocol between the T&TEC control centre and the IPPs control centres. Madam Speaker, I am happy to report that this recommendation was also acted upon, since proper communication was now established with both the IPPs and the ODPM via the use of radios.

The sixth recommendation: Meet with the IPPs to develop a load rejection scheme. This is an ongoing plan, there is an ongoing plan to act upon this recommendation and discussion on this topic continues to take place at the steering committee meetings.

The seventh recommendation: To develop various islanding schemes for the power system, and that recommendation is being acted upon.

The eighth recommendation: Check the capability of all DC supplies for batteries at the various substations. That has been completed. To meet with the ODPM to work out mechanism for response during an island-wide blackout; completed. Several meetings were held with the ODPM and an action communication plan was identified and developed. Survey and provide cost for the construction of a double circuit line from BC substation to gateway substation, the survey and the estimate were completed, and the estimate is somewhere in the region of \$500million to be budgeted and acted upon.

And Madam Speaker, I can go onto a number of the other recommendations and to give a status but at some appropriate time, perhaps in the Senate I will continue to provide the people of Trinidad and Tobago with an update on the recommendations that were contained in that island-wide blackout report.

In fiscal 2021-2022, T&TEC continues to support the socio-economic growth, and the development of Trinidad and Tobago and has made significant

investment in the electricity infrastructure all across Trinidad and Tobago. The following projects were completed in fiscal 2021-2022:

- The replacement of two 63—33 kilovolt MVA power transformers for the Wrightson Road project substation, completed.
- The upgrade of St. Mary's Galeota 33 kilovolt circuit. The replacement of defective poles and insulators, completed.
- The benefit of the replacement of aged transmission infrastructure all across Trinidad and Tobago in Pinto Road and in several areas, Madam Speaker, they are ongoing and they are very close to completion.

And arising out of the nationwide outage that occurred on February the 16th, 2022, the commission has undertaken significant works to expedite the completion of the second 220 kilovolt double circuit bundled conductor tower line from Union-Estate Substation to Gandhi Village. And as I have said, Madam Speaker, this project is set to be completed in February 2022—2023, I am sorry.

With respect to disaster preparedness, you would recognize, Madam Speaker, that as all utilities, T&TEC, WASA, TSTT, have been all suffering with extreme weather conditions, and as a result of that T&TEC has embarked upon putting together a robust disaster preparedness plan and strategy. We have so far procured an amphibious vehicle which can traverse through flood areas, swamps, et cetera. And this vehicle is expected to facilitate quicker inspection of the network during and after disasters, and consequently improve its response time for disruption on its network in extreme weather conditions.

The vehicle was shipped and received at the port of—in Trinidad on September the 12th and will be commissioned in the coming weeks. Using the PSIP funding in

fiscal 2021, the commission procured 98 12/21 metre poles as spears under the disaster preparedness programme which, in the event of a disaster, will be used in the restoration process for electricity or communities impacted by electricity disruption. The polls were all received in May 2022. The Commission has also completed the procurement under its tender rules of 750 12.2 metre poles as spears under the disaster preparedness programme. The poles were all received in August 2022. And given the increase in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters resulting from climate change, the disaster preparedness programme is geared to minimizing disruptions in the electricity supply and quicker response time to outages.

With respect to repairs of streetlights, Madam Speaker, as of August 2022, a total of 23,017 streetlights have been repaired and this project contributes to a greater sense of safety and security of citizens, especially during the nighttime. And I can give you the assurance that in the new fiscal year 2023, we will be seeking to ramp up activities in our street lighting programme, to remove all of the blown lights across our highways and our main roads. And I have already given authorization for the request coming from various constituencies on both sides of the House to be given serious consideration, because I understand and we recognize that our street lighting programme is very, very vital to the peace and the security of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: I have asked Members on both sides of the House to present to me their request and I look forward to 2023 being an active year where we pay specific attention to the lighting up of our streets, our secondary roads and all of our rural communities to improve our security.

Madam Speaker, with respect to the Water and Sewerage Authority, a lot has been said in recent times in the media with respect to the transformation of WASA. You would recall, Madam Speaker, that two years ago we laid in this Parliament the report of the findings of a Cabinet sub-committee on the operations of WASA. This report was laid before this Parliament for every single Member to read and for every single citizen who might be interested in the operations of WASA. That report was laid bare before this House on the instructions of the hon. Prime Minister. So, when I heard the Leader of the Opposition talking about some secret strategic plan to reduce staffing in WASA by 2,000, I was astounded. I was astounded because the views of the Government on the operations of WASA are all contained in a report that was laid before the House and therefore—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—we have nothing to hide. We have nothing to hide with respect to the operations of WASA. So, when the Leader of the Opposition comes here this morning and talk about some action plan, there is no action plan approved by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to reduce staff by 2,000 employees inside of WASA. I am not aware of it. I am not aware of it. What action plan? There is one action plan approved by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago with respect to that—with respect to WASA and that action plan speaks to the improvement of water for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—and it has been a public document. But I was hoping that the Leader of the Opposition would have provided us with more details of what she was referring to but unfortunately, it was not forthcoming. Because in their usual style, it is all geared towards riling up the people of Trinidad and Tobago without

levelling with them, without any scintilla of truth or decency. And if as a Leader of the Opposition you are prepared to come here and talk about some action plan, give us the details because I did nothing in this Ministry and so far, over the last two years, we have levelled with the people of Trinidad and Tobago with respect to WASA and there is absolutely nothing to hide.

And I call upon every Member of this House, both on this side and that—especially those on the other side, your constituencies are also been affected by an unreliable water supply. The Member for Couva South talked about water riot because some people in his constituency were getting water once a week or once every nine days and he threatened water riot. And I expected the first Member on the UNC side to come and to defend and work with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is the Member for Couva South. Do not engage in mischief because they are not interested in solving problems. They are hoping that as this Government confronts the problem of this country that we become unpopular and it will create an opening for them to be in government. The people in this country do not want the UNC, sorry, to govern them. The people of this country know them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: So, do not feel as though when we are called upon to make decisions that may not be politically popular, that it is going to present you with a political opportunity to come into government. If you want to come in Government present to us your plans and your programme, because you always have a plan to remove the PNM from Government but you will never have a plan to govern this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have five more minutes of speaking time, you may request an additional 10 minutes.

Hon. M. Gonzales: I am requesting 10 minutes.

Madam Speaker: Okay. Please proceed.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. And therefore Madam Speaker, we will continue to pursue our responsibilities to ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago get an efficient water supply. And, Madam Speaker, as I talk about WASA, we have completed the transformation plan. That transformation plan was passed to the board of commissioners for implementation and I trust that the board will continue to do its work to implement the transformation of the Water and Sewage Authority because we are all invested in having an organization that can execute the Government's plans and the Government's programmes to ensure that the people of this country continue to get an efficient and reliable supply of water.

But as we do that, Madam Speaker, we would have undertaken a number of plans and a number of projects under the Water and Sewage Authority, especially under our Community Water Improvement Programme, where a number of communities have all benefitted from an improvement in an increase in their water supply, low cost, low hanging, low capital expenditure. And I can list a number of these projects. A number of these programmes were executed in the UNC constituencies and some of their own Members, they came forward and they would have given their testimonials that these projects under our Community Water Improvement Programme would have enhanced their lives and improved their water supply. And as we do that, we will continue to ramp up our activities in 2023 to pursue similar types of projects all over Trinidad and Tobago, thereby

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improving the supply of water, so much so that this programme has been so successful, that currently the levels of service—24/7 level of service across Trinidad and Tobago has now increased to 51 per cent—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—51 per cent. And therefore, I want to thank the hon. Minister of Finance for continuing to provide us with the financial resources to continue to pursue these projects and programmes. And with a lot more to do in this new financial year, we will continue to do very important emergency work on the Caroni Water Treatment Plant, the Navet Water Treatment Plant, the North Oropouche Water Treatment Plant. We will continue the desilting of the Hillsborough dam, the Courland Water Treatment Plant. All of these major water treatment facilities are all operating below their capacity. And as we believe—as we undertake some critical intervention to rehabilitate those plants, we are confident that communities all over Trinidad and Tobago will see an improvement in their water supply.

In early 2023, in this new financial year, we will undertake robust well development programme in Siparia, in Penal, in Freeport to increase water productions, targeting areas that are getting water 24/1 and below. Because we believe, Madam Speaker, we believe that no community, whilst everyone is entitled to a 24/7 water supply, that we have the resources and we have the capacity to bring every single community to at least 24/3 and 24/4 levels of service. And as we do that, we continue to collaborate with our international partners and I look forward to the implementation of modular water treatment plants in the Sangre Grande area, in the Ravine Sable area, in the Mayaro area to

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increase and improve water supply to over 20 imperial million gallons of water per day to increase and improve water supply.

Even in my constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West, we would have pursued a number of initiatives under T&TEC, under WASA, getting the assistance of the Ministry of Sports and Community Development, getting the assistance of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, to pursue programmes for my constituency. I want to say as difficult as the task of Minister of Public Utilities might be and consuming, I take the time to go and visit my constituency on a regular basis and that is because of their support I feel emboldened to continue to do the great work that we are doing at every single level.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And I want to take this opportunity and thank my constituents of Lopinot/Bon Air West for their love and for their support, because it is very, very critical as we undertake the task of governing the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: So, Madam Speaker, the transformation of WASA is on the way and we are pursuing a course of programmes all across Trinidad and Tobago that will see an improvement in our water supply.

With respect to leak management—before I move on from WASA, with respect to leak management when I came into the Ministry, there were over 5,000 leak backlogs in WASA; 5,000 leak backlogs. Last year, we commenced a leak management repair programme and I am proud to say that this programme has been very successful with a merger of in-house and external contractors to reduce the levels of leaks on the distribution network. And so far I can tell you, in Tobago,

the leak backlog has been completely eradicated. In central, in south and south east Trinidad, by next week, the leak backlog will be completely eradicated. And as we eradicate the backlogs—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—what is naturally going to be happening is that the system is going to maintain better pressures and there will be a more reliable supply of water to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We anticipate that with this strategy, Madam Speaker, by November, the backlog of leaks on WASA's system will be entirely eradicated and therefore, the Authority will be in a better position to respond and to comply with the RIC's standard to repair leaks within 24 to 48 hours and we are well on the way to achieving this. So, we look forward to some of these programmes taking place and I wish to congratulate and to thank the board of commissioners and all of the hard-working people in WASA for the support that they have given in this regard.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: With respect to road improvements, we have recognized that there are institutional flaws in WASA's management of road restoration. WASA's main mandate is to provide the people of Trinidad and Tobago with water and wastewater services. And therefore, with respect to road restoration, a decision has been taken to allow for experience road pavers to conduct road rehabilitation and road restoration, thereby allowing the utility company to focus on its key mandate which is to provide the people of Trinidad and Tobago with a reliable water supply.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, TSTT is continuing to do great work. It has crossed a very, very difficult process in transformation and I can tell you TSTT is looking to roll out a suite of digital services to its customers. It has increased and expanded its mobile FDD 4G LTE networks all across Trinidad and Tobago. And over the past year, TSTT has expanded its mobile FDD 4G LTE network with the deployment of 30 new LTE 700 megahertz sites along with the expansion of top 10 congested LTE megahertz sites across Trinidad and Tobago. The company is continuing to do its work to expand its services all across Trinidad and Tobago and will launch a new suite of digital services in the areas of home automation; security solutions; software as a service, SaaS; as well as its best in class software e-Tender service to all its customers.

Recently, the Authority launched its Parlour and its e-commerce platform to support some of our local artisans and our local craftsmen and craftswomen. And therefore, I am very, very proud of TSTT and the support it is giving to some of our local manufacturers, giving local manufacturers an opportunity to export their products to the region and to the wider world. I am very proud of them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have done a lot of work from a policy perspective. Because at the end of the day, as a Ministry, our responsibility is to ensure that we have the legislative and a policy framework to move the utility sector forward. And in so doing, we, over the years—over the last two years, would have put together a number of policies and programmes in the area of waste management. We would have completed the Integrated Solid Waste Management Policy for Trinidad and Tobago, the beverage container policy, the National Waste Recycling Policy. We have currently before the Cabinet, an integrated water

resource management policy, the energy efficiency policy, the energy conservation, and all of these policies putting in place as we seek to strategize and to position the utility sector to continue to be robust and to respond to the challenges that are faced by every single utility in Trinidad and Tobago.

By April of next year, we will be in a position to commence the construction of our engineered sanitary landfill in south Trinidad. That has been on the books for some time. The Solid Waste Management Company of Trinidad and Tobago would have completed its topographic and hydrographic surveys, its cadastral survey, its geotechnical and groundwater studies.

Presently, the Authority is working with the Environmental Management Authority on an ESIA as well as a certificate of clearance—environmental clearance. And once all of these statutory approvals and processes are completed, I must say that SWMCOL will seek to engage a design/build consultant to construct a new engineered landfill in Trinidad and Tobago. Because I can tell you, the Guanapo Landfill, Beetham Landfill and the landfill in south, they are all bursting at their seams, they are all at their maximum capacity. And therefore, in Trinidad and Tobago, at this point in time, it is a sense of urgency that we move into a more engineered landfill, that we get on board our beverage container legislation, we change the behaviour of our citizens in the way that we manage waste. Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, waste management is very critical, especially as it relates to the protection of our environment and the protection of our watercourses and our underground aquifers.

May I ask you how many times do I have remaining?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Play just over three minutes.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Three minutes. So, I wish to end, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on some of the social programmes because we would have been regaled with so many “unfactual” matters presented by the Leader of the Opposition, that we are detached and that we do not understand the feelings of ordinary men and ordinary women in this society.

I can tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can tell you that under the Ministry of Public Utilities, we have a social sector programme to protect our vulnerable citizens. Members on the opposite side would pretend that they do not know that over 220,000 citizens of Trinidad Tobago benefit from an electricity rebate policy by this Government; 220,000 citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Last year, in the last fiscal budget presented by the hon. Minister of Finance, the rebate was increased from 25 per cent to 35 per cent. And therefore, the Government now has to undertake an expenditure of \$72 million to ensure that we have reliable electricity services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Nobody talks about that. Nobody talks about that. And the hon. Leader of the Opposition would have spent three hours this morning attempting to mislead the people of Trinidad and Tobago with information that cannot be supported.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And therefore, I tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we in the Ministry of Public Utilities, we continue to work on policies and systems to protect the less vulnerable—the vulnerable groups in our society. There is an Utilities Assistance Programme where 13,000 citizens are beneficiaries of that programme, where we assist vulnerable groups, pensioners, to pay the utility bills, their WASA and T&TEC bills; 13,000 citizens. Hundreds of citizens benefit from our water

tank assistance programme where we provide water tanks of vulnerable groups in society, especially in communities by Members—represented by Members opposite. But yet, you will not hear about it. You will not hear about it because they do not want the country to know of the policies and the programmes that we are continuing to pursue to protect the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Under the CWIP programme, as I have explained a short while ago, it is another development programme of the Ministry of Public Utilities, plans and programmes are being put in place why as we seek to transform the Water and Sewerage Authority, a number of communities on both sides of the House, especially those opposite, benefitting from an efficient water supply. The Member for Manzanilla can tell you that and so many Members opposite whose constituents have benefitted from a Community Water Improvement Programme. And I can tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I can assure the people of Trinidad and Tobago that in this new fiscal year, whilst we seek to transform the utility sector and make decisions to ensure that utility sector is always at a position to provide the people of Trinidad and Tobago with an efficient utility sector programme, we will pursue programmes to protect the less vulnerable in our society. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Princes Town.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And hon. Members, remember for—you have 45 minutes and you have an additional 10 minutes, you would so desire if you need it.

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to be able to contribute to the financial appropriation Bill, 2023. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would also like to take the opportunity, as I first start, to

congratulate the Leader of the Opposition for reflecting the views and pulse of a nation plunged into despair, darkness and hopelessness.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Today, the Leader of the Opposition has given a comprehensive response to the Minister of Finance's fiscal package and it demonstrates her understanding and her ability to deal with the issues that most impact and affect the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and understanding that the challenges that are faced by the majority of our citizens are real.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on listening to my colleague from Lopinot/Bon Air West, the Minister of Public Utilities, it is best described, in terms of the Minister's contribution, as feeble, vacuous and puerile. Those who are words that came to mind in terms of the Minister's attempt to critique the contribution made by a Member for Siparia.

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I paid close attention to what the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West had to say and the Member attempted to contextualize his contribution by indicating that when this administration came into office in September 2015, that they were faced with so many challenges, especially the challenges affecting the hydrocarbon sector. But then, the Minister went into a long winded tirade, regaling us about all the wonderful things that were happening under the various sectors and the various Ministries.

Today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to ask the Minister, if things are so good, why are people bawling? Why are people suffering? Why are people still living in abject poverty? Mr. Deputy Speaker, after listening to the contribution made by the Member of Lopinot/Bon Air West, I can understand why that Minister is in charge of solid waste.

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You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister failed to say why it is that 4,000 people died of COVID while thousands of children are still today without devices. The Minister did not tell us why did so many of our nation's citizens have to line up for hampers and grants and still many of them are today on the breadline. Mr Deputy Speaker, the hon. Minister failed to say why so many of our nation's citizens died at the hands of murderers under his administration.

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, through you, I have a piece of advice for the hon. Minister. Next time citizens are murdered in this country, recite for them the poem of "The Spider and the Fly". When next citizens cannot afford groceries at the supermarket, recite for them the poem of "The Spider and the Fly".

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: When people cannot get basic services of water, recite for them the poem of "The Spider and the Fly". That will be your legacy, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to add my support to several things the Member for Siparia said today. And the Member for Siparia called out organizations and persons in this country who are afraid to call a spade a spade for fear of reprisal, and that is political and economic reprisal.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will give you one example. How can we have in this country organizations representing businesses headed—and, you know, it is always said, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you know the backstory to the story, then you understand why people are motivated by what they say and what they do. So, when one organization can come out and say this was a thoughtful, well-prepared budget, and that same organization is represented by a family member who gets

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billions of dollars in construction contracts in this country, you understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why people say and why people do what they do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have seen and we have heard over the last day or two the utterances of what have been described as that of Trinidad and Tobago's Marie Antoinette. But today, we have almost heard from King Louis because after the last contribution made by the Member Lopinot/Bon Air West, the Member for Siparia was right when she described Government as being tone deaf and totally out of sync, detached from reality.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2021, it was reported that Trinidad and Tobago had 17,000 small and medium enterprises. That was a figure that was provided to us in this House by the Minister of Labour when asked in 2021. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2015, there were 23,000 small and medium enterprises. Mr. Deputy Speaker, after the pandemic, we were told that from the 17,000 small and medium enterprises, that 6,000 of those were closing down. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have seen today by the contribution made by the Member for Siparia that the only people who are suffering, apart from the average man, woman and child in this country, are the small and medium enterprises that have been forced to close their doors or who are on the brink of closing their doors.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And the fiscal measures contained in the Minister of Finance's budget presentation did nothing to help those small and medium enterprises.

2.45 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this budget reminds me of something we say in Trinidad and Tobago, and in local parlance, we often say, that you live for today

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and let tomorrow see about itself, and that is the mentality of every PNM administration time and time again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And today, we are reaping the rewards, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of that mentality. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, dealt with several areas in the sphere of public utilities, and I would like to address some of those, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member spoke about the investments that were made, particularly, in WASA, in terms of water production, distribution and looking at alternative supplies. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the recurrent expenditure under WASA for the year 2021, 2022, WASA was cut by \$350million in the area of maintenance, materials, supplies and employment.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was very intrigued to see, what the allocation that was made to WASA in this year in the areas of maintenance, supplies and contract employment was. Mr. Deputy Speaker, once again, WASA has been cut by over \$250million. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this affects the distribution and supply to many of our nation's citizens who day on day, in this country, suffer for a reliable supply of water.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air, almost as if he sought to give comfort to the population that things were happening with respect to WASA and productivity. The Minister introduced, for the very first time, in this budget presentation, the issue of the water modulated treatment plants, and that announcement was made in February of this year. The Minister—when the Minister made the announcement of the water modulated treatment plants, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I quote from the Minister on February 11, 2022. The Minister

indicated that 10 of these water modulated treatment plants will be built across the country to improve productivity and to improve the distribution of water across the nation. But the Minister also, in that same speech promised that the very first water modulated treatment plant will be delivered in October of 2022. The Minister, like the Minister of Finance, appeared as though he forgot, selectively as usual, that he had made that announcement and made that commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am reliably advised that not one grain of sand has been committed to the construction of any water modulated treatment plant. So, therefore, that promise—and the Leader of the Opposition told us PNM: Promises Never Materialize—the very first promise of a water modulated treatment plant, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is bogus and it is hogwash, because nothing has commenced in the area of these water modulated treatment plants.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, spoke about a comment made by the Member for Siparia as it relates to a document she spoke of. And you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West went on to tell us that the Cabinet had appointed a committee to look into the future plans of WASA and the restructuring of WASA. That was not the document that Mrs. Persad-Bissessar, Member for Siparia, spoke of when she exposed that 2,500 employees of WASA will be put on the breadline. You see what the Member for Siparia spoke of was a document entitled: The Strategic Business Plan and Model for WASA that was prepared with Government policy to be sent to the Regulated Industries Commission. It is that Strategic Business Plan and Model that will inform whether or not the RIC institute new tariffs and new rates, and also

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it will inform how the RIC goes about coming up with those new tariffs and new rates.

So when the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West speaks about the restructuring plan, it is not the restructuring plan we were speaking about. The Member for Siparia has a copy of the strategic business plan that has been finalized to be sent to the Regulated Industries Commission. And on page 53 of that document, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it cannot be disputed, because the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, up to now, did not dispute the revelation made by the Member for Siparia that over 2,500 employees of WASA will be sent home. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to remind the RIC—

Mr. De Nobriga: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(4), not that the language is poor, but the volume is offensive, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. Again, hon. Member for Princes Town, you already have a very distinct, protruding voice. So, again, let us see how best we can work it out.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to remind the RIC that the approach in terms of new tariffs and new rates for water and electricity, and the Minister of Finance was very clear in that the only way in which water and electricity where we will actually see investment into the area of water and electricity production would be through these tariffs. The Minister was very clear that there would be no other capital investment because Government is dependent on an increase in these water and electricity rates in order to invest that money that they anticipate will come in from the increased tariffs. Outside of that, the Minister shows and demonstrates no alternative supply of capital investment in

Mr. Padarath (cont'd)

these areas. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to remind the RIC, that in determining these new rates, it is a three-pronged approach. First, WASA and T&TEC has to submit the business plan and the business model—

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am having some difficulty in hearing my colleague. So, I would ask that the Members of the Government adhere to Standing Orders 48(4), (5) and (6) in terms of their volume.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay Members. Again, on both sides of the House, again, if you all can speak in a lil more hushed tones, it will be appreciated. And, again, likewise Princes Town, kindly proceed.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in determining these new rates, the RIC has to look at the business plan submitted by T&TEC and WASA. They then evaluate and then the third stage is the public consultation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as part of the review by the RIC, the RIC in their evaluation has to determine whether or not citizens are comfortable or happy or are actually receiving that quality of supply of water and electricity. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, through the public consultations, citizens will have the opportunity to say whether or not they are satisfied and whether or not they are actually receiving a satisfactory—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence, please.

Mr. B. Padarath:—supply from both WASA and T&TEC. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will tell you why I raise this, because when you look at the allocation made to the RIC for these public consultations, because in the budget presentation through the *Social Sector Investment Programme* we are told that the RIC will implement these new tariffs and so on by the second quarter of 2023. Therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one would expect that in the allocations made to the RIC, when you look

at the line-Item, Hosting of Conferences, Seminars, et cetera, there is actually no projections there, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There are no estimates, there are no allocations.

So, therefore, my question is: How does the RIC intend on airing the views of citizens as it relates to these tariffs, these impending tariffs? Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will say to the RIC, again, that you cannot institute new tariffs without justifying a proper and satisfactory supply of water and electricity to citizens. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that goes to my next point.

You see, at a joint select committee of this very Parliament, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Manager of Customer Control and Customer Relations at WASA told us that 16, 1-6, 16 per cent in February of this year—told a joint select committee of this Parliament that 16 per cent of this country receives a full 24/7 supply of water. Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister then disputed that figure and the Minister said it was somewhere in the region of 30 per cent, but could not give any facts or any data.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have in my hand, a copy of something called the quality of service standard report of WASA and Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is an internal document that is compiled by WASA and it gives a breakdown of every area in Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the scheduled supply of water. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the RIC standard, in terms of how it is aggregated is that you must receive 48 hours in terms of an average week—48 hours within a week. That is the RIC standard in terms of scheduling.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this quality of service standards produced by WASA dated August 2022, internal document of WASA says that 52 per cent of all the areas in Trinidad and Tobago that are on a scheduled supply of water are

noncompliant, noncompliant, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 52 per cent. So when the Minister comes to the Parliament, I remember asking a question about my very own constituency and colleagues asked questions their own constituencies. Many of us represent rural areas and we have the challenge of citizens not being able to get pipe borne water and so on and we asked them and the Minister got up and and he said: you are on a schedule. And then we say, Well, Minister but people are complaining they are not receiving the water. He said that is not my information. Well, Minister, if you do not have a copy of the quality of service standards dated August 14, 2022 that says only 52 per cent of the country actually receives—no, not receives, 52 per cent of the country does not receive the scheduled supply of water, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And today we have to hear our colleague from Lopinot/Bon Air West lecture us on the spider and the fly.

If the Minister was actually doing his work, 52 per cent of this country would have had a better supply of water—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: But the Member is more concerned about “lacaray” and bacchanal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Not about productivity and improving the quality of the lives of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it does not get better. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to share with you, on March07, 2022, a LoopTT article headlined: “WASA assures tap water safe”. It further stated that:

“WASA has launched an investigation into claims that... the pipe-borne water it supplies”—causes—“illness.”

WASA refuted claims stating that they are both false and speculative as it is

not supported by any scientific testing of the water quality and further went on to say that:

“The Authority assured customers that the water currently being supplied through its distribution system complies with the Guidelines for Drinking Water Quality of the World Health Organisation and is safe for use.”

This was published on March 07, 2022.

One day later in the Conversations with the Prime Minister on March 08th, Minister of Public Utilities, Marvin Gonzales boasted that for the first time WASA has put together a business plan and a capital investment plan.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, former Prime Minister, Patrick Manning, used to tell us in this House, facts are stubborn things. Ironically, in the said WASA business plan on page 174, it states that:

While the potable water remains bacteriologically safe, compliance with the psychochemical quality remains at around 65 per cent although the standard proposed by the RIC is the World Health Organization guideline of 95 per cent. WASA has failed to meet the scientific testing of the quality of water to be consumed by the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, these are not my words. This is what is contained in the Quality of Service Standards. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have been at pains to show you and demonstrate, that we cannot take what the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West tells us. All the great strides he has made with respect to the production of water and the increased capacity of WASA, when their very own quality of service standard document is refuting their claim from March 07, 2022 that this water is not causing illnesses and not making people sick and so on. And then their quality of service standard report of August 14, 2022 says that:

The World Health Organization standard is that you must be at 95 per cent.

And how much is WASA at? By their own document, 65 per cent. And the Minister must explain that. The Minister must explain why you told the country in March of 2022 that we were compliant that the water was bacteriologically safe and then your own internal document of August 14, 2022 says you have failed by over 30 per cent in compliance with respect to the World Health Organization's standards.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West also shared with us projects. The Member spoke again about infrastructure and pipelines and so on. This is very Member, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I stood in this Parliament and I asked about projects that were promised by then Minister Le Hunte as it relates to aging infrastructure, the Minister, new Minister, Marvin Gonzales, got up and he said: "I had no idea, I do not know what you are speaking of Member for Princes Town." Today, the Minister rolls out some of those repeated promises made by then Minister of Public Utilities, Robert Le Hunte, almost three years later, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing? Is it that this is the approach of this Government as it relates to the public utilities sector in this country like everything else?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West indicated that the Government had allocated \$4.7 million to rebates for both water and electricity. First, I want to deal with the issue of the electricity rebate. The Minister of Finance, in last year's budget presentation told us that over 200,000 persons in this country, they receive a rebate as it relates to electricity. Mr. Deputy Speaker, based on the impending increase in the tariffs, the Member for Diego Martin/North East, Minister of Finance, did not share with the country how many of those

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persons who fall within that 200,000 category will be bumped off from receiving rebates when the electricity tariffs are reviewed and new rates are implemented. Instead, we are told that over 14,000 will receive rebates for electricity and water.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what a tangled web we weave, when we first set out to deceive. And that encapsulates the approach taken by the Minister of Finance and the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West as it relates to the area of rebates. Mr. Deputy Speaker, how did they move from over 200,000 persons in this country receiving these rebates, last year, to now 14,000 without any explanation? But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Members opposite come year after year and they repeat some of these same broken promises, but they also jump from one area to the other with the hope that people will forget what they said previously.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is my sincere hope that the Member for Diego Martin North/East or the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West will share with the population how did they move from 200,000 people benefiting from rebates to what is contained in the *Social Sector Investment Programme* of only 14,000.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to share with you in WASA's Business Plan, page 266 it says:

Based upon the evaluation process described above, WASA is proposing to phase in tariff increases to fully cover operating expenses, a greatly enhanced efficiency levels by the end of the regulatory controlled period and to provide funding for a portion of the annual depreciation expenses to move towards financial solvency.

Again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the only way for the Government to pay its Bill is to increase the financial burden of citizens by increasing taxes paid. This Government's only strategy to generate income and pay its bills is taxation.

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Mr. Deputy Speaker, on page 193 of the plan, it states that:

WASA has adopted a cost-based approach to its tariffs setting and, in so doing, has also reassessed its customer classes as the grouping of customers with similar characteristics enables the matching of service requirements with the cost of providing the service.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it goes on to say, on page 199 to 200, it states that:

Current tariffs for metered domestic customers is based on a two-tiered tariff structure. Customers are charged TT 1.75 for the consumption up to first 150 m³. This submission proposes to reduce the initial tier of the consumption from the existing level.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it also says:

This change will increase the proportion of household consumption priced at the second-tiered level and it is designed to encourage water conservation from the high current consumption levels.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it went on to say that there plan is not only to introduce new tariffs, but also to deliberately adjust the parameters of the first tier of the tariff system so that the majority of the customers will fall into the second tier having to pay higher rates.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it also says on page 200:

With the current tariff structure for metered domestic customer, a customer consuming 443 m³ per year will pay a volumetric total tariff of TT 776. After the reduction in the block of consumption from 150 m squared to 45 m² per quarter, tariffs for customer consuming 443 m² a year with an increase to TT 1,262, an increase of 78 per cent in the volumetric tariff. Considering the elasticity of 0.15, the customer will reduce their average

demand, so that their volumetric tariff decrease to TT 1,113 instead of TT 1,262 that will result from a higher consumption.

So while they are only focused on reducing demand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they ignore the taxpaying citizens. The average customer will now, according to these calculations have to pay 78 per cent more for water supply, one that is not even safe for consumption. Instead of focusing on reducing demand, why is the focus not on improved crippled distribution infrastructure and introduce strategies to increase water production.

You see, the Government wants you to think that they care about you, but in reality, they only think about and invest in themselves and the population is fed to the wolves, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is what is happenings with respect to WASA.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you would permit a few minutes, I would like to deal with the issues of T&TEC. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I saw a few weeks ago, and it is as almost as if the Trinidad Express has now awoken. I have been asking this of the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, the Minister of Finance, Diego Martin North/East, for the longest while and, that is, what is the rate in terms of the natural gas that is being sold from NGC to T&TEC and whether or not that subsidy has been removed in whole or in part?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I saw the *Trinidad Express* picked up this issue a few days ago, but it is almost as though it is shrouded in secrecy, and I am hoping one of those Members will be able to tell us, what is the going rate now, because as far as I understand, this rate is fixed by the subcommittee of energy who then passes on that price to NGC for T&TEC to purchase natural gas.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, something that is being parroted in the public domain and I heard the Member for Diego Martin North/East speak about it in his budget

presentation and the Member speaks about the \$7billion that T&TEC owes to NGC for the provision of this natural gas. And the Member says this has been happening for the past 10 years. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is the furthest thing from the truth, because this debt that is owed from T&TEC to NGC, that occurred under this People's National Movement administration post-general election 2015. Mr. Deputy Speaker, up to 2015 when the People's Partnership exited office, T&TEC did not owe NGC that \$3 billion that the Minister ascribes happened under the People's Partnership. So, therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am hoping that the Member would spend some time dealing with, how do you intend on clearing this \$7billion debt and also clarifying to the population how did the PNM allow that \$7 billion debt between NGC and T&TEC to occur?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was hoping to hear from the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West and the Member almost, as if he took a page out—that is the hon. Member that is for Lopinot/Bon Air West, appeared as though he just took a page out of the report into the power outages. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this was not one power outage. This country has experienced two power outages and we have had and we have seen dips in electricity over the past couple weeks, Mr. Deputy Speaker. No explanation. The Member told us what was contained in the report about what occurred at the Gandhi Village Substation, but the Member did not tell us what investments were being made so that we would not see those reoccurrences happening again, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

We were not told about what is happening in terms of the maintenance of these substations, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We were not told whether or not additional stations that will carry the excess load will be filtered into another area. Nothing

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about investments in those areas that will have a direct impact in terms of the public utilities sector in this country, Madam Speaker. Those were the things we wanted to hear about from the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, but instead we got some hogwash about fly and spider, but very little about water and electricity, things that impact on the day-to-day lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, as you resume the Chair, I want to spend a few minutes on TSTT. And, Madam Speaker, up to this time, we have not been provided, by this Government, with a reason for the acquisition of Massy Communications at the cost of over \$255 million. Much of what the Member for Diego Martin North/East spoke about in terms of a cashless society and fintech and all these things, is dependent, Madam Speaker, on the software and the technology that is available through the companies that we depend on to provide these services.

Madam Speaker, since that purchase in 2017, 2018, we have not seen an increased capacity in terms of TSTT being able to provide the software and the security to enforce any of these platforms. I heard the Member for Diego Martin North/East in his budget presentation said that 100,000 products will be launched on this platform, and that they will utilize this platform to create small and medium enterprises by advertising and also, at the same time, they will utilize that platform to receive the payments from persons not only purchasing these products locally, but regionally and internationally.

3.15 p.m.

The Member for Siparia was spot on, Madam Speaker, because just a few weeks ago we saw TSTT's system crash. We saw Massy Stores in this country,

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their system of payment going down but the Member for Diego Martin North/East tells us all these grandiose, bravado plans, a contingent on the support that they received from TSTT but cannot tell us why after spending \$255million to acquire Massy Communications; TSTT is in the doldrums. The only thing that has occurred since then to now is that TSTT has hired a spin doctor, paying them \$50,000 a month while you have sent home over 3,000 employees at TSTT. The only thing that has occurred at TSTT, Madam Speaker, is that while you sell-off the assets of TSTT. In my own constituency, Princes Town, these tall high-rise buildings vacant; in San Fernando, right here in Port of Spain. What they are doing is instead they are renting properties from friends and financiers up the road, Madam Speaker, in Lopinot/Bon Air West, in that constituency.

Madam Speaker, and these are the challenges that are affecting the public utilities sector in this country and we expect nothing to change, you know. All these plans are plans that we have heard before. All these policies are policies—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Standing Order 48(6), please.

Madam Speaker: Okay, so—finished?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis:—explaining.

Madam Speaker: Overruled. Member, I would just ask you to audit your volume. Okay? I know you have a full voice but you have to try and audit your volume. And I also remind you, you have five minutes left of speaking time. You may, if you wish, ask for an extended time of 10 minutes.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam, I would like to have my extended time of 10 minutes, please.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to the area of digital transformation, but before I turn to digital transformation, the Member for Diego Martin North/East—Madam

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Speaker, the Member had the audacity to speak about modernized infrastructure as it relates to the public utilities sector. And, Madam Speaker, I will say this, it is vexing to say the least because my colleagues and I have been raising the issue of dilapidated aged infrastructure for a number of years being the primary reason for the poor production in distribution levels across the country. While the Minister has announced the creation of the Office of Water Resource Management—and, Madam Speaker, essentially what that does is take out the component of water production out of WASA with the establishment of a board of its own with commissioners, and so on, really it is for the Government to micromanage that process. And one wonders why Government wants to micromanage that process. Does it have anything to do with the 10 water-modulated treatment plants that are being promised?

Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of Public Utilities spoke about the creation of this Water Resource Management. Madam Speaker, it is almost as if Government is lapping up their own political vomit, because, you see, Madam Speaker, in 2015 we were told that several Ministries were being condensed and that they were closing down the Ministry of Water Resources and returning to the Ministry of Public Utilities. It was the creation of that Ministry of Water Resources that saw under a Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration that over 76 per cent of this country had pipe-borne water. That was the reason why we were able to create so many policies and programmes, Madam Speaker, to ensure that we had alternative areas and supplies of water in this country. Madam Speaker, when you look at the allocation for wells and the creation of alternative water supplies under the Ministry of Public Utilities in WASA in the Recurrent Expenditure, Government could not even spend what they allocated. So what it in effect told

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you, Madam Speaker, is very little new wells had been developed, very little new infrastructure had been developed, and with a cut of over 350million last year and 250 million this year in the area of material and supplies, there had been no major projects as it relates to dilapidated aged infrastructure.

Madam Speaker, communities across the country have been plagued with dry taps. You only have to ask people in Cocorite who protested last week in Diego Martin, for the people in Barrackpore who have had not a drop of pipe-borne water since last month. Our poor ageing infrastructure continues to be one of the main challenges affecting this sector but instead of investing and upgrading the infrastructure, the Government has systematically driven WASA and, dare I say, T&TEC and TSTT into the ground.

Madam Speaker, I turn to the area of digital transformation, and the Member for Siparia, again, spot on in her contribution, Madam Speaker, for two years this Ministry has been in existence. This Ministry is supposed to be the cornerstone, the platform in which many of the projects identified across Government agencies and Ministries should take off. But, Madam Speaker, when you have the Ministry of Digital Transformation not being digitized themselves, then you know, Madam Speaker, very little will continue to happen because there is neither the political will nor the know-how to get it done.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance has mastered the art of what is referred to as clickbait. Madam Speaker, clickbait is content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage persons to buy into something that looks good on the surface but may not actually be so in reality. Therefore, Madam Speaker, clickbait aptly describes the Government's approach to digital transformation.

Madam Speaker, digital transformation was one area in the Minister's

budget presentation—

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, 53(1)—Madam Speaker, 53(1)(f). If the Members opposite cannot be silent, could you invite the Member for Princes Town to re-audit his volume upwards?

Madam Speaker: Okay. So, Members, generally we have no difficulty in hearing the Member for Princes Town. I will just ask all Members to be guided by Standing Order 53 with respect to their volumes. Continue.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, digital transformation was one area in the Minister's budget presentation that I highly anticipated because it is an area that has a tremendous amount of opportunities, especially for the youth of our nation. After the Minister of Finance and others repeatedly gave us the assurance that Trinidad and Tobago would be fully digitized by 2025, a lot of what was announced in previous budgets under Digital Transformation has either been abandoned or stultified, but we should not be surprised as the Government is symptomatic of clickbaiting citizens.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance clickbaited the nation when in his 2022 budget presentation he promised to provide supporting legislation to give effect to creating a digital society, but, like everything else, the Minister was only interested in the buy-in by the population and not the actual end result of a digitized environment. Madam Speaker, if we turn to page 21 of last year's budget statement the Minister promised a Cybercrime Bill, amendments to the Communications Act and laws for a national digital identity. Up to this time, Madam Speaker, there has been no mention of any of these pieces of legislation. The Government in 2017 sent a Cybercrime Bill to a joint select committee that has not been resurrected since. Our Telecommunications Act in many parts remain

antiquated and do not meet the requirements for the times that we live in with respect to global technologically-driven world.

Madam Speaker, it appears that the Government has once more abandoned its own legislation, its own joint select committee, and its own promise to the people of the nation. The announcement of a legislative framework for a digital society has been nothing more than clickbait. Madam Speaker, I would demonstrate why the Minister of Finance is like a parrot on a stick afflicted by repetitive compulsion, symptomatic of a psychological phenomenon in which a person repeats themselves over and over and again with little or no results. This is a Government that lacks continuity and moral authority when it comes to legislative agenda, therefore the budget statement continues to be a rehash, Madam Speaker, a rehash of the same old rhetoric from the Minister of Finance.

Madam Speaker, the clickbaiting does not stop at the promises the Minister and his Government made with respect to supporting and creating a digital society through legislation. The Minister once more copy and pasted out of last year's budget the establishment of a national e-identity and interoperability solutions.

Madam Speaker, if we look at page 22 of the budget '22 statement, the Minister said, and I quote:

“the National Digital ID and Interoperability ecosystem will be facilitated by a unique digital ID which identifies the user as we move ahead in our digital nation thrust.

In 2022 we will introduce a pilot project.”

Madam Speaker, today I want to ask the master of clickbait, the Minister of Finance, was this just a grandiose sound bite filled with buzzwords that sounded new and exciting to you or whether this project has actually commenced? My

information, Madam Speaker, is that this pilot project does not have as much as a pilot pen because it has not commenced.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: But again, should we be surprised when we have to expect only public relations and “gallerying” in a sector that could be creating jobs and modernizing the way in which we do things across the public service.

Madam Speaker, it is astonishing that as far back as May 3rd that the Prime Minister in the *Trinidad Guardian* was reported as saying that he wanted a unique e-identity card for every citizen. Now, Madam Speaker, I know Members of the Government have a penchant for local parlance. So let me say that in the *Trinidad Express* of September 08, 2022—“mouth open and story jump out”—you see when the Minister of Digital Transformation, Minister Hassel Bacchus, indicated that the plan might be changed, we are now being told, Madam Speaker, that in 2020, that while they had all these grandiose plans and projects, the Minister is now saying that we are not able to achieve any of that. Just two weeks ago the Minister at a post-Cabinet press conference said that they were unable to achieve any of these projects in digital transformation and that they are lagging behind but they are working speedily to rectify the problem. Two years ongoing, Madam Speaker, cannot digitize—the Ministry of Digitalization Transformation cannot bring on board any of these projects under the Ministry and mouth open, story jump out, the Minister of Digital Transformation tells Trinidad and Tobago that none of the projects that they have envisaged have reached the stage of completion and in many cases have not even started.

Madam Speaker, for several years the Member for Siparia have been advocating for technology in the hands—of putting technology in the hands of our

nation's children. The Member for Tabaquite, I anticipate, Madam Speaker, in her debate will deal with the issue of education and technology. But, Madam Speaker, in the area and the sphere of business, the Member for Diego Martin North/East again, with much gusto and bravado, beat his chest loudly last year when he spoke about these business incubators. The Minister told us that we will be outsourcing services through small and medium enterprises in the area of ICT to regional and international companies. Again, as though the Minister had abandoned those plans and policies, not one mention of it is made in the budget statement. And when you look, Madam Speaker, when the Member for Siparia told us, "The devil is in details", when you look at the allocations there is very little or nothing in those areas that suggests to us that no jobs were created and that no businesses in terms of the small and medium enterprises benefited from this programme.

Madam Speaker, in the area of the ICT centres, the Member for Diego Martin North/East for the past seven years has been promising 100 ICT access centres. Madam Speaker, when you look at the Minister's budget statement, this is what it is says:

"the Community ICT Access Programme was expanded during 2022 from the original 6 public access centres to 32 centres. We are well underway to achieving our target of 100...centres;"

Madam Speaker, again, without any achievable targets, the Minister was unable to tell us out of those 100 ICT access centres how many have actually come to fruition. Madam Speaker, I am told that out of the 100 ICT centres only six of those centres are accessible, yet this Government comes with foolery and "mamaguy", hogwash when they speak about 100 ICT access centres. And, Madam Speaker, what are these ICT access centres? These are actually putting the

software and the hardware in terms of computers and Internet connectivity, and so on, in community centres. Many of these instances it is community centres that they are utilizing. Madam Speaker, again, they cannot even get these projects off the ground.

Madam Speaker, in terms of the digital hub, this was an area I had great hope for; I hoped it would have been a tremendous amount of progress and, however, instead of the Minister reporting on the achievements in the area, he just shamefully repeated the broken promises of the digital developer hub. Madam Speaker, this is another sector that will suffer the same faith as the public utilities sector. Madam Speaker, fluff, “mamaguy”, bravado, but very little actual real tangible results to impact on the lives of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I want to take the last few moments I have really to advocate on behalf of my constituents in the constituency of Princes Town. The only times the roads in Princes Town were ever fixed post-September, 2015, was when the PNM was campaigning for the Moruga/Tableland seat that they lost to Michelle Benjamin. That was the only time they fixed the roads in Princes Town—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—because they had to traverse on those roads to campaign in Moruga/Tableland.

Madam Speaker, I am advocating on behalf of my constituency for our roads and our landslips to be addressed. I look forward to hearing from my colleagues as we point out the woes, the shortcomings and the lack of political will to increase the quality of life of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, particularly as I have addressed it in the area of public utilities and digital transformation and as I look forward to hearing from my rest of colleagues.

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Education.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate and I thank the constituents of St. Ann’s East for the opportunity to represent them here in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, forgive me if I move directly into my contribution without reference to the last contributor. But, just to say that I have never maybe experienced a more ironic contribution, “talk bout clickbait”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Not a recommendation, not a solution. Madam Speaker, the constituents of St. Ann’s East did not send me here for that, so I want to congratulate the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—and their teams, Madam Speaker, for the hard work, research and the analysis involved in producing this fair budget to Trinidad and Tobago, and I say, a fair budget to Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, the budget was not all roses, that is a fact. No one can feel happy about price increases even if one understands the reason behind them and why it is done.

Madam Speaker, another fact is that things are not as easy as they once were in the world and Trinidad and Tobago is a country of the world; island, yes, but we

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exist in the space of everyone else and therefore, as have other governments, this Government in Trinidad and Tobago has had to implement fiscal measures that though necessary may not be desirable nor popular. But, Madam Speaker, these are the things that leaders must do. Leaders must make the hard decisions when it is time to do so, and I assure you, Madam Speaker, that these decisions are not easily made.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: No government wants to be in that position, but when the rubber hits the road, the people of Trinidad and Tobago elect us to do what is best for our country. Madam Speaker, regardless of the hard decisions that were made, that had to have been made, all is not lost, and I am here to speak to education. One major asset, Madam Speaker, that has not been removed from the people of this country and the young people of Trinidad and Tobago is educational opportunity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, if you were to question many of the Members of this honourable House on both sides they would tell you stories similar to mine. Some of our leading national professionals, our athletes, they will tell you, and the Leader of the Opposition herself alluded to the fact that educational opportunity is a critical thing, and this has always been a legacy of the People's National Movement, opportunity of education for all.

Like many of my colleagues on both sides of the House, Madam Speaker, that was the one thing available to me, education. I come from Sunshine in San Juan—and “ah” saying it just like how I say it when I am at home, Sunshine in San Juan, and now I am speaking to all the parents and students who have challenges, I

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know what it is to have challenges. I know what it is to wear one overall from Form 1 to 5, to not being able to pay school contributions, to wear my brother's old school shirts to school, to not have textbooks, to buy cloth in the Croisee. Right where KFC is now there was a cloth store, buying cloth there to sew my own clothes on my mother's machine. So I know what it is to have challenges; I know. At that time there was no GATE when I had to go to university. There was no GATE. Thank God my grandfather was able to stand security for my student loan, when my parents could not do it. That is how I got to UWI. I am speaking about educational opportunity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: I am speaking to the young people who feel that there is no hope, speaking to you. I could afford one textbook in UWI, I still have it today, because it is a testament to the challenges you had to overcome to get where you are.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: All the others you had to borrow from the library.

Work hard at UWI, got through there; by the time I finished my master's programme in UWI, which I worked in UWI to be able to afford—I could not pay for that tuition, I had two children to care for. So I am speaking again to the young parents, the young parents who are looking for opportunity, know the struggle. From UWI I went in as a teacher in St. Francois Girls. I did not have a car, travelling to work, two children while I was there; three children now. My husband was not wasting time, Madam Speaker, three children now—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and laughter*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—in UWI, finishing a PhD, repaying a student loan.

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Thank God there was the opportunity to get a student loan because without that opportunity, PNM policy, I would not have been able to finish my studies at all or even embarked on them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: It was rough. It was a struggle. And from St. Francois to COSTAATT, from COSTAATT to politics. So, Madam Speaker, I know the value of educational opportunity and I know the opportunities it can bring, not always immediately, but if you do not have a ticket, you do not have a chance, and on this job market where it is not roses in any country, one has to avail themselves of the opportunity available. So I want to hold out some hope to our young people, some hope to our young parents because I know for a fact, I am an MP, people message me all the time. I speak to them all the time.

Some people feel very hopeless coming out of COVID-19, the challenges that came with that and I want to hold out hope because there is educational opportunity in Trinidad and Tobago and I want to encourage us all to take the advantage of it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Education may be free in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, but it is not cheap. The funding to provide educational opportunity is in the order of 7.5billion annually with the Ministry of Education itself being allocated 5.5billion. Parents, parents I am speaking to you now, help your children attain the best education they can. Focus on it. And young people, take advantage of the opportunity, do not waste it. Break the cycle. The opportunity is there for you. Regardless of all the other difficulties that we face as a country and as a world, the opportunity for educational achievement in Trinidad

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and Tobago is still there for you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Aim to complete your post-secondary or tertiary education. The Government provides funding to COSTAATT, MIC, UTT, NESC, YTEPP and UWI so that they can operate and offer educational programmes across a wide range of areas.

This year, in this budget, \$1.3billion is allocated to these institutions. If you are doing CAPE, there are 100 scholarships available for the top performers to go to university; \$178 million is allocated to that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—500 bursaries are also available for tertiary level studies and you have to pass a means test to be eligible. What this says to the young people who feel they have challenges, it means that if you are a person who needs the help, you are at an advantage to get these bursaries, 500 bursaries. It was done this way to help those who need it the most, to get down to the people who are high achievers and need the support. Do not waste the opportunity, \$25million is allocated to provide these bursaries this year, young people. Even if you do not get a bursary, you can still get up to 100 per cent tuition covered through GATE for a bachelor's degree or equivalent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Up to 450 million will be spent on GATE this fiscal; 400 already allocated and more will be supplied in the mid-term as necessary. Leader of the Opposition, you know how this works. Do not clickbait the population. You know that the mid-term is there and if they need more, we will supply more.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Some of our young people, you have to work after Form 5; that is the reality, so your path to a bachelor's degree is different. You may have to do a part-time diploma, an associate degree. The GATE has now been opened for you again. You can access funding twice for the first programme and then for the bachelors programme. Take advantage of it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, I was a lecturer at COSTAATT and I witnessed firsthand what was happening with GATE in some years. It was a misuse. There were students registering for courses and just dropping out. Madam Speaker, we do not have money to waste like that.

We have money to apply to persons who are serious about their education and who are serious about their personal development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So, yes, we have had to put strictures to ensure that the money that is spent, the investment, goes where it should go and is used as it should be. I was there firsthand, speaking to students and encouraging them, do not just drop out of the course, but because it was just free, that is what was happening. The Leader of the Opposition spoke to the disbelief that they would get access to GATE; disingenuous, because the Leader of the Opposition knows that we can get access to increased funding for GATE if it is required. And I want to explain that the Cabinet has already approved this. Funding and grants has already been apprised of this and the measure is in effect, so young people, go out and get your GATE.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: If you already have an associate degree or a diploma, you have until 2024 to register for your bachelors, and if you are doing your associate now, you have two years in which to register for the bachelors.

We put out the press release so that you would know, the public, our young people would know the opportunities that you have to be able to further yourself. We said we would increase the number of students accessing assistance for tertiary education from 400 scholars only to 600, and, Madam Speaker, we have done that. The national bursaries are in place, 464 helped in 2020; 455 in 2021, so we are set and ready to go up to 600.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Performance beats “ole talk”, Madam Speaker. So, young people, fear not. The Leader of the Opposition may not believe but I believe in you. This side here, we believe in you—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—and we will continue to give you the best support that is possible. So go out there, the GATE is open for you, develop yourself and take advantage of educational opportunity.

3.45 p.m.

What about students who need to repeat subjects? Many times our students do not get all at the first try. You can register right now. Registration is open with the Ministry of Education for free tuition in certain subjects and we are doing a hybrid system so it is more convenient. You have some online classes, some physical tutorials. Register now. Get your second chance. And your second chance at doing the CXC exam whether it is January or June next year will be free as well.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So we are catering for if you are doing CAPE. If you are not doing CAPE, if you need to repeat. We are catering for all of that. Educational opportunity, follow the Ministry of Education's socials.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: You follow it for yourself and see what is out there for you and take advantage of it. And I want to tell you, Madam Speaker, one of the main champions for young people for giving them opportunity is our hon. Prime Minister and I salute him today for that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Even in the midst of the difficulty, the Ministry of Education has maintained approximately 10 per cent of the annual budget over the last seven years, Madam Speaker. This is what priority in education means.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: That is what it means. Madam Speaker, when I spoke in the 2021 budget debate you may recall that only a few students were out to school physically, a few thousand. There was still at that time a high level of uncertainty with respect to a full return to physical school operation. As a matter of fact, every time we mentioned that students had to get back to school physically, there was a loud outcry. Many called the Government wicked to even consider sending the children back to school physically. Sometimes we have short memories, we do not remember. Others called for schools to remain online forever. Madam Speaker, it was again no easy position to be in, because as a responsible Government we knew and we said that our children especially the younger ones would be compromised by the lack of physical engagement. We

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knew this but we had a duty to prioritize the safety of the students as well.

Madam Speaker, we established the Ministry of Education's Education District Health Unit. We consulted repeatedly with our stakeholders and we gradually transitioned back to the physical classroom. We moved from totally virtual engagement in March 2020 to the physical attendance of Forms 4 to 6 only in February 2021 to rotation attendance of all secondary students and Standard 5 students in February 2022. And finally, Madam Speaker, in April 2022 our ECCE primary and secondary students returned to school physically, most for the first time in over two years and we have not looked back. I want to draw it to the attention of this honourable House that even in the worst of times, Madam Speaker, the most uncertain times, terminal examinations were physically conducted by the Ministry of Education.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: SEA 2020, 2021, 2022. CXC June 2020, 2021 and 2022, January, 2021 and '22. Thousands of students out physically to do their examinations.

The workers alone to administer those examinations, 3,500 short-term workers over the time every year to administer these exams at a cost of approximately \$30 million per year. Careful organization, logistics were required to carry out these exams from 2022 in the heights of the pandemic to 2022. But that allowed over 120,000 young people the opportunity to progress along their educational pathway in the midst of a pandemic, Madam Speaker. Had we shirked this responsibility, where would these young people be today? How would they continue their educational progress in a world that was moving on?

Madam Speaker, I had a daughter who did exams in those times. Minister

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Morris-Julian, other Members of Parliament here, 120,000 young people who benefited from the careful work to afford them the opportunity to progress their education. Madam Speaker, leadership is not an easy road. It requires fortitude, testicular, ovarian and otherwise.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: But this is the oath we took, to serve in the best interest of all the people without fear or favour.

Madam Speaker, I wish to publicly thank the staff at the Ministry of Education who have worked diligently to bring us to this point. You see, it is not always obvious how difficult this period was for the non-teaching staff of the Ministry. And on behalf of Minister Morris-Julian and I, I want to thank both Permanent Secretaries, the Chief Education Officer and his team, the DPSs and I want to call the heads and support staff of the departments that make up the Ministry because, Madam Speaker, they all played valuable roles in getting us from where we were to where we are today with our children back in the physical classroom.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So, Madam Speaker, bear with me. Supervision; curriculum; Student Support Services; IT; health safety and environment; communications; ECCE; research and planning; Education District Health Unit; teacher training; exams; education planning; educational research and evaluation; programmes and project management; educational facilities; procurement; HR; legal; IRs; scholarships; funding and grants; general admin; school; health; safety and security; educational technology; finance and accounts; nursing; text books; school boards and the Permanent Secretary and ministerial secretariats and all

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other departments of the MOE, we thank you. Thank you for your hard work in getting our children back to the classroom.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: I want to also thank the leadership and staff of the public, post and tertiary institutions, MIC, YTEPP, NESC, COSTAATT, UTT, UWI for getting our students, our young people back into the physical classrooms and sustaining them during this most difficult time of the pandemic.

Madam Speaker, our students have gone through a traumatic time and having worked together to successfully transition them back to the physical classroom, we have to do all we can to help them settle in and get down to business. Whatever the situation, all of us, parents, teachers, administrators, staff of the Ministry, policymakers, all of us have to put country first and stabilize the learning environment for our children to the best of our ability. I want to implore us, let us leave the children out of big-people business. They have suffered enough. Let us prioritize their time in the classroom and make it count. Our future as a country depends on that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, the output of the education system is critical for the future of this country. We can make all the best policies, the best plans but if we do not have the human resource to carry it out, then we are going nowhere fast. And what we are facing is a human development problem. That is what COVID-19 and the effects of COVID-19 have exacerbated, a human development problem. We are investing billions of dollars annually into education and training and we doing that to produce citizens that are committed to driving the development of Trinidad and Tobago in an upward trajectory towards the

realization of Vision 2030. That is the goal. Creating citizens who will drive the development of Trinidad and Tobago towards the realization of Vision 2030. That Vision 2030 policy document begins with a profound statement and I want to quote it:

“There are times in the development path of a country when extraordinary challenges demand an equally compelling response.”

These words seem almost prophetic. They were written in 2016 but they seem almost prophetic because they did not or they could not contemplate the extraordinary challenge that we would face as a country a mere four years later which would be the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. What are the specific challenges that we face in the education sector? Some of them legacy issues which have been exacerbated by the extraordinary challenge that was the COVID-19 experience. I will list five.

- The need for an organized system to deliver the curriculum to students when physical school operation is not possible.
- That requirement to modernize data collection, management and analysis at all levels of the Ministry of Education.
- The urgent requirement to produce globally competitive citizens with 21 Century skills.
- The urgency of increasing student achievement and equity of educational opportunity mitigating the effects of learning loss.
- And five, the need for critical school infrastructural upgrades and maintenance.

These are the challenges that we must apply the \$5.5 billion allocated to the education sector to surmounting.

There are some facts that must be laid on the table, Madam Speaker. Of the \$5.5 billion to the Ministry of Education approximately \$2.2 million is used to pay teachers, \$1.3 million goes to subsidies to post, secondary and tertiary institutions, \$1 billion is allocated to school repairs, school feedings, schools transport, janitorial and security services at schools and scholarships, \$200 million is allocated for grants to government-to-government assisted schools, as well as to students in private and special schools. Add another \$800 million in salaries for non-teaching personnel, equipment, vehicle maintenance, exam fees, et cetera and you have a rough accounting of how that \$5.5 billion is allocated.

Another fact, the reforms adjustments and transformations required to overcome the challenges we face in the education sector are complex and will take time and sustained effort to implement. There are different options available to achieve the desired outcomes, and depending on what is observed during implementation it may become necessary to switch or adjust the methods being used. And the last fact is that, progress will be highly dependent on the input of all stakeholders. No one person or category of persons can affect the changes that are necessary to surmount the challenges that we face. So an important factor that lead to success is collaboration and buy-in from all of the stakeholders. So having identified five main challenges, let us now turn to the budgetary allocation and how it will be used to deal with those responses.

The requirement to modernize data collection, management and analysis at all levels of the Ministry. Madam Speaker, if the Ministry is to respond in the way that it is expected in 2022, the staff and student records must be digitized as soon as possible and this is the purpose of the students management system and this digitization is ongoing. Digital records of attendance, grades, student bio data,

disciplinary records, special needs, all of these can be used to generate reports that yield important information for policy making. For example, the SMS can be configured to show when a school's performance is dipping or when a student's performance is dipping. And that can be used to design intervention strategies at the right time. The Ministry will be able to verify enrolment of students, placement of teachers in short order, independent of school records. That is a fundamental thing and it can only come with digital records.

This platform developed by the MOEs in-house IT team is being populated. A pilot of 70 schools has been completed and a data-entry firm has been engaged to continue the input of data. You can imagine, Madam Speaker, the size of this project. We have over 800 schools. We have 250,000 students and therefore putting in that data, verifying that data which, of course, is very important, is a huge project. The security of the data is also paramount and so we have been working hand in hand with the Ministry of Digital Transformation to ensure that those records are kept securely.

With respect to teacher records, Madam Speaker, teacher records are kept physically. If you have even seen a teacher's file, it is a huge file. No wonder that things get lost, misplaced and this has implications for teachers' salaries and, of course, at the end of it, their pensions. So that is also being digitized using the IHRIS platform. And so that is ongoing now at the Ministry, an in-house team is verifying data, teacher numbers, putting in the data, scanning files and that is ongoing at the Ministry of Education. And the goal is to reduce, if not eliminate, the issues that our teachers are having, for a long time, with their salaries, with their increments, et cetera.

Madam Speaker, the level of efficiency and access to information required

by the Ministry at this time necessitates this fundamental operational shift from manual records to digital systems.

The need for an organized system to deliver the curriculum to students when physical school operation is not possible. Madam Speaker, if there is anything COVID taught us is that we must be versatile and we saw the tertiary institutions being able online seamlessly. We need that for our primary, secondary and ECCE.

When schools closed across the world in March 2020, education resilience became a mandate of all education sectors. And so around the world all education sectors are involved in getting resilience and that means that there are now building out e-classroom systems, school learning management systems for all of their schools to ensure that in the case of any other situation like COVID our students can continue their educational continuity and therefore, we in Trinidad and Tobago are doing the same. So our school learning management system, a national school learning management system is important because it gives us important national student data, it allow us to securely store records, it is a repository of standardized student and teacher e-resources, all of that information that is placed on an e-classroom, you have standardized high-quality e-classroom templates, access to support and training for parents and teachers and it is a hub for accessing other platforms such as e-books and continuation classes.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the educational technology unity which has been formed as a response to what has happened with COVID, they are working with 70 schools hand in hand with the student management system. So the information being input on the SMS is being used for the school learning management system to build out the e-classrooms.

Digital infrastructure at schools, of course, goes hand in hand with this and so over 9,000 teachers have received their laptops and devices. Students have received—between 2020 and 2022 63,000 devices have been distributed to our teachers and our students. This year another \$20million has been allocated to replenish the stocks of devices at the schools, as well as to continue giving devices to the students or teachers that may require them. As of August 2020 all secondary schools have been outfitted with WiFi in their offices and common areas to ensure that they have the access to be able to use the SMS and the SLMS. Fourteen schools through UNICEF, of course, a partner of the Ministry, 14 schools have received WiFi throughout the entire compound extending outside of the compounds. So these schools are acting as community hot spots. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will be having more schools outfitted by UNICEF into this academic year. Fifty-seven rural primary schools have also been outfitted with WiFi through a collaboration with TATT, B-mobile and Digicel and they are now working—they are now working to get more primary schools on. So during this year we have \$20million allocated to the digital education programme and that will be part of what we are doing, building out the WiFi infrastructure in more schools. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can assure you that educational resilience is a top priority for the Ministry of Education.

The urgency of increasing students' achievement and equity of educational opportunity mitigating the effects of learning loss. Mr. Deputy Speaker, school closures caused by COVID-19 resulted in dips in student performance globally and, of course, in Trinidad and Tobago we would have seen that same pattern being repeated. What have we done to mitigate the learning loss? Increasing student achievement and equity of educational opportunity, we have selected 26

schools, secondary schools that need our support which the students of these schools need our extra monitoring and input of resources.

In addition to that, the programme that was really ongoing, it was 26 schools, a budgetary allocation of \$50million has been given for remedial education. So what are doing and how are we proceeding to use that \$50million. The annual vacation division programme will be something that will continuing into the next five years and therefore that will allow students in the vacation time to be engaged in learning. Dedicated student support services personnel have been assigned to these schools. Learning support assistance, three each in most cases have been assigned to these 26 schools. Targeted teacher training, student training, school and student needs assessment so that we can find out which students have special needs and require assistance. Timetable adjustments for the operation of the school-based intervention team: This is an important part of the school-based management system that allows the teachers to take a look what is happening in the classroom, which are the students that need support. And we have asked these 26 schools to put aside time in your regular school day to look for these school-based intervention team meetings. Put it here as a part of the school day so that it does not happen after schools as an afterthought. It is an integral part of identifying the students who most need help.

With the \$50million allocation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are now able to expand this programme of support to 25 to 30 primary schools which generally feed into the 26 secondary schools that are we focusing on. And that is critical because before the students end up in a situation where they have to go through remedial efforts, we want to address the issues. So these same measures that we are taking for the 26 secondary schools, we are now going to implement them into

25 to 30 primary schools.

Another important part of this adjustment is the curriculum adjustment, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is important—we have been speaking to our principals and they have told us a couple things, that TVET engagement has to start at Form One in a formal way. So we have done that. And that engages the students and reduces the attrition because we lose from the secondary schools system who feel they have no hope, they are not engaged and the school has no relevance to their lives.

Another important thing is giving students two years to acquire fundamental literacy and numeracy skills that they did not have coming out of the primary school system. At the Form Two level, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are going to institute the lower secondary proficiency examination. A different name but the same thing that would have been called the primary school leaving. When students did not achieve at the Standard Five level, they were given two years to achieve fundamental literacy, numeracy and general knowledge skills in Science and Social Studies. That is what is happening at the secondary schools, to ensure that these students are at the level of Form Two with literacy, numeracy and general knowledge. Live skills is also a part of that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is happening and what has been happening is that these students have been just leaving the secondary school system with nothing, no qualifications, unprepared to develop themselves, unprepared to develop their country and to contribute to the development of Trinidad and Tobago. So we have taken action now to meet the children where their needs are, to give them what they require to develop them into productive young people. So at the level of Form Two they do this certification

and they have a certification in their hand that can be used to find employment. So in case they fall away, they will have something rather than nothing because that is what we have been facing over the last, many years. So our students, that curriculum adjustment to ensure that they leave school with the fundamental literacy and numeracy to be able to contribute to their country and take care of themselves.

Reducing student indiscipline. One of the greatest challenges to school achievement and student achievement is indiscipline. You would have seen, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Cabinet approved the revised national school discipline matrix and an important part of that is the encouragement of our students in positive behaviour management and showing them, reinforcing positive behaviour, not just dealing with the negatives.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would have seen as well recently that the Ministry of Education is entering into an agreement with MiLAT and we are entering into an agreement with the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service to ensure that students, repeat offenders, students who need support who are crying out for it. When we see students misbehaving and fighting and so on, it is a cry for help. And in the education system it may be more than the Student Support Services Division can deal with. They need more support. They need an immersive environment. They need to transform and we have seen MiLAT successfully have that transformational system. And so the intention is, when we have offenders in the secondary school system, students who just cannot help themselves getting into trouble, we want to offer them that support. We want to wrap the arms of love around our students.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And so we will be moving them into the MiLAT programme to receive that level of care and support because we want them to transform. We want them to do better. We are not giving up on them. We have to put them but the space that is already established that can help them.

The Ministry met with the Girl Guides, the Scouts, the Cadets and principals of the 26 secondary schools because we want to encourage more of these organizations to be a part of the school system, as they were before. We have asked the NPTA, we have written to the NPTA reaching out to them to partner with us so that we can provide the guiders and could provide the support the school needs, the leaders of the chapters in the different schools because our young people need positive engagement. They need options for that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So we are not sitting down and just saying, you are misbehaving. We are doing the things that will offer them positive engagement, positive development and that is what we are using, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to increase the student achievement, the school achievement, equity of educational opportunity. These are some of the measures that we are using.

Of course, the community police continue to partner with us in 17 schools and they are also encouraging the students from the schools to join the police youth clubs in their area. Very good work being done by the police youth clubs and that is what we need. We need the engagement of the communities to guide our children so that they are not just hearing it in the schools but when they go back to the communities they are getting the same type of messages.

With respect to globally competitive citizens, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we need to encourage an appreciation of culture and tolerance in our children. We need to

create cultural confidence in our young citizens. The Ministry is formulating a patriotism policy which will encapsulate all the things on the official curriculum that we are doing, as well as the unofficial curriculum because we want to ensure that our children love themselves, love their country and they learn about Trinidad and Tobago and the beauty of our country, the wonderful people we have here, our leaders, our icons in the sporting arena, the cultural arena. So we are pulling together that policy and we will be bringing that to the Cabinet for approval and implementation.

The music programme for primary schools. During the COVID time this went dormant. We are revitalizing that programme in all of the primary schools but not just some. We are revitalizing it in all of the primary schools and the music tutors will have a mandate to encourage the school to participate in, at least, three national competitions and execute an annual school production so that our students will be involved, not just in their academics because our principals are saying to us, that the students, the problems they are having with the students, are not just academic, it is the total development of the child, the morals, the ethics, the team work, all of these things and COVID did not help that. So in pulling together all of these activities it will mean that our students have the opportunity to develop holistically and that is what we are doing.

Digital literacy. You would have seen us do the SEA results portal this year. You would have seen us speak to CXC e-testing being expanded in January 2023. There will be more students taking e-testing from CXC. The online continuation classes where the classes, the second chance classes for students will be offered in mostly an online version so therefore they will have familiarity with the online environment. The e-book platform being procured right now by iGovTT for the

Ministry of Education.

I spoke about the student management system, digitizing our records. The student learning management system where you have now the e-classrooms being created. All of these things will encourage in our students the acceptance of digital education and move our transformation along.

I come to the need for critical school infrastructural upgrades and maintenance. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the importance of physical school having been established even as we speak to advances in digital transformation, the physical condition at school plants must be maintained and upgraded to support our students. The Ministry of Education's team has been moving around the country to different schools, moving around to understand the exact environment of the school. Who our principals are. What is happening with our teachers? Seeing the infrastructure of the schools, understanding the challenges faced by our principals and teachers and also the successes because there are many in our education system.

Some important information on the age of schools. Approximately 30 per cent of schools are more than 60 years old, 42 per cent of primary schools, 18 per cent of secondary schools more than 60 years old. 70 per cent of primary schools, 33 per cent of secondary schools are between 40 and 60 years old.

So, we have ageing school infrastructure.

4.15 p.m.

So, school repair is always ongoing every day. Every single day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have an average of five schools where we have emergencies that need attending to: plumbing, sewer, electrical. And these things are taken care of as

soon as they arise to ensure that school operations take place. But the time has come for us to sink some capital expenditure into school repairs and therefore, you will see in this budget allocation an increased allocation for school repair, so that we can take care of more of our schools. And it is anticipated that more funding will be required and therefore, we will take advantage of the opportunity in the midterm to get some more funding to deal with our schools. But at this point in time, we will use the \$150 million that is allocated.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, your initial speaking time, you have two more minutes, you have an additional 10. Do you care to avail yourself?

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: I will. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are going to use that allocation, \$150 million, to do some critical repairs at our schools. Some of the things that need to be focused on: the VAPA areas, Visual and Performing Arts; the sporting fields, the labs, critical. These are the areas that our students are most engaged in in most of our schools and therefore, we have some critical work to do at our schools.

The Leader of the Opposition mentioned the unfinished school plans, and I want to not spend too much time on it but to say that a school construction programme, a properly planned school construction programme requires that funding is allocated before the contracts are given out. If you just give out contracts without finding funding, what you are doing is just frustrating yourself

and others. And unfortunately, that is what happened before this Government got into place. So, we have been dealing with it. We have been fixing as we go along. We have spent \$400 million so far to complete 13 schools and we have another phase coming of seven schools at \$270 million, and we are continuing to complete the school construction as we go along. That is in collaboration with the capital expenditure that will be put into the existing operating schools as well as the emergency repairs that come up every single day to ensure that schools continue to operate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have outlined five specific challenges which face the education sector and the manner in which the allocation of the Ministry will be used to surmount them. I take this opportunity to thank our teachers, our principals, our students, all of our education stakeholders, corporate Trinidad and Tobago who have been contributing in a valuable way for their continued partnership with the Ministry of Education. The collaboration and that approach is the only way we can help our education sector move forward. Our children need us now. Our future needs us now. And if we intend to build back better and to avert the human development crisis that has been precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it will take all of us working together in harmony.

I turn to my constituency of St. Ann's East, and as I thank them for their confidence in me and for sharing me with the national community. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can assure you that they are definitely the wind beneath my wings. I want to thank the staff of my constituency office publicly because they do so much for my constituents, take care of them every single day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: I demand a lot of them, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have monthly hamper distributions. We have weekly distributions of fresh bread. We have a free flea market Friday where we open our doors and members of the community come in and they can take all of the items that we have gathered, useful items, for free every Friday. We have an annual Easter bonnet and basket competition for ECCE going on for five years now; poetry slam to introduce literacy, encourage that for our primary schools; spelling bee every year done in conjunction with NALIS; essay competition, we have just finished that for our secondary school students. We have virtual events.

For this vacation period, we ran a Vacation Revision Programme for our Standard 5 students. We have a cooking with teams post-SEA programme for the vacation as well. We do Christmas lunch for seniors. We are doing an entrepreneurship programme for young entrepreneurs in 2023. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are a very busy constituency and I thank my staff for ensuring that all of the initiatives take place for the benefit of the constituents of St. Ann's East. We have a saying, we like to say this, "Life is better in St. Ann's." This is true. You know, that is just how it is, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Infrastructural projects: we have just opened the Maracas Valley ECCE Centre and I know that the residents of Maracas Valley are very happy for that. It is something we have been clamouring for for some time. And we have the pending construction of the Maracas Bay ECCE, that is on the cards. Water infrastructure, Upper Mayfair Gardens, Febeau Village, Gasparillo, Saddle Road,

Las Cuevas Road in Maracas Valley, Lengua Village.

I want to assure you that the Minister of Public Utilities has been working with us and we expect to get some improvements in these areas as we move along. He has a plan that he is working and we are looking forward to that. The Minister of Sport and Community Development, she has already given the commitment for us to deal with the refurbishment of the Maracas Bay Community Centre, Las Cuevas pavilion. And we are looking to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries for the Las Cuevas fishing depot. We know we need to get that done. We are also thankful for the work that has been done on the Saddle Road as well as the Maracas Royal Road, and we know that that is always something, due to the number of persons in these areas now, that is something that is always—we are looking forward to more support on, and we are thankful for what we have and we are looking forward to more.

I want to thank the CEPEP workers, the forestry workers, the URP workers, because they do an important job in keeping our communities well maintained. I want to thank them for that. I want to thank the councillors, the Chairman of the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation and the Tunapuna Regional Corporation for the service that they are doing on the local roads, drainage and so on, because our constituents, my constituents benefit from the work that they are doing in these areas, and I am grateful.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to thank you for the opportunity of making this contribution as I reaffirm my commitment to the constituents of St. Ann's East and to the people of my beloved Trinidad and Tobago, as we continue to work hard and

as we continue to invest billions annually in education and training to produce the citizens who are committed to driving the development of Trinidad and Tobago in an upper trajectory towards the realization of *Vision 2030*.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this very critical budget debate. I am joining the debate today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, coming in after the Minister of Education. I think it is a well-known fact now that I have been given the responsibility by the Opposition to shadow this very critical education sector. So, I am positioned to go into significant details because I think the Minister's contribution today is characterized by the shared dissonance that this Government has with respect to what is going on with the reality in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And I say that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because it is clear that they live in a completely different Trinidad and Tobago from the rest of us. Completely.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And as we go through this debate and we listen to the Ministers come one after the other, as they have been doing since Monday, attempting to defend the indefensible, attempting to convince Trinidadians and Tobagonians that the realities—the harsh realities that they are facing either does not exist or is not that bad, I think, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we must thank the Leader of the Opposition who came here today in defence of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And the Leader of the Opposition used her contribution to clinically outline where we as a citizenry in this country face utter levels of mistrust with this Government because you simply cannot trust them.

And so, I have had the opportunity to not only listen to contributions here today, but the significant contributions over the past couple of days and, in fact, the past few years. And when I say there is a dissonance in the Government messaging, what I mean is what you hear coming from them time and time and time again, and what we know to be happening—I mean, you have no clearer example than when the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries turned into Kanye West on CNN and told all of us we are living a good life over here. And so that, you listen to that, you listen to the good life rhetoric, you listen to, “Things are going so well, we have to be so grateful,” I mean, all they have not told the population yet is that, “Shut up because we are minding all yuh. Right? Relax all yuh self, the Government is minding you, the nation.”

And so, when we are being told that we have to be grateful, we have to be so happy with the management, when we are being told that we want everything for nothing but then we realized that we are getting nothing from the Government, I mean, how do you want the population to react? What should be our reaction now? Our reaction now should be to say, “Good job”? In the face of record failures in the education sector we ought to say, “Good job”? I mean, the self-congratulatory messaging coming from the Government, as the Opposition Leader rightfully said, it not only toned deaf but it is absolutely insulting to a very discerning population.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And as I go into the education sector, one thing struck me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I listened to the Minister of Education. I am not sure where between 2010 and 2015 the Minister of Education was but I am sure it cannot be in Trinidad and Tobago. I am sure. Because when I am listening to the list of programmes that they are intending to pursue, I want to understand if you were in fact an educator during that time, then you must have known those programmes existed between 2010 and 2015.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And even if you do not know that they existed, I know for a fact that when you go into a Ministry, records are kept, they do not disappear. When you go into the Ministry of Education, what obtained, what happened between 2010 and 2015, the records exist. The systematic dismantling of programmes that you are now announcing as new, they exist in the Ministry of Education. So, it is just a simple matter of reading. This attempt of revisionist history to pretend that you are solving problems that you have created, we will not accept. We will not accept it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And so, I want to start with GATE. I am starting with GATE because I think the messaging here is obscene at this point. It is obscene coming from the Government.

The Minister of Finance on Monday came forward and said, “We are expanding the GATE programme.” The Minister of Education followed that line.

Do you know when those changes happened to GATE, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Early after winning the election of 2020, this Government, this PNM administration embarked on the systematic closure of the very GATE they are now claiming to open. Imagine that. So, if you want to tell us about the levels of shamelessness is that you could come today and purport to be—to have the solution for a problem that you created. Imagine that. We are talking now about that they are talking about expanding GATE to amend policy guidelines that they are amended in 2020 which restricted funding for no more than one programme at an undergraduate level.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. A. Haynes: Now, when at that time—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, one second.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, I heard it on two occasions. Please, you will have the opportunity to enter the debate. Fine?

Hon. Member: Absolutely.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Ms. A. Haynes: So, as I was listening to the Minister of Education today, I had to take a minute and figure out what is really going on here. Because I remember, earlier on in my parliamentary career, I had to write a press release after the announcements in November followed by some press conference because we were very disturbed by the changes to GATE. And at that time I said, the decision by the Government calls into question the sincerity of the PNM administration's

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commitment to creating a better life for our citizens and creating hope for the future, and opportunities for future generations. And that still obtains today because, you know, you are talking about an administration that is so incredibly short-sighted; so incredibly short-sighted that you are reversing poor decisions that you have made just in 2020. Imagine that.

So, they had to be the only people in the world that did not understand that when you are choosing to pursue tertiary education, those of us, we have different paths going through this system, and the Minister came to acknowledge it today. Where was your voice for these students in 2020? Because you were already the Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: Where was your voice when Cabinet sat down, everybody sat down and made these decisions that you are now seeing the fallout of?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: Now that these students—I am in my first year as a Member of Parliament. I had a call from a very distraught student. She did not know that when she was going to pursue a diploma and she utilized GATE—because at that time families were already hit very hard. The available funding to pursue tertiary education for a number of families had whittled away to nothing. And then you find out that in your pursuit of a part-time diploma, and you utilized GATE—and I think it would have been something like \$12,000. They utilized GATE at that time to pursue that. And then when you make it into your bachelor's programme, you have made it into your bachelor's programme to be told that you have no access,

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you had no opportunity, it was callus, it was heartless. And your attempt to revise the decision now—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes:—does not change what you have done to those students then. And so, you know, I am listening and I am appalled by the level of shamelessness that you could come here with and talk about the expansion of GATE. What did you meet when you came in in 2015? Now, I would forgive the Minister now because she was not Minister then but, again, you have access to all of the documents. It is a simple matter of learning the sector with which you have responsibility for.

And so, when you talk about—and the Minister of Finance spoke about, how are we going to create more opportunities? What are we doing? You are coming here today to encourage students, participate, take advantage of the opportunities. The People's Partnership administration, understanding that we needed to balance coming out of the tertiary education sector and, in fact, the secondary school sector, reduced the number of job takers and increased the number of job creators. What does that mean? It means that Trinidadians and Tobagonians must be told that you can be entrepreneurs, you can be innovators. But not only just be told that, but there must be incubators for these types of developments. And so, we initiated creative programmes such as idea to innovation, illumination, programmes where young scientists can be promoted into the space of entrepreneurship and innovation. You closed all of that down. All of that. Right? Because remember, 2015 was the year of “tighten your belt”. This is before COVID-19, eh. “It had no COVID in 2015”. It was the year of wean yourself of the Government. Right? So,

between 2015 and 2020, citizens, their belts have become so tight they are starting to suffocate and now we must tell—you are telling us we must be grateful. Imagine that.

The People's Partnership administration at that time looked as well outside of just GATE and looked at the Higher Education Loan Programme, HELP, and this allowed a Students' Revolving Loan Fund. Now, you know—and I am raising this now because just this year, I had a concerned parent calling me, very concerned. Her daughter, very well qualified, did everything right, did everything she ought to do and got into a postgraduate programme. We all know you all closed the GATE on postgraduate programmes, so you have no access to GATE for postgraduate training. Okay? Right. But on top of that, to add insult to injury, the access to the health programme has also been limited. No, but you told no one that. Parents are being put in this kind of complete state of runaround. You cannot get this, you cannot get that and so, the programmes started, the student is ready to go, cannot attend; cannot attend. Now, this is to access a loan which they intend to pay back. So, this idea of weaning yourself off becomes irrelevant. But you cannot access that. And the Minister of Education came here today to tell parents, "Go ahead," encourage your students; encourage the children; gas lighting the people left, right and centre; selling dreams, telling them it is available when they know because they are living it every single day. They know it is not available.

Do you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that when we look at the GATE programme again, you know what has been happening? Parents are—so, you have applied, you have done your means test. Again, citizens doing everything they

could and getting nothing. You applied, you put in your paperwork for the means test, you are approved for a certain amount. Lo and behold, the GATE payout is late. Not surprising, with the level of inefficiency we see here from the Government. You cannot—I cannot imagine that they are overseeing anything in any proper fashion. So, your GATE payout is late. So, parents wanting their children to be able to register for school on time, et cetera, you then take a loan, whether you take a loan from a family member, however you do it. Right? You get the money as best as you can to start that semester just so your child could have the opportunity. When you have done that, whatever rake and scrape you have done to get the money, when—so you get the payout and then when you apply for the next year, you are told, “Mm-mm, mm-mm, you do not qualify, seems like you cannot access the financing.” What kind of disingenuity is that? What absolute terror are they raining on the parents of Trinidad and Tobago? How can you justify, as a Government, running a system in that manner? It is appalling. And then, as I said, to come here and stand today and say, “The opportunities are abounding. Go and take advantage of the opportunities.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to turn to the question of the laptop programme. The Minister of Finance, the Minister of Education today, both of them referenced the fact that—referenced the digital education programme. Sounds amazing, sounds revolutionary. Let me tell you what that is. Their key successes in the digital education programme, the first one is that they have distributed 7,000 laptops to means tested students and teachers, and a total of the 63,410 devices between 2018 and 2022. Okay? And that they have outfitted the secondary schools

for wireless access. That is the digital education programme that has cost us something like \$45 million to date. What they have done, in essence, is take a transparent, accountable laptop provision programme, where you knew when you passed SEA and went into Form 1 you had access to a laptop, they scrapped that. They saw no value in that. They told us up and down the country how much of a waste of money investing in students in digital education was in 2015. You had a former Minister of Education telling us that they are going to put laptops in schools because I can only assume that that Minister did not know the difference between a laptop and a desktop, so you rest the laptop there and tell them do not move it. Right? Then you have the new Minister coming now to tell us, “Let us pat them on the back, congratulations to the Government.” They have given out 63,000 laptops between 2018 to 2022 to teachers and students. How are you accounting for transparency here? You took a transparent programme, you took a programme where you knew where you would be able to access the laptop. You could have expanded the programme, you could have delivered devices to students in primary schools. You could have done a lot of things. Instead, you scrapped it, you created a problem, you bring a half-baked, half measured—I mean, ridiculous excuse for a new laptop programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: You do not want to call it that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: You do not want to call it a laptop programme, so you call it a digital education programme. And you cannot admit that what you have presented

to the public is less than what they got before, ineffective, inefficient and responsible for the learning loss that you are now lamenting.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: So, just like GATE, a problem that you have created, you are now presenting a solution that is ineffective. And so, I now want to turn to what they are talking about as the learning loss as a result of the pandemic.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have on previous occasions—and I will reiterate it here. The statistics are available for anyone who is interested. The reduction in our passes started since 2016; 2017, the results were lower than 2014; 2018, the results were lower than what was our last year in government in 2014, and they continued to be reduced. Were the results exacerbated as a result of the pandemic? Absolutely. But were they on a downward trajectory? Absolutely. And why is that? It is because the PNM's policy towards education was a systematic removal of everything that worked. Everything that worked, you stripped it to bare bones and then you wonder why things were failing, why the sector was collapsing?

And so, here we are. In the period 2017 to 2018, speaking to a standing finance committee of the previous House, the former Minister of Education talking about the fact that the passes they were seeing then were already starting to decline—listen to the years, eh. This is for fiscal 2018. So, this conversation is happening in 2017. No COVID-19, no pandemic. Okay? Just so we clear.

So, they are talking about a project entitled, Creating a Culture for Student Achievements 2017. And the first component of that was a primary school

component, where you took a Standard 5 remedial initiative which seeks to identify students who are at risk of underperforming at the Standard 5 level and treat with the causative factors, such as learning disorders and psychological factors. And the second component was a Form 1 initiative, which would provide remedial support for the students who scored lower than 30 per cent in the 2017 exam and those who were assigned to secondary schools. Because already you had an increase in the numbers of students scoring below 30 per cent. Let us be reminded, 50 per cent is still the pass mark. Okay? Right. So, here we have a former Minister discussing a remedial programme. As it were, it was an exercise in futility then because you discussed something, you come here, you stand up, you list off all the programmes, pat yourself on the back again, good job, everybody high fives, all round, we are doing a good job.

Then, you go back to the Ministry, you shelve all of that and our students are left to fend for themselves. Because clearly that had to have been what happened in 2017. Because we saw no progress for students in 2018, in 2019 and now you get to 2020 and then all of a sudden, we are blaming COVID. “Oh” my goodness, this is happening because of COVID. It is dishonest. It is absolutely dishonest because it was happening before.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And so, when you come to the Parliament—and now mind you, why I am able to reference things from 2017 and 2018 under a previous Minister is because while we have a new Minister, we have the same PNM policy, eh. So, there is no difference in what the PNM is doing to our education sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: You could change who. If you do not change the policy, you will have no changes in the outcomes.

So, here we are. Today, I listened to the Minister announced happily, the Minister of Finance raised it too, that there will be—but let us ground it in what happened this year. This year, we had a significant number of students not passing the SEA exam, not demonstrating the competency required for a secondary education.

Let us be very clear about that. This is no laughing matter, it is no joke for our nation.

4.45 p.m.

You had the implementation of a Vacation Revision Programme that \$10 million was allocated for. You had a Vacation Revision Programme that you are telling us in two weeks, the two weeks has elapsed, but you told us that we would get a report on the successes of this programme. To date we do not have that. What we do know is that less than half of the students who were from that 9,000 not passing the exam, less than half accessed the programme. We do not know for how long, we do not know how many students completed, we do not know whether or not the programme was indeed a success. We actually will not know now for another two years simply because the exam that you are taking to prove that you have demonstrated competency to access a secondary school education will take place in Form 2. So we are on a wait and see. We clear on that? Right.

Now you have told us that a programme that we do not know, whether or not it has been successful. We know we are spending \$10 million; we do not know if

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it is successful; we do not know if it has been successful; we do not know how those students would perform in the next few years; we are going to keep that programme for five years. Make it make sense, Mr. Deputy Speaker. How are you going to keep a programme that you do not know whether or not it is successful? Why are you allocating more money to it if you do not know it is meeting the desired outcomes? And that is why I have had the cause to say, over and over, that what you are facing in the education sector is not a resource problem.

So you could come here and say, listen, we are doing so well because we have allocated X billions of dollars to the sector, but what you are facing is not a resource problem, you are facing a competence problem because the persons that you have directing, steering the course are not competent to deal with the problems facing the sector, and that is why we are seeing what we are seeing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: I want to tell you now in the vein of the discussion of the Vacation Revision Programme and why I said from the beginning that what we are experiencing here in this House is an attempt of revising history, pretending that the years 2010 to 2015 did not exist or whatever good existed was because we had money and I would just posit, because we had sense, it is not just dollars and cents, it is just common sense in some of these cases—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes:—actual technical capability to run these institutions that you saw the difference. But there was in fact a set of key deliverables on literacy and numeracy that led to significant improvement nationally which led to the highest academic performance in the history of Trinidad in 2014 in all three exams: SEA, CSEC and CAPE. They found support for literacy and numeracy with a universal

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after school and homework study centres utilizing a “Dial-a-Teacher” Programme, setting up a toll free help in Math and English Language for SEA student; Math, English and Integrated Science for CSEC students courtesy a partnership between Ministry of Education and TSTT. That occurred before this Government came into power. That occurred before COVID.

When I stood up on several different platforms during the pandemic, referenced this programme, said, why are you not partnering with TSTT? Why are you not employing different sectors in the arms of the State to create more accessibility even during the pandemic when we could not meet; we could not congregate; there was no face to face; you had things on the books already; the plan has been drafted out that you could have utilized to mitigate against the learning loss, what did they choose to do? They chose to be reactionary. Now, you want to hear about homework centres and study centres and Vacation Revision Programme after the students have not passed the exam, after they anticipating reduction in passes in the next year. So that is why I say you cannot be the solution because you are the problem these are the things that I am talking about.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: In 2015 they would have met over 280 remedial teachers who are specifically trained to target student who are under performing, and close to 300 substitute teachers in primary and secondary schools in different subject areas. Now you had 2022 for the Vacation Revision Programme because apparently nobody over there reads, nobody knows what is going on. You are rushing around now, we have to train teachers, we have to train teachers. Optimize what was already there. If you do not bad spend money you are not going to be complaining about where the money is and we “doh” have this and we “doh” have—you know.

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You ignored things, you ignored things that were built, that were there, that you could have built upon. You could even tweak it if you did not like X, you could change it, you could make it more your own, but you did not have to scrap it. It is the mark of a short sighted government that cannot build on what they found there before.

And then during that 2010 to 2015 time period there was a coaching programme introduced for primary school students and secondary school students where 169 coaches were hired, trained and deployed in schools. You listened to the Minister today, the conversation on positive reinforcement, the requirement for positive reinforcement and making sure that the students could meet people and they have coaches. That existed before, it existed before, you scraped it. Now you are trying to bring it back like it is new after you have created a problem. And this problem has been ongoing. This is not COVID-related. Do not let anybody “mamaguy” you here today, it was before COVID these things were happening.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Members: And then one of my favorite parts of today’s contribution from the Minister of Education, that we need to ensure that our students leave secondary school with some sort of skill set. All of a sudden there is a recognition that there is a need for technical/vocational training within the school system, amazing. While I sat in the other place, I recall the former Minister of Education telling us why we needed to reduce access to technical/vocational training. And today the Minister is announcing that we are doing certain things to allow persons to leave school with some skill set, you get some training and then everybody, you know, beating the desk, and again all of the high fives, we are doing so good.

During 2010 to 2015 the Caribbean Vocational Qualification at the

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secondary school level was increased from 42 to 102. The initiative was aimed to increase the number of secondary schools offering CVQ regional occupational standards so that each student may graduate with at least one occupational skill. You met it, you closed it down, now you are trying to bring it back, brand new programme, ridiculous. It is ridiculous, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The programme then spoke about the holistic development. At that time over 5,200 students would have participated in the CVQ offerings at the secondary school level. Imagine how many more could have participated if we could have just erase the PNM from the last seven years—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes:—if we could have just wipe that clean. We would have been so much better off. And to the rhetoric, the rhetoric coming from the other side, from the Government. It is always like, could have been worse, you know, guys, things are bad but it could have been worse, it could have been terrible, awful, it could have been better. It absolutely could have been better if you were not there for the last seven years, I guarantee you. I guarantee you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And so when you come to the population, you have to be at the very least honest about what you have done. But the good thing is I do not know if the Government believes that because they stopped the laptop programme, nobody in the nation has access to the internet. All of this information is readily available. The information that I have quoted you can find housed in documentation under the Ministry of Planning, Economic and Social Restructuring and Gender Affairs during the years 2010 to 2015 which would have outlined what programmes existed then. You can find the information in terms of what was cut by the

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Government based on their press releases. So that you—I mean they readily gave us this information and then I listened again to the question of school violence. And we are here for you, we support you. Okay, absolutely. What happened to the Student Support Services?

Time and time again, every budget when they are looking for money, for, God knows what, they cutting the Student Support Services. There was a hotline that was launched, the National Student Hotline, to provide professional counselling to students with confidentiality. There was a Circle of Hope which led to weekly interventions within the schools. They spoke with teachers and students who may have issues. The programme was robust so that you had guidance counsellors, guidance officers, school social workers to treat with educational, behavioral and clinical psychologists within the school system to ensure that you had a space where we look after the mental health of our students. They cut it out, they cut it out. You are seeing the school violence and then you are saying, “Oh my”, let us do something about it. Imagine that.

And so this pattern occurs time and time again with the Government and that is the dissonance I am talking about, that is the duplicity that I am talking about, that is the detachment from reality that the Opposition Leader spoke about this morning, that you could stand here and recite things that you closed down that. Had they been operational in our darkest times you would not be facing the problems that you are facing here today.

And so as I look through the education sector and it would be remiss of me as the representative of Tabaquite not to raise the critical issue of school transportation services when we talk about the high cost of back to school for parents. When I listened to the Minister of Education today give the story of her

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access to education and the sacrifices that they may have had to make, is it not the responsibility of each generation to build so that the other generation has it easier? So you are telling me because you had a difficult time of it, or many of us in the House may have had difficult time, everybody going forward must have a struggle, that we must all be on the struggle bus together? Is that the PNM's policy that we will all be on the struggle bus together with the Members for Diego Martin West and Diego Martin North/East driving the struggle bus and we must go along happily. It cannot be like that.

And so when I listened to the Minister of Education talk about traveling to school and having to travel to school, let me tell you what is happening today, today, 2022, back to physical reopening of schools. You have parents in Tabaquite whose children are going to school in San Fernando. I raised it here at the mid-year review, I raised it before. We wrote several letters to find out about what is occurring with school transportation, they told us it is happening. It is not. We live in Trinidad, right, we living in the area you know it is not happening. Parents are paying \$70 one way per child to go to school. That is \$140 per child to go to school, that is prior to the fuel increases that we just had. So I cannot tell you what the increases may be, but that is what was occurring before the budget. And I was on a panel discussion with the Minister of Trade and Industry on Monday night after the budget and this is what I talk about, the absolute detachment from reality.

The Minister said, you know, that is nominal increase, right. When you are struggling, when your belt is so tight that small increase for some for others is the tip over the edge. It is the tip over the edge. And so you are wondering why there is so much discontent from people, why people are so unhappy. Because you could come here and say it is a fair budget when the budget is tipping some

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persons over the edge, they were on the edge and they may be going over now. Because you cannot tell me that you are paying \$140 per child, a day and then tune into Parliament and hear that school transportation services are being provided, for who? So where is the bus, where is the bus? We must know if the bus is passing. It is ridiculous, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And so I call on the Minister of Education, on the Minister of Finance to ensure that the school transportation services, particularly in rural communities across this country, are up and running—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes:—and that the routes have been done in conjunction with the schools and the parents so that there is active consultation and you are not sending buses to go from point A to point B and the children not going to school there. Okay, so that have to be—when we ask for data driven policy it includes things like community consultations. For my area I know and as for many of my colleagues on this side we would have written numerous letters. I know the Member for Oropouche East has been begging for the Ramai Trace Hindu School—

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes:—because those students where they are housed right now are unable to get to school in an easy fashion but you telling us about opportunities, you are telling us opportunities exist.

And so a main factor of this Government's budget presentation this year you heard a lot about the digital thrust, where are we going, the digital highway, right. The very same Government that is struggling to maintain a regular roadway is going to put us on the digital highway. Excuse me if I am a little bit mistrustful.

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Because you are looking at, in my constituency of Tabaquite several areas, the Bonne Aventure Main Road. And this is why I had to, when I listened to the Member for Tobago West and we heard the everything for nothing statement, it is the everything we getting—simple things like road infrastructure the people of Trinidad and Tobago have to be fighting for, protesting for left, right and centre and I know, I know as the Government sits in their seats they have managed to convinced themselves that the Opposition is stirring this up. But you have to be driving on the road too. I know the Member for Point Fortin knows exactly what I am talking about when I say the road is not good.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: I know. So you cannot tell me that you so effectively managed to sell yourself your own propaganda that you do not realize that people are living here day-to-day.

And so for my constituency of Tabaquite as we continue along the budget debate, as we go into the Standing Finance Committee we will be very focused on the education sector, absolutely, but we are also going to be critically focused on infrastructural development. Because you cannot talk about connectivity and connecting communities when communities are being cut off by landslips across this country. You cannot talk about connectivity and national development and Vision 2030 when communities do not have pipe borne water still, still, and the Minister for Public Utilities had the time to recite an entire poem. Imagine that, communities still do not have pipe borne water but the Minister responsible for WASA had time to “kicks” in Parliament today, imagine, imagine. And then when we stand here and we continue with this budget debate—

Mr. Gonzales: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Ok, proceed.

Ms. A. Haynes: Thank you for your protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wish as I conclude to remind—okay—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Member I should probably interject at this time. You have two more minutes and you have an additional 10. Do you—

Ms. A. Haynes: “Ohh”. Good. Okay, thank you, I will avail myself of the 10 minutes. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. Member: [*Crosstalk*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And so when we discuss—the Minister of Public Utilities could have said that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Well I was wondering if you asked him a question as—

Ms. A. Haynes: No, I did not, I did not. And he could have utilized his speaking time instead of doing the poem to say whatever he is saying across the floor now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: Can the Member give way?

Ms. A. Haynes: No, “yuh jus’ talk”. No, I am not giving way, “yuh jus’ talk”. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not giving way, okay, the Minister can write a press release because he misused his parliamentary time here today. That is not my fault.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: That is not my fault. You see when people hand you notes and tell you say this, sometimes you must say, no, you would have had time to go through why certain communities have no water instead of regaling us with a poem. We did not need it. Okay? And so when we discuss, when the population is

listening on, listening on to persons in Government telling us that we as a society want everything for nothing and we are faced with the day-to-day realities of the absolutely poor delivery of goods and services in our communities, that persons who are seeking basic access, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have to be fighting for the basics.

In 2018, I sat in the other place and in the same budget exercise I had the chance to reflect on the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. And those of us who know it, who are interested in that type of research you know that it is a basic pyramid of needs where you are told, as the theory goes, that you have to satisfy your most basic needs before you are able to move up the pyramid. And so that if you apply that to Trinidad and Tobago society today, if you are talking on one hand about the hope for an aspirational society, if you are speaking on one hand about the digital economy, innovation, of excelling, if you are honest about that you would have to realize that in order to get to that thinking, you have to satisfy basic needs first. What are our basic needs? Water, shelter, and then connectivity, the infrastructural development that people would be laughing about. I get videos with persons playing golf in potholes at this point in time because they go around the country, they tee up by the pot holes, who is planting trees by potholes and what not, because that is the nature of Trinidad and Tobago society. We try to make the best of everything, we try to make the best of everything. And so as we exist today in pothole paradise what the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is telling us that all of these aspirational things that you are talking about we cannot get there. Why can we not get there? Because we are too busy fighting up to figure out how we can get from point A to point B.

When I listened to the Minister of Education talk about the experience in her

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constituency office and what the programmes are that they are doing, et cetera, excellent, all well and good, but in my constituency office when you come to me the landslip at Bonne Aventure, the landslip in Caratal, the fact that certain communities are in danger of being cut off completely. The fact that Forres Park, Macaulay, Caratal could have no pipe borne water for a month, that they could be on water schedules where they are told they will get water on the weekends or at least on Sunday from 6.00p.m., and listen to the times “eh”, I am not being facetious here at all, 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m.

And so that you have that space to try to fill up your tanks and if you do not have tanks heaven help you. That you could have—this is the reality of the existence of persons in Trinidad and Tobago and it is not unique to my constituents, but I can raise it because that is what I am facing on the day-to-day basis. That you can have that as the reality and then you can come here, you could come here and tell us that what you can expect is growth here and you could expect—we cannot even get home sometimes.

And to show you, again, the levels of dissonance, I listened to the Prime Minister’s press conference after the budget on the fuel increases. And the idea that people are arbitrarily coming to Port of Spain in traffic time, ludicrous. As a person from south I can tell you coming to Port of Spain is a nightmare and now that gas prices are so high even worse. And so that you are sitting here berating citizens, telling citizens that you have to do better, you must do better, but you are not holding up your end of the bargain. You, as the Government, are failing on your end of the social contract. There is no reason anybody is supposed to come here in 2022 in a nation like Trinidad and Tobago to be talking about road rehabilitation programmes when they know that is a simple matter of a timely

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rehabilitation. We do not have to discuss that. That ought not to take up parliamentary time. That is basic common sense, that roads have to be rehabilitated ever so often and that if you equitably distribute that, we are not going to face the problems that we are facing today.

You remember last budget? We were told that the big trucks were causing the destruction of the roadways and that there would be a fine for the trucks. What happened with that? I hope when the Minister of Works and Transport comes before us he will tell us how many of these big trucks that were destroying the road, mashing up the roadways that they have managed to stop and what material benefit that the people of Trinidad and Tobago are seeing.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the disappointment that the people of Trinidad and Tobago are feeling right now ought not to be ridiculed, it ought not to be trivialized. No one in this House should come here and tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago that the hardships that you are facing is your own fault. At the end of the day, there is a social contract, there is a social contract between those who are governed and those who are governing. We as citizens give up certain rights, we give up certain freedoms to exist in society. And once we have done that we have a reasonable expectation for service delivery. As we stand here today we do not have proper service delivery in education, in health care, from the Ministry of Works and Transport, we do not have it, and to suggest that our discontent is ill placed or somehow political is absurd, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And I listened to the Minister of Public Utilities talk about why he was able to stand as a member of the People's National Movement and I have listened to Members opposite all the time say, you know you are a Member of the

Opposition so that is why you have to complain. And I would say, I am a member of the UNC because I have seen what the PNM does to this country, I have seen over time that the more you stay in power the more we have to complain about. And that is why I can stand here as a Member of the UNC because the change has to come. Because as I said if you exist with the policy and the policy does not change the outcomes would not be different.

And so as we engage in this debate, I urge members of the public to listen very carefully to what you are hearing. They are being very serious when they say things are going well. They are being very serious when they berate you for expecting a reasonably good access to public service.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: They are being very serious when they talk about the taxes and the fuel subsidy and then miraculously say the reduction in the fuel subsidy would lead to better services. We heard that with Petrotrin. We heard in 2018 that once you shut down Petrotrin roads would be better, education would be better, health care would be better. None of that happened.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: None of that happened. And so we are engaging in a very important exercise, but we are also listening to policy makers expound what policies they are prepared to present to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

Ms. A. Haynes: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We listened to the Leader of the Opposition very carefully outline plans and programmes that can be done in Trinidad and Tobago with the necessary political will. I have gone through today, programmes that have been done, that have existed, that we saw results from, from

an administration that is not the one that we have here today. And so I say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago be very discerning in your thinking, be very careful with what you do and how you think about. People come every day and tell you, do not make this political, do not make that political, et cetera, but we are making political decisions because impacts on our everyday life.

And so as I conclude here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we as policy makers have a responsibility to ensure that the next generation of Trinidadians and Tobagonians have a fighting chance. And as I stand here as one of the younger Members of Parliament it is very unfortunate to see persons who have sat at the table when things were good berate us now for having a problem for the fact that we are paying for the sins of others and that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is what I would stand against at every single opportunity I get. And I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.15 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I now recognize the Member for St. Joseph.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is a signal honour for me as the Member of Parliament for St. Joseph and the Minister of Health to join this debate on the 2023 fiscal package. First of all let me thank my hon. Prime Minister for having the faith in me to continue serving as his Minister of Health, and also recognize and thank the good constituents of St. Joseph whom I have the pleasure and honour to serve. As I begin my budget debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me congratulate the hon. Colm Imbert, the Minister of Finance, for the theme of his budget, Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—and also to recognize the good work done in the PSIP Programme, Minister Penny Beckles-Robinson. Thank you very much Ma'am.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, if one listens to the Opposition—and we must, and the population must, and the media must—and you listen to certain commentators you would believe that Trinidad and Tobago is an island on its own, that we do not rely on the outside world for anything, that we are totally self-sufficient. But we must remind the country—as the hon. Minister of Finance said, there were financial shocks since 2015. We had to deal with that.

Oil went to negative territory; no country in the world had to deal with that ever. We had the COVID scare which was a global pandemic since early 2020. And if one wishes to be properly informed and educated I will advise, to borrow a term from my colleague, Minister Young, all right-thinking citizens to read the Review of the Economy that Minister Imbert has produced and you will see in that Review of the Economy how well we have avoided the abyss of an IMF programme, we have avoided the abyss of devaluation, we have avoided the abyss of mass layoffs in the public sector, and for that there must be some recognition that something has gone right.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: This is not a rich man's budget as the hon. Leader of the Opposition would have you believe. We stand for every one of the country especially the poor and the disadvantage, and let me explain why this budget, which is being mischaracterized as a "rich man budget", serves the needs of the underprivileged.

When you listen to the Opposition and certain commentators why are we

giving tax breaks to the multinationals, why are we giving tax breaks— We could have deepwater exploration and shallow-water exploration. Why are you giving up tax incentives to the upstream producers? You know why? Because without those tax breaks they will not engage in more production; more exploration; more national revenue so that we could pay more food support grants; we could pay more minor house repair grants; we can pay more sanitary public plumbing assistants—all out to the Ministry of Social Development—electrical house wiring; SEED grants; disability grants for children; disability grants for adults; senior citizens pension, non-contributory; public assistance grant; rental grants; and clothing grants for fire victims.

The money has to come from somewhere to keep on putting money where it makes a big difference in the hands of the poor, in the hands of the disadvantaged, to pay for CDAP, to pay for housing, subsidize water, subsidize electricity, free health care and free education. The money has to come from somewhere. So when you connect the dots those tax incentives to multinationals redound to the benefit of those who need the money the most. But to listen to the UNC, give more, give more, but they never tell you where the money is coming from.

Why do we not want the Revenue Authority so the professional class and the business class who do not pay their fair share of legitimate taxes can be brought into the tax net so that we could collect more revenue to spend more on the poor and the disadvantaged?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Explain to me the logic behind that. So I reject totally that this is a rich man's budget, and I think if we connect the dots we could see why.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, for two years the Ministry of Health was unfocused on

COVID for good reason, but as we come out of COVID and we come to the end of this stage of the pandemic—notice I am not saying we come to the end of the pandemic. I do not want to be misquoted by anybody. As we come to the end of this stage, this acute stage of the pandemic, we have to refocus the health care sector. I just want to say that the Leader of the Opposition is talking about a commission of enquiry into COVID, and again we pretend that COVID only affected Trinidad. There was 622,629,459 known cases of COVID worldwide. That is known. The actual number could be multiples of times higher. There were unfortunately 6,547,878 deaths worldwide. No country was spared. And in Trinidad and Tobago, yes, we lost 4,200 of our citizens and we always send our condolences to them. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had to hear on Monday night news the Leader of the Opposition say that we have the highest death rate of COVID in the world. Untrue.

When you look at the international data and measure the case fatality ratio, it ranges from a high of 18.1. Do you know where Trinidad and Tobago is?—2.3. So why is it that for the UNC to look good Trinidad must fail? They always put party before country. We are nowhere near the top of the COVID deaths ranking—nowhere near. But if ever the UNC comes into office and the commission of enquiry is actually instituted, I hope the lawyers acting for the commission of enquiry will call the Leader of the Opposition for her to explain her position that the reason why we were doing well in 2021 was because sunshine kills COVID. Is it that all of a sudden the sun moved? Is it all of a sudden that the warm weather which was attributed by the Leader of the Opposition for our COVID response, all of a sudden we went into the ice age? Can anyone explain that? And I hope the commission for enquiry brings Oropouche East to explain his

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guinea pig statement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Because that was a travesty on this country to discourage people from getting vaccinated.

I hope Sen. Nakhid goes before the commission of enquiry to explain his statement that COVID vaccine— He does not want to live in communist country so he will not take a COVID vaccine.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: All of these—the UNC never helped. They took us to court on every single occasion—

Hon Member: And lost.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—and vilified—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members please.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please, on both sides, the outbursts please. Proceed.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: public servants, and I am hoping that none of the three persons who speak on health will mention or congratulate Roshan, Maryam Richards, Prof. Carrington and Michelle Trotman—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—because you made their lives a living nightmare. Even the Member for Caroni East, who fashions himself after Tim Gopeesingh, did not even go there.

Hon. Members: Ooooooh.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: At least he did not cross that line.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: At least Caroni East did not cross that line. But he fashions himself after Dr. Tim Gopeesingh. I urge you not to mention those public officers' names because you make their lives living nightmares.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I want to thank at this point every single health care worker, every single one—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—because it is the same polices and care that Dr. Tim Gopeesingh got in Couva that saved his life.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: But once he is well enough he bad-talk every single thing. It was good enough for him. And even Caroni East would not go there who sees himself in that vein. And the \$210 million allocated it will be put to good use.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as we move from being “uni-focused”, we want to put some projects, some policy systems in place that will take the health care sector even more forward. I want to speak about central block. You know why?—because the Leader of Opposition had the temerity and the gall to talk today about central block. That was a Prime Minister who reigned for five years with oil and energy prices over \$100 for a barrel and ignored central block, and you have the gall to come and ask today about central block? Right? You ignored a seismic report and you are asking about central block? It is Dr. Keith Rowley and this Cabinet that put his name behind central block.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes, we have had some delays, but as one central block goes up we have started to demolish the other. And I want to thank staff and patients at Port of Spain hospital for their understanding. They are operating under some trying circumstances. And by 2024 they will join Arima with their new hospital, Sangre Grande with their new hospital—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—Point Fortin up and running, and we are working in a world-class facility.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, to increase the throughput for radiological services, to make patients more comfortable, we are installing a new 128 slice CT before year end at Port of Spain to supplemental the containerized CT we have. So we could have some redundancy capability and to ease the workload on the containerized CT.

Our capital city by 2024, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will have a modern hospital that Trinidad and Tobago in its 60th year, 61st year and 62nd year of independence can be proud of. Proud.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: It was a travesty that the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar did not attend to central block. Under North West Regional Health Authority at the St. James facility, a new MIR, which is a gift from PPGPL, Phoenix Park Gas Processors Limited, will be installed by 2023. So North West will have their first MIR under this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: That is too celebrated. Under the NCRHA, the new Arima Hospital is up. It is running, and running beautifully, and I can attest to it because I was a patient there. I did not get special treatment because I have a letter from a patient—he did not give me permission to use his name.

Mr. Terrance Deyalsingh

September 9th, 2022.

Let me just put this into the record.

The care that I received at the Arima General Hospital was second to none and I must commend Dr. Vimal Seetahal and his team for the tremendous work that they are doing.

The professionalism portrayed by the staff at the Arima General Hospital is commendable...

But you would not hear the Leader of the Opposition or any of my three colleagues speak about that, and that is what we are doing throughout the system.

It is the first hybrid hospital, maybe in the Caribbean, where we treat COVID patients alongside non-COVID patients, and I was a patient there. The reputation of that hospital has travelled so far that we are starting to get request from other countries to come and see how that hybrid system is working so that they could introduce it because COVID is here to stay. So that is where we are.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Sangre Grande Hospital, MP Roger Monroe, it is 60 per cent completed my friend.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: You will get your new hospital in 2023, hopefully by the end of the second quarter. The same way MP Kennedy Richards got back Point Fortin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: This will serve the population of the entire eastern seaboard. It is modern, it is new and it is fashioned after the Point Fortin Hospital. So Point Fortin is being twined with Sangre Grande I am pleased to say.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, another major infrastructural project is our Ministry of Health Administration Building. It is a 20-year-old dream that the Ministry of Health should stop renting properties. We are scattered all over the place and I can tell you during COVID when you wanted to have a heads of department meeting, I am in the Ministry, the CMO is in the Ministry, Dr. Hinds is in Scared Heart, PAHO is in St. Clair, Corporate Communications is in Park Street. It was a nightmare to bring them together especially when rain is falling. So we are going to have all of these agencies under one roof by hopefully second quarter of 2023. And the synergies in having all these agencies under for one roof is something I look forward to as Minister of Health and will serve this country well in decades to come.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, San Fernando General Hospital. Oh, the new labour ward which my friend from Fyzabad is proud of also. He will never admit it. The remodelled NICU—he will never admit it—is doing well. We are working with MP for San Fernando West, the hon. Faris Al Rawi, as announced in the budget to do a refurbishment of the grounds and the buildings of San Fernando General Hospital, and also making provisions for improving the provision of cardiac services. Something that goes under the radar, because it is not fashionable in health to talk about these things, the Society for Inherited and Severe Blood Disorders. We have given them now a permanent home at San Fernando General

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Hospital and they are so happy and pleased to have that permanent home. It helps people with thalassemia, it helps people with all those complications of inherited blood disorders. It is so pleasing to hear the good works they are doing and the positive response we are getting from the society.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as we move on now to some key policy positions from 2023 into the future, with the twin objectives of giving our customers, our clients, our patients, a better level of service and respond to health care workers for better goods and delivery. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is no secret that through the years and decades the issue of finding blood for patients has been a thorny one. The current chit system is inequitable, it is dangerous, it is unpredictable, and it puts an already distress family in more distress to go and have to find blood. We started to take decisions back in 2019 to move to a voluntary non-remunerable blood donation system. But, of course, COVID hit. But once we started January 2022 we put this back on the front burner, and the model that we use is based on a PhD research model for exclusive voluntary non-renewable blood donations, a thesis done by Dr. Kenneth Stirling Charles. It is 170-page thesis and that gave us the feedstock for moving forward.

So we are hoping to from the old system which is stressful, which is dangerous, which is unpredictable, to a new system where we hope to have an army of good. What do I mean by this army of good? An army of 20,000 persons who come on to our database to agree to voluntarily donate blood twice to three times a year without a care in the world as to who that blood goes to. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am looking for something in my wallet here and I hope I have it. It just occurred to me. Yes. What used to happen with blood donations in this country—and this is the card. May I have permission just to show this card please? Just a

card. [*Minister displayed card*] This is a blood donation card, and what people used to do was to put money into their account—not money, sorry. Blood into your accounts. So I donate a pint of blood, I am guaranteed blood when my mother falls ill, my sister falls ill or I fall ill. That type of system we have to move away from.

Let us take the security guard recently who needed blood in San Fernando. If she does not have access to blood her outcome, her outlook is not good. So we need to move away from this system of exclusivity where certain people have blood, certain people have blood in an account, to one where I give blood I have no care in the world as who receives my blood. It could be a child suffering from cancer who receives the blood. It could be a beta thalassemia patient who receives the blood. It could be the bandit who is shot who receives the blood. It could be the security guard who needs the blood. Regardless of race, colour, creed or class, occupation, every human being presenting to a hospital needs blood.

But this old system where you put blood into your bank which guarantees you blood, I am saying as of today I am releasing my 30 pints of blood for the use in the general population. That is what I am doing. I am no longer considering myself a beneficiary of the 30 pints of blood I have given voluntarily over the years. This is my contribution. I am asking people to latch on to this programme. We have started it. In the old days when we had a voluntarily drive we will get 13 pints, then we started to get 50 points, then we started to get 87 pints. Now when we do a drive we get about 100 pints of blood. So we are making a start.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now move to the issue NCDs. The tackling of NCDs as the COVID pandemic showed worldwide is one that needs policy, data, screening, treatment and care, and the Government will step up its NCD

programme, will step up its NCD initiatives. But what is the missing component worldwide, not only in Trinidad and Tobago, in tackling NCDs is patient compliance with their medication, with their exercise regime and sticking to a reasonable, diet—not diet programme, but eating properly. So under the TTMoves programme, our change programme, is to ask people to eat more fruits and vegetables, walk 4,000 to 7,000 steps per day and drink more water, and we are asking the population to partner with us.

Under this TTMoves initiative we are going to be taking it to the communities with mobile units. We already have one up at Eastern. We are going to be taking six mobile units into the hearts and minds of villages and communities to talk to people, family by family, one by one. It is not going to be a mass media campaign. Our screening—we had about 74 screening programmes with 104 institutions throughout 2021. And let me tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how well these screening programme work if the population partners with us, and for that I refer to briefly to read into the *Hansard* a letter which appeared in the *Express* on Wednesday, 7th September, 2022.

“Kudos to staff at St. Mary’s health fair

A friend invited me to a health fair at St. Mary’s Hall in Tacarigua”—that is the constituency of Tunapuna—“where the nurses and doctors were pleasant and helpful.

I even did a cholesterol test and in less than a week I received a phone call to collect my results at the St. Joseph Health Centre.

Within 20 minutes of my arrival at the health centre, I was already heading out, my results in hand. Thank you.

Rosetta Ransome

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Maloney Gardens

D'Abadie''

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: This is the kind of patient responsibility we need. We will put out the health fairs, we will do the testing, but get your results and then work on those results. So moving forward we are going to have many more of these.

On the issue of diabetes, we are going to be taking and we have already started taking a very novel life course approach to dealing with diabetes, and I hope my three colleagues recognize it. Dr. Ragbir I know you have a good general practice; Member for Fyzabad, this falls entirely in your garden because this is about gestational diabetes; and MP Seecheran you are going to talk on health. So we taking a life course approach to diabetes via an IDB funded project with DERPI, Professor Paul Teelucksingh. For the first time in the history of this country we are going to have national guidelines on the management of diabetes in pregnancy. We are going to be increasing our care for our diabetic women before pregnancy, during pregnancy, when the baby is born, the baby is a child and beyond because as the Member for Fyzabad will tell you a diabetic obese mother will most likely have an overweight baby who is more prone to diabetes. So we have to stop this cycle of diabetes at birth and pre-birth. So I hope I get your support Member.

And then going forward we are going to be providing everything, and you know, I really have to be sadden when I hear there is no CDAP. There is no shortage of CDAP as I constantly state. What is happening is that the pharmacies do not reorder their stocks in time and the pharmacies run out. So please, oh gosh. Oh gosh, please. We spent \$45 million per month on CDAP. There is no shortage

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of medication. The fault lies at the level of the pharmacies who do not order and I have proof. Because I was in a pharmacy one day, a constituent of mine started to “cuss” me in the pharmacy, no CDAP. “Ah want Glucophage, none!” “I say, “Fine. Yuh abuse meh in front of the whole pharmacy, ah take it. Ah say, Come, let’s walk next door to the next pharmacy”. Prescription filled. Prescription filled because pharmacy A did not order, but pharmacy B ordered. So please, do not mislead the population.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the issue of diabetes and treatment of care, we have instituted a series of diabetic foot infection workshops. Do you know that 30 per cent of our hospital beds are taken up by the complications of diabetes and diabetic foot infections?—30 per cent of our beds. We have 3,000 beds. That is 900 beds taken up with treating patients with diabetes and diabetic foot conditions. So we are going to be rolling out a series of initiatives.

5.45 p.m.

The final part of our three-part stakeholder meetings will be in October 2022 and coming out of this will be the development of clinical guidelines for the prevention and management of diabetic foot infections, implementation of a working task force to oversee all programmes on diabetic foot infections and a pilot project partnering with the Diabetes Association of Trinidad and Tobago for foot screening programmes at the ERHA. So that is what we are doing. We are also working with the Hearts Initiative for hypertension to decrease the incidents of strokes and so on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now move on to the issue of mental health. The world, the world, not Trinidad and Tobago, the world, is facing a mental health crisis. The World Mental Health Report from PAHO: “Transforming mental

health for all”, Dr. Tedros is quoted as saying:

Good “...health is...more than the absence of illness: it is an intrinsic part of our individual and collective health and well-being.”

Notice his words:

“...collective health and well-being”.

And the way forward that WHO and Dr. Tedros indicated was to transform our attitudes to do with stigma, actions and approaches to promote and protect mental health and integrate mental health into primary care. Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we started this before. I have spoken publicly since about 2014 about the conversion and decentralization of mental health into a wellness model. As part of that, St. Ann’s Hospital, which is possibly the largest hospital by bed capacity of a thousand where people are institutionalized for decades, we have managed to reduce the occupancy there from 1,000 to 750. So more people are being treated in the communities where they need to be treated.

And we need to do more and we recognize that we need to do more so we launched something called FindCareTT with 30 websites to help people get free online 24/7 access to a suite of services under FindCareTT and the data we will get from that will help us to pinpoint where we need to go. So let me share the data. From January 2021—notice when we started eh—to September 29th, 2022, we had 41,219 users with 79,816 page views. However, what is interesting is the demographic breakdown. The 18 to 24 group, 23 per cent were users; the 25 to 34 age group, 22 per cent, and the 35 to 44, 21 per cent. In other words, that cohort, that demographic, 18 to 44, accounted for 66 per cent of the visits to FindCareTT seeking advice and help on mental health issues to the younger population. And then, when you break it down by gender, it is 55 per cent male, which is a bit

surprising, to 40 per cent female. So now that we have this body of data, we know when we go out into the communities who we need to target and I give you the assurance that we are totally revamping the way we do these health fairs from now to incorporate much more mental health screening and mental health support at the time.

So we have taken steps as the WHO recommended to integrate mental health into the primary care setting. Our pilot study is going to start very soon and the objective is to shift from institutionalization to a community-based care as the cornerstone of our new mental health thrust.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I go on, I just want to make brief mention that we are totally revamping another bugbear as the three last speakers will know about, the availability, not of MRI or CT or mammography services, but the reporting of those exams. We have had problems over the decades with timely reporting. I could tell you that we have restarted the steering committee to look at our PACS system. What is PACS? Picture, Archiving and Communication System and our RIS system, which is our Radiological Information System. We listen to feedback from patients, staff and clinics and the programme objective which we hope to start to roll out very soon will be:

1. To streamline workflows.
2. Simplify image sharing across regions and sectors.

That is crucial. That is crucial so that images can be read and reported quickly. Right now at the pilot at NCRHA we are reporting 90 per cent of the emergency images within 24 hours, and that is kind of standard we want to get to across the regions. We want to have scalable and high-quality solutions; improved access time to radiological examinations. And what will be the outcome for the patient?

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A better quality of care, decreased waiting time for your results and, at the end of the day, unnecessarily long hospital stays. So these are some major interventions, together with blood, this one that will enhance the patient experience at our hospitals across all five RHAs.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I heard the Leader of the Opposition and unfortunately the Member for Tabaquite. And, I know it is politics, “bad talk the health system” and we have done nothing and “things bad” and “things worse”. Mr. Deputy Speaker, on coming into office in 2015, let us talk about what we have done, let us talk about what we have inherited, let us talk about what we have fixed. Women were dying in our hospitals at the rate of one per month in childbirth and the Member for Fyzabad knows that. The hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar had at her disposal the Member for Fyzabad and that other Member whose name I do not like to call in the public domain who is also an obstetrician and gynaecologist who Caroni East models himself after. Brother, “doh go there eh because there is ah life after politics”. Caroni East, there is “ah life after politics, you have to live with yuh conscience”. Two of them could not fix the issue of maternal mortality. You know who fixed it? Me, this Government, this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And I have to listen to Tabaquite and Siparia say “health system collapse”. What was the maternal mortality rate in 2015? 49.3 per hundred thousand live births. You know what we brought it down to in 2018? 18.1, slashed it by more than half.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: 2019, 25.7; 2020, 26.1; 2021, it went up because of COVID. Do you know how many maternal mortality deaths we have had this year? One

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and it was as a result of COVID, one, one.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: But “things bad, things bad in de health sector”. When women were dying one a month under the UNC, what did they do? Nothing, “it is we fix that”. Let us talk about the neonatal mortality rate. In coming into office, you know what the rate was? 15 per 1,000 live births. You know what it is now?—5.7. We have decreased it significantly. That means a hundred children per year are now alive under the PNM because we have slashed neonatal maternity rates by two-thirds but “things bad, things bad”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the issue of NCDs, women’s health, I want to thank Dr. Sirjusingh Adesh and his staff, Dr. Roma Bridgelal-Nagassar and all at the Directorate of Women’s Health, because the Directorate of Women’s Health and children’s health is not only about bringing down maternal mortality rates and neonatal mortality rates. One of the other programmes which I hope to put on the front burner again is the whole issue of increasing our rates of breastfeeding in Trinidad and Tobago. You want to talk about NCDs, you want to break the cycle, let us get more mothers breastfeeding. So we are going to be initiating the breastfeeding friendly hospital initiative, we are stepping up our activities here, that is a part of our NCD drive. The ERHA is 74 per cent ready, NCRHA 72 per cent, North West, 53 per cent, South West, 68 per cent, Tobago 68 per cent. We need a minimum of 80 per cent readiness to be accredited, to be considered breastfeeding friendly. It is a work in progress but let me tell you some of the advances.

The exclusive breastfeeding rates at birth, which is the first index we look at, is now 62 per cent in 2022 up from 56 per cent in 2011 in hospital. So we are

making progress with our mothers in hospital to start to consider breastfeeding as the exclusive means of nutrition at least for the first six months of a baby's life.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: So that is in hospital. It is up from 56 to 62 per cent. We now are going for the first time to be measuring what will be happening after they are discharged for the first six months of that baby's life. So we have never had that data collection before and that is what we are doing and the ultimate goal is to have 50 per cent of babies exclusively breastfed by 2025 both in hospital but most importantly when they go home and not to fall victim to the marketing efforts of breast-milk substitute feeds. If you can breastfeed your baby, please mothers, consider that. It is cheap, it costs you nothing and the benefits to you and your baby are just endless.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to touch on NCDs and smoking. We would have come to Parliament to debate the amendment Bill of 2019 for graphic health messages warning. I would have come to Parliament back in February because the cigarette manufacturers had asked for a six-month extension and that was granted. It was opened in Parliament and those came into effect on September 26th, 2022. How did we achieve this? The Tobacco Control Regulations which took effect from September 26th, we now join 112 countries that have graphic warnings.

The Tobacco Control Unit formed and held stakeholder meetings with the Chamber of Commerce, Supermarket Association, Fair Trading Commission and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. They also had meetings with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Customs and Excise and the Ministry of Health public health inspectors so that we can ensure enforcement of the amended regulations and in July 2022, the Tobacco Control Unit initiated compliance assessments to

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sensitize sellers of tobacco products and that is ongoing. So we have been tackling all the issues of NCDs as far as we possibly could.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the few minutes I have remaining, I want to urge Members opposite—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You have roughly about three more minutes but you have an additional 10. Care to avail yourself one time?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you very much, Sir. As the debate continues, it is unfortunate that in the era of the big untruth spawned in my view initially by the Cambridge Analytica which had its roots in other countries, adopted by other countries, adopted by the Partnership in 2010.

Mr. Young: The UNC bring that.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes, so that is what I am saying, the Partnership in 2010, but they brought it from outside. It is unfortunate now that purveyors of truth and fact have to work so much harder to get our narrative out because there is something in the atmosphere, in the ether, in the water, that proponents of the big untruth are finding fertile ground in persons. And that is what the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West was talking about, “The Spider and the Fly”, and I want to congratulate him for his response. Minister Gonzales, you did well.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Because that poem is exactly what is happening in Trinidad and Tobago. You pull people with your populace narrative. You remember when the election in 2010, 2015 was being fought, there was a fire in a factory and the then Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar said let us give \$5,000 to

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every worker affected by it. That is populism. Populism does not work, but we have a Prime Minister who will tell the country the unvarnished truth because the truth will set you free.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And as my colleague Minister Young will say to the right-thinking citizens, they know the truth. They know the truth.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will always on this side tell the country the truth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We will never lie to you, we will never put on rouge and lipstick and pretend that we like you. We will not take decisions that will make us popular in the short run but we will take decisions that will make you better off in the long run. That is our aim and objective as a responsible PNM Government. Leadership is not easy, especially in difficult times.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Leadership is not easy in difficult times. It is in difficult times you know who is a leader. It is in difficult times you know who has your back and that is what Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley is about and that is what all of us are about following that example. We are not afraid of the protest, we are not afraid of the editorials, we are not afraid to tell the country what the unvarnished truth of our circumstance is but we will also tell you what is the path of redemption moving forward. Stick with us. And as I say stick with us, I ask the people of St. Joseph: Are you better off now? Let me tell you why. Two brand new community centres, \$25 million worth of community centres, My Tower or Maitagual and Caiman. The Member for Tabaquite said the ICT programme “eh wukin”, well let

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me tell you something, “the ICT programme wukin in My Tower, it wukin in Caiman”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And Minister Gonzales, you were there, you saw the computers, you saw the children using it. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the constituency of St. Joseph, the following roads have been rehabilitated and paved: William Street, Francis Avenue, Caiman Road. We have done drainage works of Industrial Lane in Champs Fleur. The widening and dredging of the San Juan River which will help mitigate flooding in where? Aranguetz, Aranguetz Villas and Mount Lambert and even in the constituency of Barataria/San Juan. Thompson Lane, concrete work and drainage. On-going works at San Antonio Street, San Juan. First Avenue Road rehabilitation of Mendez Drive, Champs Fleur. Talking about Champs Fleur, Minister Marvin Gonzales, my brother, thank you for the CWHIP programme, the booster pump on the Eastern Main Road, Champs Fleur.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: That community programme is excellent and I know Manzanilla will agree with you. Thank you, brother.

And to commence in fiscal 2023, we will be paving Abercromby Street from the Eastern Main Road right up outside the church, First Capital Park and so on. Neverson Street off Bridge Road to be paved. Quarry Drive off Mendez Drive to be paved after we replace some pipelines there, and Caiman Road off Abercromby Street to be paved. Let us not forget the new pavilion that we built in the Aranguetz Savannah with a north facing and a south facing so people can play games and I have approached the Minister of Public Utilities to put up some solar lights there so we could play ball in the night. Thank you. Because the football community is

asking for that. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is my report of what we have been able to accomplish in health, this is my report of just a snippet of the activities that we have undertaken in the great wonderful, loving constituency of St. Joseph.

And as I close, I want to thank all of those hundreds of constituents of St. Joseph who reached out to me, prayed for me, sent messages when I was ill and hospitalization at Arima.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: It was touching, I felt loved, I felt appreciated and I think that experience of being a hospital patient really changes you for the better, not only as a Minister of Health but as a human being where you have to bare your soul to others to receive treatment and as I said I read out the letter from the person from the Arima, that treatment was not for me alone, it was for everyone. So as we continue to make strides in the health sector, I say thank you once again to every single health care worker. I thank the hon. Prime Minister for his continued faith in me and I thank God for having me here today. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rishad Seecheran (*Caroni East*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Thank you for allowing me to join the debate into the 2023 fiscal budget. I would like to begin by thanking my political leader for a comprehensive and compassionate reply to the budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, my colleague, the Minister of Health began his contribution a bit confused. He was confused of which Ministry he represented. He started off speaking about tax refunds of multinationals and the

Revenue Authority. It is no wonder we did so badly in our COVID-19 response.

With regard to claims that my leader said sunshine would kill COVID-19, I would like to refute that fact and—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: I would like to refute that and I would like to state, Mr. Deputy Speaker, sunshine does reduce the transmission of COVID-19 on surfaces and that is all that she was trying allude to. So in the temperate countries around the world, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they are expecting a surge in COVID-19 cases as the autumn and winter months approach and that is a fact. Sunshine cannot kill a virus, that is not—no one never said that. What we were trying to say is that sunshine reduces the transmission due to Covid-19 on surfaces. That is why we sanitize your hands every time you touch something.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, looking back at the last two years and the claim that the Member for Oropouche said that we were all guinea pigs. At the time, I did not want to respond or enter the public debate into that statement, reason being I did not want to add to vaccine hesitancy at the time.

Hon. Members: “Nooooo.” [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: But the fact is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is some truth to the statement. Right. If you were to look at the clinical trials of vaccines, COVID-19 vaccines while they were being produced, many COVID-19 drugs had issues and some of them actually made their way to the public and one of those drugs was the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1).

Mr. Deyalsingh: No, no, no, leave him, leave him.

Mr. Manning: This is misinformation and these very vaccines have been approved by international agencies. This is incorrect.

Mr. Deyalsingh: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please, Members. Right, you take ownership for your comments? Proceed.

Dr. R. Seecheran: So, Deputy Speaker, what I am trying to say is that during the trial phases of many of these COVID-19 vaccine which were brand new. COVID-19 was a novel virus so many of these companies started from scratch to produce these vaccines and not all vaccines made it to the marketplace and some that did make it to the marketplace had issues but they made it to the marketplace regardless. For example, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was stopped during its trial, reason being that there were cases of severe blood clotting and this actually came to fruition when it was released in the open market and millions of persons used the vaccine. To such an extent, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the Emergency Use Authorization of this vaccine in the United States was amended because, in some cases, it was found to be dangerous and could cause a possible lethal complication.

So you have to understand, everyone approached COVID-19 as a new virus and statements were made, and looking back at it now, some drugs were better than other drugs. So by a Member saying we were all guinea pigs, there were some truth to that statement. Not all of the vaccines were as healthy as they should be and were as effective as they should be. That is the point I was trying to make, right. We have the Moderna vaccine, we have Pfizer vaccine, we have the Sinopharm vaccine and I am not criticizing any vaccine but I speaking on scientific basis. I am speaking on the scientific basis of studies that have been done and the United States, they have amended the Emergency Use Authorization of the

Johnson & Johnson vaccine, and we had that vaccine here available in Trinidad and Tobago. We bought I think 800,000 doses of that vaccine from the Africa Medical Supplies Platform.

In fact, one FDA Commissioner went as far as to say it was unethical for a doctor to prescribe that vaccine in the United States if another one was available. So I would just like to refute that fact. And I did not say this at the time not to add to vaccine hesitancy but I would say it now, two years after and this vaccine has been in use by millions of persons.

With regard to what the Minister of Health had said about former Member of Parliament Dr. Tim Gopeesingh who is yes, my political mentor, yes, I trained under him in Caroni East.

Hon. Member: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Yeah and I would like you to know that Dr. Gopeesingh is what I would consider a renaissance man in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Dr. Gopeesingh was a national cricketer, he played for the West Indies team while he was a student in medical school. Dr. Gopeesingh actually became a world-class medical specialist in obstetrics and gynaecology.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And then he became the second best Minister of Education we ever had in Trinidad and Tobago after my political leader.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And he is a national medal awardee, the Chaconia Gold Medal. So, Minister, you know, be careful what you say about Dr. Gopeesingh. He has accomplished a lot more than you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: The rest of what the Minister had said, I will refute while I make my contribution. So I would like to begin my thanking every single health care worker and frontline worker in Trinidad and Tobago. They have contributed to keeping our essential services functional during the heights of the pandemic. They are our modern-day heroes, serving Trinidad and Tobago in our nation's supermarkets, drugstores, maxis, taxis and yes in our health institutions. We must never forget their service to Trinidad and Tobago and their fellow man.

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, Member, please. Please, please. Across the floor and try and avoid it please.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, our health care workers, they deserve every cent that they will receive and I dare say even more. What about improved working conditions, reasonable terms of employment and mental health assistance? The Seemungal report spoke of health care workers feeling abandoned by management. What in this fiscal budget addresses that, Minister? I had hoped that this administration would have sought to reward all frontline workers and not to only single out those in the Ministry of Health. Many did not have the benefit of being able to work from home. What about those that kept our oil rigs pumping and those patrolling our nation's borders both on land and sea? Those who braved COVID-19 to do their duties. We have lost over 30 police officers and many more from the Fire Service, Coast Guard and the Army to COVID-19. What about their families? Did they not keep us safe during COVID-19? Where is their compensation?

6.15 p.m.

I expected the Minister of Finance, during this bumper fiscal year, to find a way in his heart to bring an improvement in the standard of living of every Trinbagonian citizen, and that did not happen.

We have seen our roads destroyed during this PNM administration and it has now become more expensive to use them. The oil and gas of this country belongs to every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Prime Minister wants to tell citizens how to use fuel. This is while he is transported in a convoy in around four to five Toyota Land Cruisers. Do as I say and not as I do. It is no secret, life in Trinidad and Tobago is becoming more and more difficult. People yearn for the return of Kamla Persad-Bissessar to the reins of power in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: How much more can people take? Every single ministry is failing and the quality of the life that we have seen in 2010 to 2015 is now a distant memory.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance spoke of saving lives and livelihoods but many of this administration's policies were on the extreme end of the spectrum of what nations implemented around the world. We have fallen so far back in terms of economic development that a small rebound is now being heralded as recovery.

This Government has massacred livelihoods with no regard to the medium and small business owner. The small street food vendor was banned because persons would stand in a line outside to purchase doubles. There is a very low chance of getting COVID-19 outdoors. Fast food was banned because workers in the kitchen would mingle but Massy was allowed to prepare food and sell fried

chicken in their supermarkets. How was that possible? Who prepared the food, elves? The majority of small vendors became destitute during this time, losing means to care for themselves and their families and especially in Caroni East. Not many have been able to reopen. We have literally turned the hands of time back in Trinidad and Tobago, with families retreating to seeking a living off the land and not venturing into entrepreneurship.

The Minister of Finance also spoke, as well as the Minister of Health, of the global number of cases of deaths due to COVID-19. So, he hoped by using a big-sounding number, the number of deaths in Trinidad and Tobago would sound very small. And allow me to analyze the figures that he presented. We had one of the world's most restrictive border policies during the height of the pandemic. Citizens, sons and daughters of Trinidad and Tobago, were not allowed to return home. They were not even allowed to enter and to be quarantined. And what this meant was that we severely restricted the viral load entering the country. And thus, our COVID-19 cases should have been much lower than most of the other countries around the world and in the region, such as the United States and Great Britain, where travel was not stopped.

But somehow, we ended up with one of the highest rates of death per 100,000 persons in the world. Almost number one; almost number one. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are just over 4,200 COVID-19 deaths and a case fatality ratio of 2.3 per cent. We have recorded 300 deaths per 100,000 persons in Trinidad and Tobago; 300 deaths per 100,000 persons. We are currently ranked as the 173rd worst performing country out of 195 countries. We are number 22 from the bottom of the list. St. Kitts and Nevis is ranked as 101, with 86 deaths per 100,000. Dominica is ranked as 105, with 95 deaths.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is the source of this information?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: John Hopkins University, Coronavirus Resource Center, 26 September, 2022. Dominica is ranked at 105, with 95 deaths per 100,000. And Jamaica is at 115, with 111 deaths per 100,000 citizens. So, to put that into context, for every 100,000 persons in Trinidad and Tobago, we had a 190 more deaths in Trinidad and Tobago than Jamaica. Two thousand more persons died here in Trinidad and Tobago as compared to Jamaica if we had the equivalent population. Right? Why is this?

After the parallel healthcare system and weekly media briefings, billions were spent and yet to be audited. There were systematic failures in our healthcare response. This administration, through the Minister of Health, failed everyone with his policies and leadership. Citizens died, who did not have to die. Poor people died, who do not have a voice to say what happened. We have the highest death rate in Caricom. Ask the Minister to explain that. He was talking about Yemen. Yemen is undergoing a civil war. They do not have healthcare. They are like Ukraine and Russia. Yemen's rate is 18, and then after that it comes to North Korea, where we have no data. Right? We are number 22 from the bottom of the list, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Our health infrastructure was totally overwhelmed. There was a systematic failure in delivering quality healthcare to citizens—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—to overflowing wards with inadequate drugs, equipment and medical personnel, and finally, cockroach and moss-infested step-down facilities. Patients passed, when in many cases they could be here with us today, with their

family, with their friends and with their life intact.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Prime Minister says that money was spent here to keep us alive. In fact, one year ago Minister Deyalsingh is on record as saying that the Ministry of Health spent \$480 million on the country's COVID-19 response since the beginning of the pandemic. This sum must be considerably more right now. The CAF Development Bank of Latin America has recently approved US \$1.65 billion in financing for a number of countries, including Trinidad and Tobago. How much of that total will our country receive and how much have we received already?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have been told that COVID-19 funds were channelled into infrastructure, human resources, consumables, buildings, facilities, paying for quarantine, buying equipment and personal protective equipment. I am calling for an audit into the spending of COVID-19 funds—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. R. Seecharan:—during the period March 2020 to present day.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance, in his budget speech chose the period during the surge of 2021, Easter weekend in Tobago, to the period just after the Delta surge in early 2022, to highlight a reduction in the number of positive cases. Not one mention of the PNM-initiated Seemungal report into the daily mass deaths at our hospitals.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecharan: At one point, over 30 deaths per day, to the point where mortuaries were overwhelmed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, they banned cremations. They banned cremations during this time. Persons of the Hindu religion were not allowed to put their

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relatives and friends and loved ones to rest in a respectful way that, you know, we are accustomed to. And, you know, we resent that. We resent that. Right?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Why did they do it? There is no scientific basis for what they did in banning cremations. There is no scientific basis. Why did the Minister not indicate if systemic—

Mr. Young: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1)—

Dr. R. Seecharan:—deficiencies in our nation's healthcare infrastructure—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member.

Mr. Young:—48(1). We have gone on for the last 15 minutes on COVID, 48(1).

Dr. R. Seecheran: I am responding to what the Minister of Finance has in his budget speech, if you read it. I could actually quote the page I am responding to, page 107, Sir.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Right—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again, it is your time. If you see it that way, proceed.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Thank you very much. Why did the Minister not indicate if systemic deficiencies in our nation's health infrastructure would be addressed via this budget?

Mr. Al-Rawi: Sorry. Standing Order 49(2) on the relevance of—sorry, on the point of sub judice, the issue of standardization and cremations, et cetera, and burial rights is a matter before the courts. In fact, whilst the State won several of those matters, there is one remaining matter. So, I would just like the hon. Member to avoid that topic, please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. So, Member, with regard to the aspect—

Dr. R. Seecheran: I moved on. I moved on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hold on, hold on, hold on. With regard to the sub judice issue in Standing Order 49, with regard to the cremation and those things, I would like you to stay clearly away from that.

Dr. R. Seecheran: No problem.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: So, proceed.

Dr. R. Seecheran: No problem. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was speaking about COVID-19 issues but I was expecting the Minister to state that many of the deficiencies were not necessarily only about COVID-19 but issues of mental health, drug deficiencies and lacking of equipment in our nation's hospitals. The 105-page report was a damning indictment on the leadership of Minister Deyalsingh as the Minister of Health. The committee's report tells of staff shortages being common, doctors and nurses having to perform non-medical functions and of being overworked to the point of exhaustion. Poor working conditions were highlighted, with nurses being made to work many long hours in PPE.

My leader, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, has consistently called for additional nursing and medical staff to be hired in order to release the stress placed on our doctors and nurses.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Short-term local contracts resulted in great uncertainty and low morale among our young doctors and it is a sad confirmation of earlier UNC revelations of major human resource infractions in the healthcare system. The fact that a single nurse was assigned to as many as 30 patients also speaks to a systemic

failure to provide adequate nursing resources. The lack of foresight to order adequate quantities of tocilizumab is yet another indictment on Minister Deyalsingh. Doctors had to cope with shortages of midazolam, methylprednisolone and propofol. Dexamethasone was used in cases where methylprednisolone was indicated. I commend Professor Seemungal's committee for its patriotic duty. His entire team gave a true assessment of our performance at that time.

Now the question must be asked: How many of the committee's recommendations have been implemented with this budget? You did not say that Minister. Professor Seemungal and his team spoke of poor data management system, a recommendation that supplies from C40 be continuously open seven days a week, a proposal that oxygen concentrators be purchased for all large institutions. He spoke of mental health support for staff on site, recreational facilities for all regional health authorities, and assessment and the quality of the delivery of meals. People with their family, their child, in these step-down facilities, getting a bread and cheese two/three hours after breakfast. That is not good enough. Substandard bathroom facilities; COVID-19 drugs are not being procured; healthcare workers on a short month-to-month contract unable to take a vacation, unable to apply for sick leave. They have no long-term security for their family. They cannot get a bank loan. They cannot plan for postgraduate training. Cruel and unusual punishment, Minister.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister also spoke about taking a leadership role in health development to ensure fairness, to protect social values of equity and to secure access of healthcare for low and vulnerable groups—low income and vulnerable groups. This is on page 109. But how could this be achieved when mysterious occurrences happen such as on the 25th of May, 2021? Questions

remain after four senior specialist doctors were transferred out of the Couva Hospital. And then you want to come here and bring whistleblower legislation to Parliament? The facility's only lung specialists was reassigned when patients were dying from not being able to breathe. This again was poor people they were trying to save.

The Prime Minister does his medical in California, US; not California, Dow Village, Couva. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the question should now be asked: Have any of these doctors been rotated back into the Couva Hospital or was this a disciplinary measure against them for speaking up? Mr. Deputy Speaker, we also have it reported in one of our daily newspapers of the atrocities in another hospital. But smartly, he did not reveal his identity, otherwise he may have been rotated out.

On the 15th of December, 2021 we had 32 COVID-19 deaths and the virtual collapse of our nation's health infrastructure under Minister Deyalsingh. A junior doctor bravely went to the *Express* newspaper to state the working conditions of healthcare workers after hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on COVID-19. "Where de money went?"

At the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex this doctor spoke of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion and a doctor-patient ratio of 1:60. Needless to say patients died. There was not enough manpower to care for them. It spoke to the level of care a critically-ill patient would receive in our nation's premier hospital. The Minister is on record saying that a half billion taxpayers' dollars was spent on hiring additional human resources, you know, procuring consumables and upgrading infrastructure. But we have confirmation from this doctor of a lack of oxygen tanks with patients' health being compromised while tanks were being refilled. So, half a billion dollars and you could not buy enough

tanks. Right?

According to another report, our young doctors were underequipped to do their job, as they had to share two oxygen saturation monitors for 60 patients. So, at any one time, you only have the oxygen saturation of two patients in a ward of 60. People are going to die. The Minister also explained, when the doctor reported a lack of PPE and having to work on COVID-19 patients without gloves. Little is known of the circumstances and associated factors related in the deaths of our hospitals. As they say, “Dead men tell no tales.”

Moving on, Deputy Speaker, I would like to also speak on the Children's Life Fund which was created to provide funding and critical support for children needing life-saving tertiary-level healthcare services not available in this country. And I would like to thank my political leader, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, for creating this fund and for donating to this fund.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: She donated part of her own salary as well as her Ministers'. And along the way, there were many success stories, including the family of Darrel Frank and the proud parent of baby Darius. And this was in 2013. Darius got a new lease on life, having life-saving surgery in Columbia when he was only two weeks old. He was diagnosed with an atrial septal defect, a condition where there is a hole in the heart of the two upper chambers. The surgery could not be performed in Trinidad and Tobago and the family applied to the Children's Life Fund for financial assistance and they got it. The Chief Secretary at the time, Orville London, said that

“A new-born baby always reminds us of how important...life is.”

And that he was:

“...delighted to see...the surgery was successful and that the family...”—
could— “have a future with their son.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, fast forward to today, it is a horror story. In 2021, we have the death of a teenager while he was awaiting treatment and it raised questions about the operations of the Children’s Life Fund. Triston Ramlochan, and may he rest in peace, 14 years of age at the time, had acute lymphoblastic leukemia and died on April 14th. Ramlochan’s parents tried, made valiant efforts to raise the US \$90,000 for his treatment and they were unable to do so. They had GoFundMe’s. They had barbecues and they are not able to attain the funds, and unfortunately, the young man died. So, there are lingering concerns that this fund is not accessible to seriously ill children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in fact, we have Sen. Deyalsingh advocating that the Children’s Life Fund cover patients with beta thalassemia major, a major blood disorder that reduces the body’s production of hemoglobin and this disease is characterized by severe anemia requiring regular red blood cell transfusions. Some of the persons that have been denied access to the Children’s Life Fund are Shannen Luke, Terrance Chandoo and Jovi Mitchell; all who were told that they did not qualify because the condition is not life-threatening. And these parents have had to raise funds through barbecues and GoFundMe campaigns, exactly the situation the Children’s Life Fund was created to address. And my leader spoke about that this morning and the fact that when we return to power, the legislation would be modified and amended to make amendments to the allow persons such as this to access the Children’s Life Fund.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to move to the CDAP

programme, which the Minister of Health also alluded to. This programme was introduced in 2003 to help citizens with a range of chronic diseases to get access to costly prescription drugs free of charge. And CDAP was introduced also as a social support service to citizens in need. But in June of 2018, a decision by Cabinet made modifications to the CDAP and these modifications have had disastrous consequences to the CDAP programme.

New pharmacies are now required to pay a \$68,000 start-up fee. The average new pharmacist does not have that money to pay to start up a CDAP programme. Pharmacies before this did not have to pay this money. And when asked about this concern, Minister Deyalsingh said that there are enough pharmacies in CDAP. What this has done, it has prevented many rural pharmacies from getting onto this programme, defeating the objective of this initiative. Also, the pharmacy board head spoke of the Ministry buying the cheapest medication for CDAP. And he went on to say it concerned him about the issue of counterfeit drugs. He insisted that all medication in Trinidad and Tobago, including CDAP drugs, be tested. And he went on to say in Trinidad we have limited facilities to test these medications. He said the Ministry of Health is choosing the cheapest medication possible to put on CDAP.

Rahaman also said that there is an issue of a reliable supply of payment to the pharmacies. He went on to say, as a comparison, that the only way to get your road paved is to burn tyres. What he meant to say is that the only way to get payment is to stop supplies and then the ministry would hasten to pay. So, Minister, probably in the pharmacy that you were in, you should have asked the pharmacist if he got paid for the CDAP.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Moving on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on page 11, the Minister of Finance spoke about the upward trend in confirmed COVID-19 cases, but no significant increase in vaccine uptake. Mr. Deputy Speaker, he stated that he has not seen any significant increase in vaccine uptake, which remains at 51 per cent of our national population, and that the virus is losing its virulence.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, since the dismantling of health restrictions we have had 90 deaths in August of 2022 to COVID-19. We have had over 50 deaths in September of 2022 because of COVID-19, and I do not know the exact figure because they have stopped giving daily briefings. Well, the numbers are low if compared to the murder tally. Truth be told, this administration is comfortable with losing 50 persons a month to COVID-19. Currently, COVID-19 is killing almost no one under the age of 40 and hospitalization numbers are manageable. The death and hospitalization rates also remain low among older people who are boosted and in all of these groups, severe COVID-19 illness is concentrated among people who have significant medical problems. And what this means is that booster shots matter. So, I am going to booster shots now.

Boosters offer the biggest benefit in the reduction of severe illness among vulnerable patients. And for people who are more vulnerable to severe COVID-19, because of their age or a health condition, the best advice is to stay up-to-date with your booster shot.

During the last mid-year review, Minister Deyalsingh indicated that \$12 million was allocated for purchasing vaccines. Among them, he said, was Moderna's Bivalent vaccine, which has now been approved by the FDA and dozens of countries around the world. So, Minister have we made a pre-order of Moderna's Bivalent vaccines pending WHO approval? You spoke nothing about

this. Is the Minister saying that vaccinated elderly and vaccinated immunocompromised patients must take Sinopharm and Johnson & Johnson as the booster shot for the Omicron variant, which is now the dominant form of the coronavirus in Trinidad and Tobago? These vaccines were formulated against the original Wuhan strain and not against the now dominant and extremely contagious Omicron sub-variant BA.4 and BA.5.

In a recent study in Japan, COVID-19 herd immunity was near 90per cent, after the latest Omicron wave, but that protection was shown to diminish after a matter of months. And what that means is that COVID-19 is here to stay. It is endemic. And our elderly persons and immunocompromised must be boosted. We have consistent high daily cases and deaths from COVID-19, and our vaccinated citizens have no access to these reformulated shots unless they were to leave the country.

Currently, in Trinidad and Tobago, we only have access to the Sinopharm and Johnson & Johnson vaccines. All Pfizer vaccines have been expired many, many months ago. And as I told you just before, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has been limited in its use by the United States Food and Drug Administration. The FDA said in a statement that the change is being made because of the risk of a rare and dangerous clotting condition called thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome after receiving the vaccine. Healthy persons could die after taking this vaccine. And that is why it has been limited in the United States.

The Minister of Health also refused to state if he would order the antiviral drug, paxlovid, from Pfizer and used by President Biden when he contracted COVID-19. Clinical trials of this drug has shown that it reduces the risk of hospitalization and death by 88per cent within five days of starting symptoms in

unvaccinated persons. So, four out of five unvaccinated persons in Trinidad and Tobago could literally be alive today if we had this drug. At some point in time, paxlovid or its generics will enter Trinidad and Tobago, and the question will be asked: Why did we not acquire it earlier?

The CMO is on record as saying that a cost-benefit analysis would have to be done to determine the feasibility of purchasing these life-saving drugs and vaccines are available for the public to be vaccinated. But what if you do not want a vaccine? There are many persons who just do not want a vaccine. I move around in my constituency and many elderly persons, when you asked them if they are vaccinated, they say they do not want the vaccine. This drug would be able to save persons' lives. It would be able to reduce the strain on the hospital admissions.

Minister Deyalsingh, Pfizer has signed an agreement with 35 generic manufacturers in 12 different countries to provide paxlovid to low and middle-income countries. You can order it now. It will save four out of five unvaccinated persons as well as 100per cent of vaccinated persons who take it. What is the point of spending billions of dollars on hospital infrastructure to save lives, when you could just spend a fraction of the money to actually do so? Right? But then again, Mr.Deputy Speaker, it is just four people we are talking about here. Right?

Mr.Deputy Speaker, moving on, new hospitals. Mr.Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance as well as the Minister of Health indicated that citizens would have equitable access to quality healthcare through our modern health facilities. I would like to thank my political leader for the vision to plan, design, and build the Couva Hospital in one term in office—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—an institution integral to the recovery of thousands of citizens from COVID-19. I would like to thank her for her vision for starting the Arima and Point Fortin hospital, as well as the San Fernando Teaching Hospital.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Without the development of our country's healthcare infrastructure during the period of 2010 to 2015, we would have never been able to withstand the storm of COVID-19.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: I would like to remind the goodly Minister that the Arima hospital was commissioned by Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the partnership government on the 3rd of October, 2013. The then Arima Member of Parliament, Rodger Samuel, announced the project at a post-Cabinet press briefing that in a government-to-government agreement with China, the hospital would be built at a cost of \$1.6 billion. This was in the making after Kamla Persad-Bissessar held bilateral talks with the Chinese President Xi Jinping during his 2013 state visit to Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Point Fortin Hospital. The People's Partnership Government turned the sod to begin construction of the \$1.2 billion Point Fortin Hospital at Egypt Village, Point Fortin. The project was executed under a government-to-government arrangement between Trinidad and Tobago and Austria who were also involved in the construction of the San Fernando Teaching Hospital. In fact, the then Minister of Health, Fuad Khan, said he met no plans in place to build a new hospital in Point Fortin when he entered office in 2011. This is a UNC initiative. He also noted that the hospital was earmarked for construction after seeing the state of disrepair of the old Point Fortin Hospital.

Moving on to the Sangre Grande Hospital. In the 2019 budget speech, the Minister of Finance, Colm Imbert, stated that the new Sangre Grande Hospital would be built for \$850million. Minister Deyalsingh added that it would be built using the same design, the same contractor and the same model as the Point Fortin Hospital. I would like to ask the Minister of Health: What is the final cost of the Sangre Grande Hospital? Is it still \$850 million, Sir? Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister is on record as saying the Sangre Grande Hospital—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, you have just about four more minutes in your initial speaking time. You have an additional 10. You care to avail yourself of that?

Dr. R. Seecheran: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Right. The Minister is on record as saying the Sangre Grande Hospital will now cost taxpayers an estimated \$1billion, \$150million than originally planned. It gets even stranger with the Port of Spain General Hospital, Central Block, which was supposed to start on the 19th of May, 2019. The \$1 billion project was supposed to be completed through a public-private partnership with Shanghai Construction Group (Caribbean) Limited. In fact, in January of 2022, it was reported that SCG had served a termination notice on UDeCOTT and quit the billion-dollar project. It will now cost taxpayers at least \$110 million more and an additional two years to complete construction on the Port of Spain General Hospital, Central Block. I am running out of time, so I will find other things to talk about.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to move to my constituency quickly. The purpose of a national budget is to manage the affairs of a country and to improve

the lives of the citizens. And if so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this package is a colossal failure. Let me briefly examine this budget's direct impact on the people of Caroni East. Caroni East is not only the centre of the island of Trinidad, but it is also the heart and soul of the country.

It is an electoral community of ambitious, hard working nationals with rich arable lands of agro and light manufacturing.

6. 50 p.m.

Only a few years ago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, communities of Caroni East were relatively safe and secure. Today our quiet districts are killing fields. They are dumps for murder victims; they are open drug turfs and centres of human carnage. This is most evident in Kelly Village, a beautiful community with law-abiding citizens.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, during this administration's tenure Kelly Village has become the scene of some of the most horrific crimes committed to date. Almost every day there are gory murders, wild shootings, noisy drug parties, and other wanton acts of violence. There are so many brutal slayings that it is difficult to keep count. Victims are of all ages and of all groups of society. In short, Kelly Village is now one of the most murderous districts in Trinidad and Tobago. This Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government has turned Kelly Village into "Killing Village."

I have brought this serious matter to Parliament on several occasions and pleaded for increased police patrols, the construction of a police post, CCTV cameras and other measures. I have appealed for the reactivation of police youth groups and other creative solutions. Kelly Village, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a small community and law enforcement authorities have extensive resources and modern

resources. The Minister of National Security has offered explanations, excuses and guarantees. He has issued assurances, commitments, and undertakings. He has tossed around all sorts of high-sounding language in a weird accent that I could barely understand. But still, homicides take place. Killings have become as common as flooding in Kelly Village.

It is extremely disturbing that the people of Caroni East and specifically Kelly Village cannot look forward to reprieve from the horrible crime scourge. There is nothing in this budget that offers hope for Kelly Village and other crime affected communities in this country. So the people of Caroni East, pray for the best but expect the worst.

And moving on very quickly, I would like to state that I would like some help. I wrote to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries on October 2021, on behalf of the residents and farmers of Hercules Trace in Ravine Sable with regard to the structural integrity of that bridge, and for the farmers of Ravine Sable Main Road. Approximately 100 persons use this bridge daily and at a recent site visit upon seeing the condition of the bridge, I have developed a great concern for the vehicles that must traverse this bridge on a daily basis. The bridge is an old dilapidated wooden bridge with many rotting sections and no safety railing. The residents have indicated to me that the condition of the bridge is so bad, that garbage collection trucks can no longer cross and are unable to collect garbage for the residents. The bridge is also used by heavy machinery and farmers of the area.

I will also appeal to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries about the bridge located at Lalloo Trace, which I spoke about in the last budget, and the bridge has since fallen into the river and it needs a complete reconstruction. In August of 2021, due to heavy rain the resulting excessive water volume and water

pressure, the structural integrity of the bridge failed and it collapsed. It is now impassible to both pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

This bridge affects over 50 residents and over 20 farmers in this area who rely on it to transport their produce. These farmers have supplied produce to the NAMDEVCO National COVID-19 relief hampers, and I am asking for some help in the restoration of this bridge. Residents include pregnant women, elderly, as well as there is no street lighting towards this bridge.

I would also like to speak to the Minister of Education who I wrote on the 7th of April, 2022 concerning the inadequate conditions at the community centre in which the Longdenville Presbyterian School is now housed. Currently, 90 students are housed there temporarily. The original arrangement was for 60 students in 2017, but currently because this has been going on for over five years now, it includes Standard 4 and 5. There is inadequate space for the students with some classrooms being shared with up to three classes. Infants with 28 students share 400 square feet, Standard 1, 2, and 3, are in one room, 33 students in 544 square feet. Standard 4 with 21 students are in a 170-square-foot room. Standard 5 with eight students is in 160-square-foot room.

These small classroom sizes affect their ability to learn, and the rooms offer no distancing between the students, which prevents social distancing during a pandemic. This facility does not also include a quarantine room or a sick bay in the event that a student has flu like symptoms. Students also attend school via private bus so that should a student develop symptoms, there is nowhere to house the student.

The washroom facilities are also inadequate with just three for boys and three for girls. The washrooms are also used by the public who also use the

community centre. The school has two male cleaners and we are asking that there at least be one female cleaner for the benefit of the female students. And the locks on the washrooms also do not work. Parking space is also inadequate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, moving on. I thought the Minister of Health would have used this opportunity to speak on the international concern of monkey pox, which the World Health Organization has said is a public health emergency of international concern. He made no mention of if we would get monkey pox vaccines and I am very concerned about this seeing that carnival is coming up.

Currently there are over 64,000 cases in across 100 countries around the world. Borders are open and people are travelling freely as they were before COVID-19. Cases have been reported as close as the Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica and Venezuela. The US has been unable to control the spread of the virus, and I would have liked the Minister to give us an update when PAHO is giving us those vaccines. Minister Deyalsingh has given no timeline for the arrival of much needed vaccines. And this leaves healthcare workers such as myself, and the general public exposed. Our nation is unprepared and our vulnerabilities are enormous. Minister Deyalsingh, please, at some point state when and how many vaccines are to arrive in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: We must immediately expand testing capacity and educate Trinbagonians on how to stay safe.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would also like to speak very quickly about polio mellitus. The Minister also has not brought this to our attention. In the United States and the Pan-American Health Organization director, Dr. Carissa Etienne has said to ramp up our vaccination of polio. And she sounded this warning advising

that immunization is the only way to suppress polio. Currently, regionally the vaccination coverage is about 79 per cent, the lowest since 1994. And we would need over 95 per cent to have herd immunity in Trinidad and Tobago. And what happened during the last two years in COVID-19 many parents did not stay up to date with their children's vaccination status in regard to these viruses. And we have a lower vaccination rate right now.

I thought the Minister would have spent some time, you know, educating the public about what is happening with our polio mellitus situation. And in closing—how much more time do I have, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You have just about three minutes.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Thank you. And in closing, I would appeal to the Minister of Health to modernize the Dental Act. Just quickly, right now we have many, many, many illegal dentists practicing in Trinidad and Tobago. In fact, many from Venezuela and they are advertising openly on Instagram, on Facebook, and all these media. And the general public does not know who is a registered dentist and who is not a registered dentist. And many of these Venezuelan dentists are offering services at one third and one quarter the price of Trinidadian and Trinbagonian dentists. And we do not know the level of safety that they have in their offices, if they have an auto clean machine, if they are using gloves, if they are sterilizing the equipment. We know nothing about these dentists. So we are asking the Minister to please allow the modernization of the Dental Act to allow prosecution of non-registered persons performing dentistry, right.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Also, as it stands in law nothing prevents a person who is not a registered dentist from importing, gaining access to, and being in possession of

drugs, dental equipment, and other paraphernalia pertaining to dentistry. And we need a law to stop that. Right? There are too many quacks, too many illegal practitioners of dentistry in Trinidad and Tobago. So I make an appeal to you. With those few words, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute in this debate and thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for San Fernando East.

Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Brian Manning): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, so many of my colleagues on the other side seem to be conflicted, and how could they not be. They seek on a daily basis to destroy the very country that they claim they want to lead. Instead of building, all they do is seek to destroy and to obstruct.

Let me begin by dealing with some of the misinformation that we heard here today. I begin with the Member for Princes Town. The Member for Princes Town began by complaining—or he ended sorry, by complaining about the state of roads and drainage within his constituency. Let me remind the good Member from Princes Town that there is something called the Princes Town Regional Corporation which is managed by the UNC. Unfortunately, Mr. Deputy Speaker, parts of San Fernando East are managed by the Princes Town Regional Corporation. And I hope with local government reform that that can be changed, because constituents from San Fernando East in the areas that are managed by the PTRC constantly complain of not receiving any services from the Princes Town Regional Corporation. And I am talking about areas such as Corinth, parts of Ste. Madeleine and of course Tarodale. So I would direct the Member from Princes Town to please seek counsel and assistance from his good friends at the Princes

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Town Regional Corporation.

Next, we move on to my good friend the Member for Tabaquite. The Member for Tabaquite, you know, said with a straight face here today that Members on this side could not be trusted. Let me remind the hon. Member—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: —that the main reason why we are here and they are there is because this country refused to allow them to stay in office after 2015, because they could not be trusted. They were kicked out of office. You know what is strange, Mr. Deputy Speaker? They have a problem with my moving during the national anthem because of an emergency situation but they have no problem sitting in the same benches with a gentlemen charged with fraud. They have no problem with that. They have a problem with my pointing out glaring and obvious bias.

Mr. Indarsingh: 48(6), Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. B. Manning: I told no lies, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Charles: Wait, hold it, hold it. Yuh not in charge here.

Hon. B. Manning: Told no lies.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, no. First of all, just retract that last term. The last—

Hon. B. Manning: Sorry, I told no untruths.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And hold on, right. And secondly, and secondly, you stand by your earlier phrase in which the Standing Order raised by the Member?

Hon. B. Manning: What Standing Order is that, Sir?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Standing Order raised by the Member, you stand by what you—

Hon. B. Manning: Yes, I do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to 48(6), I also raise 48—no 49, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The sub judice matter.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, okay, okay. The statement made the sub judice aspect is with regard to because he did not call no name, with regard to?

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member said colleagues with in relation to a Member sitting on the Opposition Bench—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: And that is the point I am making, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, but again, again, I would like clarity from the Chair with regard to what aspect of sub judice. What aspect you are talking about? He said colleagues where? Just let me know please, guide me.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is in the public domain the gentleman is very aware in terms of what he is speaking about, and in that context I am asking you to ask him to withdraw under the relevant Standing Order.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member you care to proceed on the topic that you the aspect that you were speaking about with regard to the information provided?

Hon. B. Manning: Certainly, thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. B. Manning: Yes, I hope I can reclaim my time, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(6) and I will explain very briefly. The

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only time a Member can bring issues of character against any Member here in the Opposition or any Member at all is on a substantive Motion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: You cannot raise issue of character outside of that 48(6).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And again, for clarity from the Chair, the Member has not identified any particular individual so from on both sides, from your Chief Whip—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—hold on, from your Chief Whip's intervention and with regard to the Member I asked for clarity. No one is able to give me. He said he stands by what he is saying and we shall proceed.

Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, he could be referring to any one of us and he is still wrong.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. Moonilal: And he is still wrong. Mr. Deputy Speaker, he has said a Member here.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous Crosstalk*]

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have an issue, they have an issue.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member—

Dr. Moonilal: It is irrelevant whether it is one—

Hon. B. Manning: They have an issue, Mr. Deputy Speaker with my calling out—

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]—character of any Member without a substantive Motion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right, all of us cannot speak at the same time. And for the last time on this particular aspect, Member you stand by your comments?

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you. Yes, they seem to have an issue with my calling out blatant bias in a daily newspaper.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. B. Manning: But they have no issue, they have no issue following someone living in a pink palace that no career politician could ever afford, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is how skewed their values are. They have a problem with me, but they have no problem being a part of a party that formed perhaps the most corrupt government in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. It just shows who they are, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Member for Tabaquite—

Mr. Charles: I rise on Standing Order 48(4), the use of insulting language, offensive and insulting and I ask him to withdraw that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled, proceed.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I am not sure what they are so worried about. The Member from Tabaquite spoke about trust, but I guarantee you she would never leave a drink unattended around the Member from Couva North, but she is worried about Members on this side.

Mr. Hosein: 48—Mr. Deputy Speaker, Mr. Deputy Speaker 48(4), 48(6). **Hon.**

Members: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: So again, again, hon.—

Mr. Ratiram: 48(1) irrelevance, and 48(4), 48(6).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, I am waiting for silence so that I can refer to your colleague's comment. Again, hon. Members and for all other Members, let us get on with the debate. It is getting late; let us get on with the particular debate. In terms of your last statement, I think, retract and use—

Hon. B. Manning: I retract Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Make a better statement.

Hon. B. Manning: But the Member for Tabaquite knows that the reason that we are in Government is because the people of Trinidad and Tobago knows—

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, you asked the hon. Member to retract the statement and I think that he should be—he should do it.

Hon. B. Manning: I did retract.

Mr. Indarsingh: He should do it.

Hon. Members: Move on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, Member, Member, Chief Whip, Acting, for the records, I am sure he did. I am sure he did retract.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I am not sure what all the concern is about. And that is why the theme or my presentation today or contribution is called facts not feelings. Those on the other side seem to have a problem with facts. And we are here today to set the record straight.

Even the Member for Tabaquite knows that the alternative to the People's National Movement is chaos and confusion, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And that is why we are in office right now and they will spend the rest of their natural lives in Opposition. I move on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, other strange statements made today and I refer to the Member from Caroni East. He made, the Member made some comments about Pfizer's Paxlovid drug that I would like to straighten out. Pfizer's plan and I have an article here:

“Pfizer’s Paxlovid Goes Generic in 95 Countries”

Critics say:

“Too Little, Too Late”

“A Medicines Patent Pool (MPP) announcement Thursday that it has signed agreements with 35 companies to manufacture generic versions of Pfizer’s life-saving COVID-19 Paxlovid treatment for distribution in 95 low-and middle-income countries came under fire almost immediately from medicines access groups as too little, too late.

However, activists quickly slammed with the new accord – saying that it would take up many months to actually set up the generic production lines of the game-changing oral drug, which in clinical trials, reduced COVID mortality by 90% among high risk groups.”

And therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the drugs are not available in Trinidad and Tobago because they have not been created yet for us. So I have set the records straight on that one. Because I know the hon. Member would not want to misinform the national community.

Also, I would like to inform the hon. Member that PAHO has not yet given a timeline for the monkey pox vaccines. So it is not that this Government has not accessed the vaccines, it is also again they are not available yet, but will be soon. Also, the Dental Health Bill right now is currently before the LRC and will eventually come to this august Chamber. Thank you.

Let me move on now to deal with some of the comments made by the Opposition Leader today. And the Opposition Leader promptly tried to rewrite history and also rewrite reality with her presentation today. She spoke of broken promises; spoke about the People's National Movement not keeping its promises. This very same Opposition Leader came here today saying that she would not bore and meander the public with a long response to the budget, and then promptly

proceeded to break her own promise. That is how those on the other side operate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As soon as the promise was even made by the Opposition Leader, it was promptly broken. And that is why the public just cannot trust those on the other side.

The Opposition Leader spoke about outstanding payments. In just two organizations, two state enterprises, and I will use maybe well I will say that several organizations have outstanding payments because matters are before the courts. Because during the People's Partnership and UNC's time in office, there was such rampant corruption, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that many matters are still before the courts today, and I only used two, EFCL and EMBD, as an example where there are approximately \$5 billion in outstanding statements.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence of any tendering process or any supporting documents, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 49. I believe the Member admitted the matters are before court and he is going into evidential matters.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, right so I give you a little leeway but—

Hon. B. Manning: No problem.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: —move on to another aspect.

Hon. B. Manning: Also, the Opposition Member attempted desperately today to rewrite history in terms of our crime statistics. The Member made it seem as if crime was under control while they were in office but as soon as they left, there was a spike in crime. But that is understandable, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because as we all know, criminals never bite the hand that feeds them. And while those on the other side were in office, we had state-sponsored crime and criminals in this country. We had LifeSport, we had gangs accessing government contracts and so

on and so on.

Mr. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6) please.

Hon. B. Manning: I made a statement of fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you. Also, the Opposition Leader attempted to rewrite the economic history of Trinidad and Tobago. And let me set the record straight. The Opposition Leader made it seem again, that it was all roses and sunshine from 2010-2015 and then all of a sudden as soon as governments changed the economy collapsed. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As far back as 2008—and I will give the Opposition Leader a short economics lesson because clearly it is needed—we had global financial crisis. That caused the world economy to collapse and with it energy prices. In 2009 Trinidad and Tobago had a deficit budget, which means a budget that was partially funded by debt. Those deficit budgets continued, Mr. Deputy Speaker, right into the term of the UNC Government. And what occurred between 2014 and 2016 is on record as part of economic history as one of the worst downturns of energy prices in the history of the world.

I will quote for you from the World Bank's web page:

“Between mid-2014 and early 2016, the global economy faced one of the largest oil price declines in modern history. The 70 percent price drop during that period was one of the three biggest declines since World War II, and the longest lasting since the supply-driven collapse of 1986.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, but that of course did not prevent those on the other side in 2014 from presenting the single largest budget in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, much of it borrowed money, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Because of the

irresponsibility by those on the other side with our economy while they were in office, we have been digging ourselves out of that hole ever since. So do not fall for the boldface misrepresentations by those on the other side making it seem that they left an economy that was all rosy. That is not possible and is simply is not true.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: We have been working diligently, this Government, to stabilize the economy of Trinidad and Tobago and to set the stage for economic growth going forward, in spite of the various crisis that we have faced and that is exactly what we have done.

What this budget says unequivocally, is that Trinidad and Tobago is back in business. After several years of severe hardship, this Government has set the stage for growth and economic expansion with a responsible and almost balanced budget.

Let me begin by discussing the fuel subsidy. A subsidy is defined as a sum of money granted by the State or a public body to help an industry or business keep the price of a commodity or service low. Let me give you a story Mr. Deputy Speaker. Our habits have changed here in Trinidad and Tobago dramatically over time. When I was growing up it was a family of four and we had one car. There was a lady in Marabella called Ms. Helen. Okay.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. B. Manning: Ms. Helen drove a bread van as they called it, and she would collect all of the neighborhood children and take them to San Fernando. I guess you would call that today carpooling. But that is what persons did in the past. Today, because of the introduction of cheap motor vehicles and also cheap fuel, we

have abundance of cars on the roads of Trinidad and Tobago and our habits have changed dramatically. A family of four today may have four cars.

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1) the relevance of his speech. Is he speaking about the car that was sold to the former government Member?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is okay, Member. Member, thank you. Overruled.

Hon. B. Manning: Yes. So a family of four may easily have four motor vehicles because several individuals may own more than one.

In Trinidad and Tobago sometimes I think we believe that we can have it both ways and we cannot. You cannot have cheap motor vehicles, cheap fuel, and then have no traffic, no pollution, and no drain on our foreign exchange. It just does not work like that. Importing motor vehicles is one of the largest drains on our foreign exchange. We have to take a long look at ourselves and our habits and decide how we are going to adjust to a changing situation.

Now, subsidies especially the fuel subsidy were designed and meant for poverty alleviation. The problem with the fuel subsidy is that it is an inefficient means of alleviating poverty, and in many cases would benefit the wealthy more than it will benefit the poor in Trinidad and Tobago. And I will give you an example. Say if you have a 50 per cent subsidy on fuel, if you are driving a motor vehicle that cost you \$100 to fill the tank that means that the State is paying a 50 per cent subsidy on your fuel. If you are driving a motor vehicle, a luxury vehicle perhaps, and it costs \$500 to fill the tank, the State would be paying \$250 on your behalf. And that is why a fuel subsidy is wholly inefficient when it comes to poverty alleviation, and that is one of the major reasons why it is so wasteful. We are literally burning money up in smoke; it is going up in smoke, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

7.20 p.m.

It benefits the wealthy far more than it does the poor. And that is why we have decided to take spending away from this inefficient fuel subsidy and direct or funnel those funds into more targeted programmes that will benefit the poor in this country. It also acts as a disincentive for the conservation of fuel. It promotes traffic and pollution and is a drain on our foreign exchange. Regional comparisons still, after all of that, even a partial repeal of the subsidy, Trinidad and Tobago still has the lowest fuel prices in the region. Mr. Deputy Speaker, those are facts, not feelings. At the same time, we maintain the price of LPG, which is meant to protect the poor, and you just have to look up and down this region. The price of LPG in other Caricom countries can easily be five times what it is in Trinidad and Tobago. So we are setting the stage for development while protecting the poor and vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago. That is called responsible governance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is my view, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the subsidy on premium fuel should be completely removed. Anyone driving a vehicle that requires premium fuel is driving a luxury vehicle and should have no right to a fuel subsidy designed for poverty alleviation. And that includes me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There should be no subsidy on premium fuel. In other words, these targeted programmes—we are placing money in the pockets of the poor in this country. And let me mention to your list several of the programmes in which wasteful taxpayers' money which would have been spent on a subsidy will be spent to alleviate poverty in Trinidad Tobago. The increased personal tax allowance up to \$7,500; an increase in VAT registration threshold from 500,000 to 600,000; increased subsidy on the very successful Housing and Village Improvement Programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

This has been extremely beneficial to the people of San Fernando East and has provided homes for persons who in some cases did not know how they were going to ever find a home for themselves. The establishment of a school-to-work apprenticeship allowance. This is an extension of the OJT programme. It incentivizes employers to give our young people an opportunity to learn at their own pace.

Social grants totalling \$5.4 billion. Senior citizens pension grants of up to 4.3 billion. Food support, food cards, school lunches, \$175 million. Disability grant, \$630 million. Social assistance grant \$355 million. Mr. Deputy Speaker, even with the partial removal of the fuel subsidy, Trinidad and Tobago remains the country with the single lowest cost of living in the entire region, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Facts, not feelings. On top of that, due to reduced spending on a wasteful fuel subsidy—a wasteful and inequitable fuel subsidy 13,000 low-income customers of both WASA and T&TEC will receive water and electricity subsidies at an estimated cost of \$3.75 million in 2023. And we have also set aside \$450 million for much needed road paving throughout the country. As the Prime Minister and Minister of Finance have explained publicly, much of the funds that were supposed to be for road paving were directed towards our COVID fight. And now that this budget will be passed, we have ensured that there is enough funding so that roads all over Trinidad and Tobago will be repaired.

On top of even that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we still enjoy and you know people like to talk on the other side. They like to misrepresent the facts and talk about cost of living. With all that we have done thus far, we also on top of that, still enjoy subsidized electricity, subsidized water. We have subsidized inter-island ferry travel, subsidized air bridge, free drugs for chronic illness, free

transportation for senior citizens and students, subsidized tertiary education, subsidized health care, subsidized homes, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Every HDC home is subsidized by the state with taxpayers' funds. We even have subsidized mortgages for persons to access those homes and other first-time homeowners. That is a 2 per cent mortgage at the TTMF which cannot be found anywhere else because it is subsidized by the State. Subsidized LPG and the list goes on and on and on. Trinidad and Tobago has the absolute lowest cost of living in all of Caricom, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Facts, not feelings.

Unfortunately, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a lot of these facts have been skewed and obfuscated by several economic masqueraders out there in the media. Several of them seem to have found a home at the University of the West Indies speaking forums, and a particular business desk at a media house. But I am here today to expose some of these masqueraders. Yes, we have economic voices in the public domain masquerading as independent when they are nothing more than de facto Members of the Opposition, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Many seem to have found a home at the University of the West Indies, as I said earlier on, their speaking forums. We have one such example as one masquerading, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2020 stated with such authoritative brio, without qualification, no ceteris paribus, no—with all things remaining the same, as if it came from the good Lord Himself on Mount Sinai, that by the year 2022 Trinidad and Tobago will run out of foreign currency. That is what this person said.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this masquerader with a straight face predicted a current account deficit and the balance of payments crisis by 2022. Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me present to you the reality of the situation. And I will quote from the budget document:

“Our premier record as a country, which has never defaulted on its public debt remains intact, in contrast to other countries in the region who have found it impossible to honour their debts over the years.”

Our current account:

“The current account of the balance of payments is anticipated to record a surplus of more than \$4 billion in 2022.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, how could a professional make such a poor judgment trying to predict the future arrogating powers unto herself that she clearly did not have attempting to predict what our economy will look like years down the road? How could they have gotten it so wrong?

I move on to our net foreign reserves. Our net official foreign reserves, as of August 2022, stood at US\$6.8 billion, representing 8.5 months of import cover well above the international benchmark of three months. So this is the reality. While this masquerader is talking about current account and reserves crisis, and running out of foreign exchange, we are not even close, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Moving on to the HSF, as a result of higher than expected oil and gas prices, we have deposited US\$163 million into the HSF for stabilization fund for intergenerational benefit that acts as another buffer and we have the ability to stabilize our fiscal spending in case of any kind of oil price shock internationally, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We also have inflows of foreign exchange from the oil and gas sector for the first eight months of calendar 2022, which were US\$1.9 billion or 1.33 billion more than the same period in 2021. Mr. Deputy Speaker, those are facts, not feelings. But I ask again, how could a supposed professional and economic expert have embarrassed themselves so thoroughly by getting it so wrong? As if marketing Bitcoin throughout the entire region was not embarrassing

enough, they make this prediction that is proven to be unsubstantiated, and completely false, Mr. Deputy Speaker, false. But there is a sinister plan here, but I will get to that, in due course, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Why should we ever trust the opinion of this supposed that professional ever again? I have no idea why anyone else would.

There is another masquerader, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who has been constantly promoting his policies of pain. Even in the middle of the COVID crisis, this callous gentleman, while people were losing their lives and livelihoods, demanded a dreaded devaluation of our currency, and a dramatic slashing of our public service workforce; maybe up to 10 to 15 per cent of our public service in the middle of a global pandemic.

Mr. Ratiram: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*] the last 15 minutes, did he speak before us in the debate?

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not know why the member for Oropouche East seems so bothered today. We are moving on. Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you all know, this Government has committed itself to not devaluing our currency because we understand the kind of pain that a devaluation will cause on the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We are but a small island and a lot of what it is we consume is imported. A devaluation would immediately dramatically increase the cost of living for every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is something that this Government has committed itself to not doing.

Mr. Ratiram: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I crave your protection please. It is a bit noisy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence please, silence.

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, these recommendations can only be considered as cruel, outdated and uncaring economic policy. These are called austerity measures and they have been proven to be without merit. Since this gentleman was kicked off of an economic advisory committee he has embarked on a campaign of misinformation, because it is all about him being right, and everyone else being wrong. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we at the Ministry of Finance will not be deterred by this misinformation, and we will continue to do what we believe is fiscally responsible and to the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: We have yet another masquerader, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who I actually do have a level of respect for.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Hon. B. Manning: This gentleman recently came up with a list that ranked Trinidad and Tobago as the 15th worst performing economy in the world. Madam Speaker, we give ourselves far too much credit. When asked exactly where this list came from, the gentleman stated that it was calculated by himself using IMF figures. Only one problem, we have regular meetings—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, sorry, Madam Speaker, 48(1) the relevance of speaking about a fictitious character without identifying your source or who this fictitious character is—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Ratiram:—what is the relevance of speaking of fictitious characters?

Hon. Member: Provide your source.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Ratiram: Say who is your source.

Hon. Member: Provide your source.

Mr. Ratiram: Identify what it is you are speaking about.

Hon. Member: We do not know who you are speaking about.

Madam Speaker: Member, please continue.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you so much, Madam Speaker. I think the Member for Couva North is still concerned about unattended drinks, but let us move on. Trinidad and Tobago—they ranked Trinidad and Tobago 15th worst performing—

Mr. Ratiram: 48(6) please.

Hon. B. Manning: [*Laughs*]

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, 48(6).

Hon. B. Manning: [*Laughs*]

Mr. Ratiram: What drinks he is referring to for Couva North? I am not—

Hon. B. Manning: [*Laughs*] Thank you so much.

Mr. Ratiram: You are mistaking me for Tourism?

Hon. Members: [*Laughs*]

Mr. Ratiram: He is mistaking me for Tourism.

Hon. B. Manning: Trinidad and Tobago, this list calculated by this gentleman ranked Trinidad and Tobago as the 15th worst performing economy in the world, supposedly using IMF figures. Only one problem, we have regular meetings with the IMF and the IMF has stated unequivocally that this calculation, and this ranking, makes absolutely no sense and they do not agree with it. In other words,

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Madam Speaker, the IMF had said that “your maths not mathsing so you better maths again”. So I hope my good friend is listening. Another masquerader—final—from the Tobago Business Chamber earlier this week made a statement that stated that:

This budget seemed like the Government did not have a plan.

How can that be, Madam Speaker? Madam Speaker, national budgets are produced by the Ministry of Finance in conjunction with the Ministry of Planning and Development, along with other stakeholders—that is the Ministry of Planning and Development. This is to ensure that Government’s fiscal measures are keeping with our developmental goals as stated in the *Vision 2030* and Roadmap to Recovery documents, both of which are readily available online. What is confusing is that the Tobago Business Chamber was one of the organizations that contributed to the development of both of these documents. So I do not know how this gentleman attached to the Chamber could have made a statement that it seemed like we have no plan, where he was part or his organization was part of developing said plan. But, Madam Speaker, let me tell you what the sinister goal of these masqueraders in the public domain, giving economic advice that I can only describe as misinformation is.

Madam Speaker, this is not random old talk by people and professionals who should know better, but a concerted effort to effect a sinister scheme. These masqueraders understand just how important investor sentiment is to protecting the exchange rate of this country. If investors do not believe in the Trinidad and Tobago economy, they will stop spending and begin hoarding foreign exchange. What they are determined to do, Madam Speaker, is to force a currency devaluation, which would bring hardship to all but they simply do not care.

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Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, just on a point of clarification, the Member continues to refer to masqueraders and so on. In an effort to have some clarity, because if colleagues and responding wants to set the record straight, we would want to be in a position to whom the Member is referring to.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Hosein: What is the source?

Madam Speaker: Could you point to the Standing Order you are referring to?

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, 48(1) in terms of the relevance of his speech.

Madam Speaker: All right, so I overruled, continue.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you so much, Madam Speaker. They seem so excitable today, I do not know what it is. What they are determined to do, Madam Speaker, is force a currency devaluation which will bring hardship to all of this country, but they do not care as long as their need—their nests, sorry, are feathered. They could not care about anyone else in Trinidad and Tobago. And that is when I say those on the other side are conflicted because they seek to destroy the very country they claim they want to lead.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: We are not the masquerade.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, 48(6) and 48(4) please.

Mr. Tancoo: 48(6) Madam Speaker, 48(6)

Mr. Hosein: 48(4).

Mr. Tancoo: He is imputing improper motives against Members on this side of trying to destroy the country. That is absolutely untrue. He should retract that.

Madam Speaker: Overruled.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, thank you because I spoke facts, not feelings. Moving along. This Government has committed itself to not devaluing our currency in an effort to protect the poor, and we will not do so, thank you.

Moving on, Madam Speaker, to the sister aisle of Tobago. The Opposition Leader today, one of her criticisms is that it seemed like this Government was seeking to punish Tobago. But Madam Speaker, of course, once again, the facts will reveal that that is completely untrue.

We have had at the Ministry of Finance several meetings with the newly appointed Chief Secretary and other representatives of the THA. The population should take note that it is this PNM Government that has tried and attempted on several occasions to grant further autonomy to the people of Tobago, but have been blocked and obstructed from doing so by this obstructionist Opposition. The Tobago allocation in 2022, Madam Speaker, we allocated \$2.4 billion to the THA. For 2023, we allocated \$2.5 billion, approximately 4.3 per cent of the total national budget. So how can it be said that we are attempting to punish Tobago? The facts simply do not support that statement. The Tobago tourism sector is poised to expand, with new hotel investments aiming to contribute to meet a shortfall of 2,500 rooms. Private sector investment in hotels, such as the proposed new Marriott Hotel at Rocky Point, the Manta Lodge and Sanctuary Resort, proposed new marina facility in south-west Tobago. Now let me explain about this marina facility in Tobago, Madam Speaker, and I know those on the other side, have a very slim grasp of economics so I will try to assist them.

When it comes to diversification and developing projects that actually have huge impact in our economy, any country or any person or business has to compete along its competitive advantages. I like to equate it to the Shaquille O'Neal

playing basketball. Shaquille O'Neal is seven feet, 300 pounds so, he plays close to the basket. Going away from your competitive advantages is like asking Shaquille O'Neal to shoot threes. It makes no sense. Tobago's major advantage over its Caricom neighbours is one, its green, clean and serene one, but there are other islands that are the same. Its major advantage over its Caricom neighbours with whom they have to compete for tourist dollars is its location outside of the hurricane belt.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have five more minutes remaining of speaking time—

Hon. B. Manning: Uh-hmm.

Madam Speaker: —you may request a further 10 minutes if you so desire.

Hon. B. Manning: I will take it Ma'am, thank you so much.

Madam Speaker: Okay, please proceed.

Hon. B. Manning: Competitive Advantage. I would also like to recommend to Tobago that Tobago would be a prime location for medical tourism. Medical Tourism is a multi-trillion dollar business and is a non-cyclical business. It is one that Tobago should take a very strong look at because its competitive advantages plus the access to medical professionals at Mt. Hope give Tobago an opportunity to lead the entire region in that industry. I will speak more on that at another point. At the same time, Madam Speaker, this Government also supplied tremendous support during the COVID crisis to Tobago, and I will give you a list of exactly some of the things that were provided during the COVID pandemic to Tobago. We offered \$50 million to the Tobago hospitality and tourism sector support programme to provide working capital to the tourism sector, 30 million for farmland development, 50 million for this Tobago hotel industry for financial grant

support and to facilitate maintenance and upgrade works via the Tobago tourism accommodation relief and 4 million tourism COVID relief grant allocated to render greater support to the ancillary service providers in the industry. Madam Speaker, clearly we have done all we can to support Tobago and there is no such thing as this Government trying to punish Tobago anyway, as alluded to by the Opposition Leader.

Other sources of funding for projects in Tobago would come from various Ministries, including state agencies, we have Works and Transport, Tourism, Social Development, Local Government, all to the tune of up to \$731.5 million. Tobago also has access to \$135 million in loan financing for development projects. Also, 100 million loan financing from CAF for coastal protection works in Tobago. The overall allocation for expenditure in Tobago for 2023 is in the region—exceeds over \$3 billion, Madam Speaker. Those are facts, not feelings.

Moving on to diversification, Madam Speaker, and I believe I heard the Opposition Leader rattle off a bunch of archaic ideas and projects that made it seem as if the Opposition Leader does not realize that we entering a digital age and it is time to step up. A lot of the projects that were mentioned today by the Opposition Leader are completely archaic and out of step with reality. So, referring to the diversification in the energy sector, I think there were parts of this that were missed by the general public so I shall assist. One really important project, Madam Speaker, the methanol to polyolefin project by the Alkene Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago (ADCOTT), this project, with expected overall capital expenditure of US\$1.5 billion, that is, foreign direct investment in Trinidad and Tobago, aims to establish facilities to produce polyethylene and polypropylene resins. Madam Speaker, polyethylene is the widest used plastic in the world. It is

high-density polyethylene, low-density polyethylene. Polypropylene is a clear plastic, both are used for packaging, both are extremely important.

Next, we have the aluminum ingot processing project. This is intended to create a new energy-based manufacturing industry without significant gas requirements. Products would include electrical cables and cold rolled sheets made from aluminium. Capital expenditure on this project would be approximately US\$685 US million. Madam Speaker, what we are doing here is very extremely forward thinking. The foundation of the modern industrial world is built on iron, steel, plastics and aluminium. Trinidad and Tobago is already the capital of manufacturing in the entire region. With access to these base materials, we can produce a manufacturing industry here in Trinidad Tobago, that can, one, employ thousands of people and generate billions of dollars in foreign exchange. And that is exactly what this forward-thinking PNM Government is doing and ignoring the archaic ideas that have come from the other side.

Madam Speaker, I wanted to really say some more about the NIB but I know I am pressed for time. The—as you would know, government has been moving to move the retirement age to the age of 65. So let me explain of how exactly that works. We have an NIB fund. We have approximately \$31 billion, which is the single largest fund in the entire region. How it works is that contributions are made to the fund, and then along with returns on investments of the fund, are used to pay out benefits. The challenge that the world is seeing is that we have an ageing and shrinking population. Because of that contributions are shrinking so, we have several choices. One, we can increase contributions, which this Government has committed to not doing. We would be taking more money out of the pockets of the people of this country. Or, we can reduce benefits, which is also

something that we will not do. So Madam Speaker, we are forced to increase the workforce. Unfortunately, in Trinidad and Tobago and in much of the region, our birth rate has fallen to a point where it is less than two. I believe it is around 1.75 or 73 at this point. It is less than two so we are not even replacing ourselves and this has caused a challenge to our NIS fund and this is why changes have to be made. It was not some of the crazy ideas offered by the Opposition Leader earlier and I have no idea where the Opposition Leader would have gotten those ideas from. Many have welcomed this proposition, Madam Speaker, in terms of being able to work a bit longer. It gives an opportunity, one, to pay off debts and also to increase savings before retirement.

Madam Speaker, as I conclude, I want to say that this budget states unequivocally that Trinidad and Tobago is back in business after coming through some extremely trying and difficult times. We have set the stage for this economy for a take-off that we have been predicting for several years. I noticed during the budget presentation several Members on other side when they heard the predicted energy prices for the next few years of \$90 plus per barrel, and \$6 per MMBtu of gas they went dead quiet and Madam Speaker, they understand why. If energy prices stay at that level, they know that they will be enjoying 15 unbroken years in Opposition, because this Government will absolutely provide for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We would grow this economy and we would do so by protecting the poor of Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

7.50 p.m.

Mr. Devendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker for recognizing me to participate in this debate, and to try to bring some sanity back into this conversation about the lives and future of Trinidad and Tobago. **Hon.**

Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, I want to break with tradition a little bit, largely because I just listened to 55 minutes, Madam Speaker, of an explanation and a justification as to why this country is in the crisis that it is in, because we have a Minister in the Ministry of Finance, who does not have a clue about finance, does not have a clue about what he is talking about, Madam Speaker, not a clue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: In fact, listening to this hon. Minister was a painful exercise, a painful exercise, Madam Speaker, because he was talking all over the place. This Minister was not sure whether he was a Member of Parliament for Tobago. He was talking about Tobago, he was talking everything else except finance, Madam Speaker. Everything else except finance.

Hon. Member: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Gentleman, Sir, you have had your opportunity, allow me to have mine now, please.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, but that is not the worst part of this thing. The worst part today that I heard from the Minister in the Ministry of Finance is when he listed out a series of subsidies, as if the Government was doing this tremendous favour to the population, and then he crossed a line, Madam Speaker, because he sent a signal and you could tell from his colleagues, his own colleague, that they were not sure that this was a policy position that he stated, where he said, Madam Speaker, that it is his view—and I want the Minister of Finance, when he is wrapping up, to advise whether this is the Ministry of Finance's view, whether this is this Government's view that there should be no subsidy on premium fuel. There

should be no subsidy, because the signal that this Minister is sending on behalf of his Government—

Madam Speaker: And maybe it is because it is late my hearing might becoming a bit impaired, so I would ask you all please to control the conversation, the crosstalk, so that I can hear the contribution. Continue Member for Oropouche West.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this Minister is also signalling what I believe to be the Government's clear intention to remove all these subsidies, all these subsidies that he is talking about that he begrudgingly is giving to citizens, these subsidies, Madam Speaker, removing subsidies, left right and centre. Madam Speaker, this very said Minister also used the parliamentary privilege of standing here and attacking individuals.

Mr. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, 48(6). The Member of Parliament for San Fernando East was clear to state that it was his personal opinion.

Madam Speaker: Okay.

Mr. de Nobriga: The Member there is saying it is a—

Madam Speaker: Okay. All right. I overrule, please continue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Just for clarification, Madam Speaker, when the Member of Parliament, a Minister in the Ministry of Finance, stands in this House, he does not have a personal view, he is expressing the view of the Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: That is the Government's view.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Now, if the Minister in the Ministry of Finance—if the Minister of Finance wants to disavow himself, if he wants to disavow that, that is up to them. But the Minister today spoke as the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, and his statement clearly signals to the population that this fuel price increase that we are experiencing here is not yet finished. I move on, Madam Speaker.

The Minister also used his parliamentary privilege, he stands there in this honourable House and attacks persons who are not in this House casting aspersions left, right and centre, but is too coward to call the names of the people he is “assassing”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: That character assassination, it is very unfortunate, Madam Speaker. It is very unfortunate that an adult, a person involved in politics, at this level, would stoop so low as to attack people’s character. Madam Speaker, the Minister also suggested, having listened to the hon. Leader of the Opposition before, that she presented a series of archaic plans, a series of archaic plans. Madam Speaker, he then tried to present one of his own, but tell me, Madam Speaker, whether these are archaic plans:

- a biotechnology manufacturing corridor;
- a digital innovation park;
- a Trinidad creative centre;
- an energy logistic hub;
- solar tech renewable park; and
- the south-west peninsula economic zone.

Those are not archaic, Madam Speaker. Those are projects that are feasible and practical, but the Minister does not know that, because it is above his intellectual

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capacity, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, there is much more I could say about this contribution by this hon. Minister, including the fact that he tried to rewrite history, including the fact that he admitted that when the UNC came into Government as part of the People's Partnership, they found an economy that was collapsing, but he chose to leave out certain parts, just like his Minister of Finance, which I will come to just now, Madam Speaker. He chose to leave out specific parts, because while the economy is falling, based on international prices falling, Madam Speaker, the Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration was still able to grow the economy by more than 20 per cent and that is a fact.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: They were still able to increase and make submissions and provisions to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and that is a fact. They were still able to employ 55,000 new jobs, create 55,000 new jobs. That is a fact.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: That, Madam Speaker, is what the Minister needs to compare with what is happening today.

Madam Speaker, allow me a few minutes to calm down, Madam Speaker, and I want to begin to put this back into perspective where we have lost it, because of the contribution of the Member on the other side. Madam Speaker, I want to congratulate the hon. Leader of the Opposition for such an intelligent comprehensive—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—and people-centred response to what was, in fact, a most

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disappointing budget presentation by the hon. Minister of Finance. I also want to congratulate my colleagues who have spoken before and my other colleagues who will speak after me, in raising the concerns and recommendations they have for how this country should be dealt with going forward. You see, Madam Speaker, we on this side, as patriotic citizens of this country, know that we must hold this Government to account otherwise it would be chaos, mayhem, corruption and mismanagement.

Madam Speaker: I would ask you to withdraw the word “corruption”. You could use the other one. Okay?

Mr. D. Tancoo: It will be chaos, mismanagement and wanton wastage.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, another one of the multiple misconceptions raised by colleagues on the opposite side is something I want to correct today, hopefully for the last time, because it forms an integral part of a lot of what the Government likes to tell the population of this country. Let me be very clear, Madam Speaker, that there is no such thing as government revenue separate and aside from taxpayers’ revenue. Every red cent collected by this Minister of Finance and by this Government from taxes, grants, loans, sales of assets, rents, every red cent belongs to the taxpayers of this country. That is not PNM money.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: That is not the Member for Diego Martin North/East’s money, that is not the Prime Minister’s money. That money belongs to citizens of this country. So this narrative that the Government has been using that the State must share the burden equally, it is all taxpayers’ money and it is all money being spent that should have been spent on the citizens of this country, because the wealth of

Trinidad and Tobago does not belong to the PNM, it belongs to taxpaying citizens.

Madam Speaker, this budget is a crime against the people. Allow me to explain, Madam Speaker. If you listen carefully to the reactions of members of the public, you would be clear, Madam Speaker, that members of the public have rejected this budget for what it is. It is an abuse of office, Madam Speaker. You see, Madam Speaker, a government is supposed to use the resources of the State for the improvement of the substance and quality of the lives of citizens. So when you have a Minister coming here and the decisions that he is taking with regard to paying moneys out that is taxpayers' money, and instead of making their lives better, he is making their lives worse, Madam Speaker, that is an abuse. That is an unacceptable abuse. And if you listen to the words of the people, Madam Speaker and the commentaries that have been raised by citizens outside, you know that this is not a Government of the people, for the people or by the people.

Madam Speaker, there are several instances where Ministers in the recent past have displayed their own angst against citizens, but this Government today, on Monday, I think put the nail in the coffin, Madam Speaker. This Government, these Ministers of Government, are so far removed, Madam Speaker, from the realities of the day-to-day crises facing citizens of this country that it is worrisome, and it is worrisome because these are the same Ministers that are making expenditure decisions for over \$400 billion in the last seven years and another 57.7 billion on this budget.

Due to time constraints, Madam Speaker, I want to focus on only one of those issues, the removal of the subsidy on fuel. I think the entire country remembers the sickening sound of the Minister of Finance laughing as they raised the price of fuel, snickering that citizens had not rioted yet. And last Monday, I

saw the same lack of concern, the same angst against the population when every Member of Government thumped their desks, gave each other high-fives, celebrating the fact that the Minister of Finance announced that citizens were immediately going to have to pay between 15 per cent more for premium and 14 per cent more for super gasoline. This, by the way, is the same Minister of Finance, Madam Speaker, who, when he was in Opposition, was completely against the increase in the price of fuel, but when he had the opportunity, Madam Speaker, he jumped to raise the price of fuel not once, not twice, not three times, not four times. I believe, Madam Speaker, this is the fifth or sixth time, and I honestly believe, given the comments made by the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, that it is not finished yet. They are going to come again and again and again and again until the subsidy, until the protection that citizens have, based on their own money, is removed by this uncaring heartless Government.

The Minister raised the price of super by 158 per cent in its seven years. He raised the price of premium from \$5.75 to \$7.75 per litre over the last seven years. He raised the price of diesel, Madam Speaker, by 227 per cent over seven years, Madam Speaker. And while he pushes fuel prices up, this is the same Minister of Finance who is offering public servants a trickle, 4 per cent, 4 per cent over six years.

Madam Speaker, this Minister has also publicly stated—the Minister of Finance that is—that he has received over \$8 billion more in revenues in fiscal 2022 than he expected and, as a result of the continued energy boom going into 2023, he expects to get even more revenue, Madam Speaker. But, you know, like the rest of the world, even this Minister knows that this energy boom is temporary. It is temporary, Madam Speaker. So, what should have been done is—a caring

Government would have used some of that saving, some of the additional income that he got that he did not budget for to rally citizens through, to protect citizens from the punishment of higher energy prices that they are vesting onto the population, especially, Madam Speaker, given the hardships that citizens are now starting to emerge from. Especially given the hardship that this Government is also going to vest upon them through property tax, through increased energy prices, through increased WASA rates and T&TEC rates. Especially since the Minister knows that their spending power, the disposable income of citizens, have fallen drastically, Madam Speaker. What a caring Government should do to assist the citizens, subsidize the citizens, so that we—not just we, Madam Speaker, all citizens, do not have to go through the trauma of facing higher prices and the run-off effect and the multiplier effect of that of higher fuel prices on everything else. Instead, this callous PNM regime throws the average citizens, hardworking citizens, under the bus at a point in time when their disposal income is probably the lowest thanks to the measures of this Government. Madam Speaker, it is obvious that once you increase the price of fuel, the price of everything else, every other goods and service that have a transportation component will increase and that is literally every single good and service, Madam Speaker.

The Minister came, this Minister repeated it, the hon. Minister before me, who spoke before me, that there is a proposal to give 175,000 persons a one-off grant of \$1,000. But that is a mamaguy, Madam Speaker. Because even if world prices fall for fuel, the price for fuel today has been fixed by the Minister. It has been fixed by the Minister and nobody believes that this Minister, especially given the rants and raves of the Minister previously, nobody believes that this Minister or the Ministry or the Government is going to ever reduce the price of fuel, even if

world energy prices fall.

Worse, Madam Speaker, the increase in the price of fuel was immediate, but the Minister failed to say when these persons who are recognized to be desperately in need and adversely affected worse by this increase in fuel prices, when they are going to be able to access this grant, this one-off grant that he is offering to them. Just to be clear, Madam Speaker, that works out to \$2.74 per day, and they have no idea when they are going to get it. It is mamaguy, Madam Speaker, but there is more. There is more. This one-off grant completely ignores the plights of parents already struggling to send their children to school who have just managed—they literally have just managed to eke out enough money, borrowed money from wherever they can—and this is the reality of the situation we are living in now—to buy school books and uniforms.

Madam Speaker, in my constituency and I am sure it happens in other constituencies as well, there are individuals who are simply unable to send their children to school because they cannot afford to pay the transport. They cannot afford to buy food for their children. Children are being kept away from school because of financial hardships. That is the reality that we are living now. That is not the reality that they live in, Madam Speaker, but it is the reality that we live in.

There are thousands of parents who are experiencing this trauma, and now to put increase fuel prices on them, because the grants that the Minister is speaking about does not come to students. It does not come to these poor parents. It does not come to them at all. You see, the Minister is promising to give a thousand dollars on one hand, Madam Speaker, and taking back 10 times as much via property tax and hikes in WASA rates, et cetera, as I mentioned before. Madam Speaker, the Minister also clearly stated, that the cost of the fuel subsidy,

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according to him, will be upwards of \$2.2 billion and, therefore, they have capped the fuel subsidy at one billion, meaning that taxpaying citizens must now dip into their own pockets to pay \$1.2 billion.

The Minister claims—the Minister of Finance claims that that is additional money that could be spent on social grants, education, health, transportation, et cetera, and assisting the poor and vulnerable. Madam Speaker, I want to know and I want to ask the Minister, why these are mutually exclusive? Why is it that they could not subsidize the fuel and provide—

Hon. Member: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Allow me—and provide the support needed through the same social grants, education, health and transportation. Why must there be a trade-off? A Minister previously indicated that we must find—the Minister of Health I believe—you must find the money to spend. Madam Speaker, I want to tell them, again, where the money is, because it is not that a trade-off is required. The money exists, Madam Speaker, the money is there. All that is required to access that money is for the Government to stop the state sponsored corruption. I will withdraw, Madam Speaker. All that is required is for the Government to stop the state sponsored mismanagement, extraction, illegal loss of funds that they have been facilitating by refusing to implement the public procurement and disposal—

Madam Speaker: Member, I do not know illegal loss of funds is any different. So withdraw that and find another way, please.

Mr. D. Tancoo: I withdraw, Madam Speaker. I withdraw. In 2020—and these are not my words, Madam Speaker—the *Express* called it the “Cost of corruption” and I am quoting:

Madam Speaker: Member, what you have to understand, and I think we have

said it here and it is well settled. Anything you quote becomes your word. So if it is not allowable for you to use it first-hand, you cannot quote something that is inappropriate. All right? So, that should be your guidance for whatever you are going to quote.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, the Government has refused to implement the Public Procurement and Disposal of Property Act, 2020. They have continued to do so. That has cost taxpayers \$5.2 billion per year for the last seven years. If yesterday, if last year, if in fiscal 2021 or in fiscal 2022 they had fully implemented this legislation, according to the Procurement Regulator, Madam Speaker, \$5.2 billion would have been accessible to this Government. That is \$5.2 billion that they spent that they cannot account for; \$5.2 billion that has vanished because we have not seen the production, we have not seen the output for it. That \$5.2 billion would have been back into the Government's hands to spend with enough money. They could have taken \$1.2 billion out of that 5.2 in waste, mismanagement and misdirected funds. They could have taken \$1.2 million in that to subsidize the fuel so we do not have the crises that we have now. And \$4 billion, Madam Speaker, could have been spent on grants, laptops, social support, education health, et cetera. Instead, Madam Speaker, the Government's refusal to implement this legislation means that, again, \$5.2 billion minimum would again be lost to mismanagement and any other word they want to use, Madam Speaker, for loss of funds without any evidence of output being created, and they are refusing to implement the legislation, Madam Speaker, but they are coming again to ask for \$57.7 billion again to spend without proper oversight by the Procurement Regulator.

Madam Speaker, interestingly enough, I noted that the Minister of Finance

complained that over the last 84 months, the Government has struggled to pay salaries, and this has forced them to borrow more than \$30 billion. In other words, Madam Speaker, \$30 billion, I said before, \$36.4 billion is what has been lost to this country in taxpaying money for which no accountability has had, because it has disappeared, it has not been under the Procurement Regulator. Madam Speaker, \$36.4 billion lost in that way, Madam Speaker, but the Government, the Minister of Finance, came on Monday gone and told this country that they had to borrow \$30 billion. Well, I will deal with the \$30 billion subsequently.

But it appears to me, Madam Speaker, that we seem to be borrowing money to pay for things that we are not seeing. So we are losing \$36.4 billion, we are borrowing \$30 billion, so we have lost that 36.4 and we are losing this, this \$30 billion that the Minister says he has borrowed. All has gone into this whatever other word they want to use, Madam Speaker, lost to the country, lost to taxpayers, because of incompetence or mismanagement or otherwise extracted from the Treasury, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, listening to the Minister on Monday gone, the Minister cited this \$30 billion figure, trying to tell the population that things was so bad, he actually had to borrow a lil bit upwards of \$30 billion. Madam Speaker, we have indicated, the hon. Leader of the Opposition has indicated before that you cannot trust this Minister of Finance with figures, and it appears we cannot trust his junior Minister as well with numbers or any other such things, including plans and policies.

Madam Speaker, the fact is that despite the Minister's allegation that he had to borrow \$30 billion, when you add up the figures that was supplied by the very same Ministers, it is not \$30 billion, Madam Speaker, that was borrowed by this

Government. The figure borrowed by this Government over the last seven years is two and a half times higher than that not \$30 billion. This Minister and this Government have been responsible for borrowing \$78.191 billion over the last seven years. That is the Minister's track record for borrowing, Madam Speaker.

But, let me share another statistic with you, Madam Speaker, because that means that in seven years, this Minister has been able to borrow half of what was borrowed over a period of 57 years before that. The reason for my concern, Madam Speaker, is because of the growing crises that we have, the growing debt component, the foreign debt component, at a point in time when our foreign exchange holdings are depreciating and we are now at a position, Madam Speaker, where the level of foreign debt is almost equal to the value of our foreign reserves, almost equal, and that is a crisis waiting to happen, Madam Speaker, but that is this Government's policy.

So you are borrowing and indebting future generations and future generations and their generations after that, but you are not putting anything in place to repay those things. Madam Speaker, we are creating—we are not creating anymore, we have created a substantial debt trap, and that is burying this current generation and future generations to come.

Madam Speaker, once more, I want to quote another example of the Minister's incorrect use of figures in his last budget presentation and I quote, Madam Speaker. On Monday, this Minister came to the Parliament and told this country and I quote:

“...I am advised by the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries that natural gas production has stabilized and the decline in production which began in 2020 has been reversed.

I am further advised—”

And I continuing the quotation:

“...that gas production has increased significantly since May 2022 and is now close to 2.9 mcf per day. I am advised that we will end the year with an average production of 2.75 mcf of gas per day, and, barring unforeseen circumstances, this is expected to increase to just under 3.0 mcf per day in 2023”

But, let me just say, Madam Speaker, that if these figures are true, then this country is in serious crisis, and if these figures are not true, then this country is in serious crisis, because it means that the Minister is wrong.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: So, Madam Speaker, I checked the budget speech. I checked the copy, the hardcopy of the budget speech provided by the Minister, I checked the online budget speech. I listened to the Minister’s budget contribution, as painful as it was. I checked the media for articles to see if the Minister provided a correction, but there was none, not even today. The Minister, therefore, stands by what is in his budget statements and all the figures presented there.

Madam Speaker, the fact is that gas production, according to the available data, is not now at 2.9 mcf as the Minister quotes. In fact, it is 1,000 times higher at 2,900 mcf or 2.9 bcf, billion cubic feet per day. Now, I had friends in the energy sector calling me from Houston and everywhere else, Madam Speaker, to verify if what this Minister is saying is true. It is not true. And, at this level, the Minister of Finance should not be making such billion-dollar errors.

I wonder sometimes, Madam Speaker, if this Minister of Finance, even knows what is going on in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, much less

for the Ministry of Finance, and that is why this country is in the crisis that it is. From then to now, the Minister had multiple opportunities to correct his blunder. They have not. None of the Members that spoke today have not and for five days that have passed, they have allowed this misinformation to continue to exist.

Madam Speaker, I want to refer the Minister in the Ministry of Finance to some statistics today. I want to help him out a little bit. The Minister of Finance in his presentation made extensive use of IMF data. He has done that, not just on this budget speech, but on the Spotlight for the Economy and in the mid-year review and in previous budget statements. He has placed great reliance on the statistics derived from the IMF website and their data centre in several of his presentations. I have used the very same data, and for the Minister in the Ministry of Finance's reference, I want to advise him that the source of the data is—and he can go and check it please. It is at *www.imf.org/en/data*. That is the source of the information that I use. All that was required was a proper sorting of the data by country and a ranking of the data by year, and from that you can discern trends by the IMF, based on historical data and projected data supplied by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to the IMF.

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And allow me to share some of the trends that this Minister chose to leave out and you decide why, Madam Speaker. You see, the Minister of Finance has as a habit of comparing Trinidad and Tobago with a series of other countries, cherry-picking his choices based on the narrative that he wants to sell just so that he could claim that Trinidad and Tobago is better off today because the PNM is in Government. Well, we who live in the real world, the citizens outside there, the 1.4million citizens outside there, they know that this country is far worse off today

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than it has ever been under any previous Government in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Back to the data, Madam Speaker. According to the data downloaded yesterday at 4.00p.m., the Trinidad and Tobago economy lost about 16 per cent of its real GDP between 2014 and 2021, while the rest of the Caribbean grew by 3.2 per cent, and the rest of the world grew by an average of 24 per cent during the same period. So, while we were dropping, the rest of the world were increasing, 2016 to 2021.

What is worrying, Madam Speaker, is based on the same trend analysis and current Government policy, the same data, the same IMF data, based on the same trends, the projection is that the Trinidad and Tobago economy, the real GDP, our real output, will be 2.3 per cent smaller in 2027 than it was in 2024. While that is happening, the projection is that it will get worse. While that is happening, the projection for the rest of the Caribbean is that they will get better. Now, this is exactly in sync, Madam Speaker, with facts presented by the hon. Leader of the Opposition earlier which showed a failing business environment which has already resulted in the loss of investor confidence in Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, I know that the Minister will jump quickly and point to investments promised by energy companies in particular but these are all based on private negotiation with concessions protected by secrecy and non-disclosure agreements that we have no access for; we have access for. And it would not be the first time that the Minister of Finance and Ministers on the opposite side, Madam Speaker, have come here to this Parliament and made broad pronouncements of multibillion dollar investments that never materialized because that has been the history of the Members on the opposite side.

What the data shows, Madam Speaker—and, again, I am referring to the IMF data, nobody's analysis except mine of factual—I did not create any statistics. I did not create—all that was required was the ranking of statistics. And if the Minister would stop being lazy and do his own ranking, he would come to the same conclusion and get the same results and be just as worried as we are on this side, unless the Minister already knows that and prefers to sell the flavour, to sell the image that Trinidad and Tobago is doing well when the facts do not support that.

In fact, Madam Speaker, when the data is sorted even further—and that is a basic, basic algebraic interpretation, basic algebraic methodology. When the data is sorted even further, it shows that Trinidad and Tobago—pay attention, Minister in the Ministry of Finance, pay attention—it shows that Trinidad and Tobago will be ranked based on failing infrastructure right now, based on failing energy fields and the full dependence of the Government only on energy and nothing else. We will be ranked as one of the eighth worst performing Ministry—sorry, Trinidad and Tobago will be ranked as one of the worst performing economies; the eighth worst performing economy out of a 195 countries in the world. And the Minister could do his own homework and come to his own conclusion and check it for himself and verify that what I am saying is fact.

Under this Government, you are sabotaging the future of Trinidad and Tobago and citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, over the last seven years, the Minister of Finance has talked about diversification. He has talked about targeting specific industries for development. They spoke about agriculture as a growth pole, a

growth industry. They have spoken about fintech and about a flurry of game changers and mega projects, and more recently, digitization as a vehicle for transformation of the economy. All of these, Madam Speaker, thus far, have failed because too often the decisions to proceed with projects is not based on financial propriety. It is not based on cost-benefit analysis. It is based on narrow political interests as opposed to long-term developmental objectives. And that is why a completed children's hospital at Couva remained closed while citizens were forced to wait for weeks and months and years for basic surgery and basic medical attention. Bad mind, Madam Speaker, political decisions that have affected Trinidad and Tobago citizens negatively because this Government does not simply care about the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

For seven years, this Minister of Finance spoke about the need to move away from the overreliance on the energy sector. But as soon as world prices rise, as soon as we started to get a little lift in the cost of energy, the Prime Minister and his inner circle jumps on a plane, Madam Speaker, and circled the globe to engage in talks with energy companies. That is not the way to do negotiations, Madam Speaker. That is certainly not the way to do negotiations, certainly not outside of the public eye without public servants.

Today, just like previously, the Minister pins his entire hope for growth on the energy sector only. They have sabotaged everything else. Madam Speaker, the Minister claimed in his budget statement somehow that somebody, just like this current Minister in the Ministry of Finance, somebody told them something about something. In the budget statement, the Minister claimed that someone told him that the country should abandon oil and gas production. Well, that is completely unbelievable, Madam Speaker. I believe that the Minister has made that up, just

like he has made up so many other numbers, some of which I would prove just now. No right-thinking person would say, “Give up oil and gas”.

As a matter of fact, common sense, Madam Speaker, which may be a stranger to those on the opposite side, common sense, right-thinking citizens—like the Minister of Health liked to throw out just now—right-thinking citizens would have told the Minister that revenue streams from the energy sector should have been used because it is temporary and should have been used to create the environment for sustainable development of new industries and revenue resources. Sadly, as we have seen from the Minister’s presentation, there is no strategy, no plan and no vision for growth in this country. All there is, is a Minister fabricating numbers based on projections that somehow he is going to, without putting anything in place, generate growth, positive growth in this economy in 2022 and going forward, when every other indication, economic, fiscal and social tells us otherwise.

Madam Speaker, again, Central Bank data—Central Bank has a Data Centre. I am hoping that the Minister in the Ministry of Finance knows that as well. I extracted some natural gas production data from the Ministry of Finance—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Mr. D. Tancoo: Yes, Madam.

Madam Speaker: You have five more minutes of speaking time. You are entitled to a further 10 minutes if you wish to request—

Mr. D. Tancoo: I most definitely will appreciate if I can have that extra time, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Please, proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, the data from the Central Bank website shows

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clearly that between 2015 and 2021, the average production of gas was 3,330millioncubic feet per day. During that period, the economy contracted significantly because of the continued reliance on oil and gas, continued reliance on energy and the failure to transform the economy.

So now, today, when we have a situation where the production of oil and gas in 2022 and projected for 2023, it is 84 per cent of that, it is less than the average over that 2016 to 2021 period, it is less than that, suddenly the Minister is talking about economic growth. That is why the Minister would jump on fiscal—for fiscal 2022, he will jump on the use of nominal figures because the increase that he is talking about here is not real production increase. It is based on inflation. It is based on higher prices. That is all. And that is what the Minister is planning on, riding the wave on the back of ad infinitum, without putting anything in place for what would eventually happen, which is that the price of gas and oil and energy products will fall. But international agencies, Madam Speaker—so, it is not just the numbers from the IMF and the projections, it is not just the Central Bank's data, Madam Speaker, international agencies are also warning the Minister about the direction his policies are taking this country.

On Monday, the Minister of Finance, in his anxiety to feed the narrative, left out some critical information that to date has not been made public but is contained in the Standard & Poor's report of July 21, 2022. What the Minister did not mention during his time at the crease on Monday in this honourable House was that the Standard & Poor's, in the very same report, forecasted that export growth would decline in 2023, 2024 and 2025 by 8.4 per cent; 26.7 per cent and 0.3 per cent, respectively, during that time frame in each of those years, Madam Speaker.

So that coincides with what the IMF projection is saying and what the

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Central Bank statistics are showing, that there is going to be a worsening going forward of the state of the economy if things remain as bad as they are, as mismanaged as they are under the incompetence of this Government and the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, and the Minister of Finance, and the rest of the Members of Cabinet on that side, Madam Speaker.

As an economist and as a patriot of Trinidad and Tobago, I find it extremely disturbing that such strong and prolonged contraction of real economic growth would severely compromise the long-term growth potential of Trinidad and Tobago. Why the Minister did not share these projections while he was touting Standard & Poor's gave him a credit rating and patting himself on the back for its outlook in the short-term? Why did he not share that, Madam Speaker? I would leave that for you to decide, but there is much more to be worried about, Madam Speaker.

The same Standard & Poor's report used by the Minister also predicted a growing unemployment rate to 6.5 per cent by 2023. That is next year. In fact, that is the fiscal year that we are walking to tomorrow. A growing unemployment rate of 6.5 per cent predicted by the very same Standard & Poor's that gave him a short-term "bligh" because of high energy returns, high energy prices.

Madam Speaker, another figure that I want to give to the Ministry and give to the Minister, these were the labour force participation rate. It is already established, I think others have spoken about it before, that there has been a substantial contraction in the number of persons employed over the last seven years. What is of even greater concern, Madam Speaker, is the fact that the labour force is also falling. Madam Speaker, there has been a sharp decline in the labour force participation rate from 61.9 per cent to 55.9 per cent during period 2014 to

2022; a sharp decline. So, we have a situation where people are no longer looking for work while we have a growing population. They are no longer looking for work, Madam Speaker, and that is of concern because the query must be, “We have an increasing population but decreasing people employed and a decreasing labour force and a falling labour participation rate.” Where are these people, Madam Speaker? Why are they not in the official unemployment statistics?

It is instructive to note that there are now more gangs and gang-related activities in Trinidad and Tobago according to the Minister of “national insecurity”. Are these missing persons now part of what is an underground economy? Are these growing numbers of persons not seeking jobs because they are involved in some other kind of activity? Madam Speaker, can we not see—can those on the opposite side not see a direct correlation between the increased numbers of persons who are no longer in the labour force, no longer looking for work and a rapid growth in gangs? You see, these are some of the kind of statistics, Madam Speaker, that I wished that the Members on the other side would pay some attention to because these should be the statistics guiding the Minister of Finance in the determination of the priorities of his Government and the financially responsible decisions which should guide the budget which we are currently debating, Madam Speaker. This is also of some level of concern, Madam Speaker, because what we have facing us today is a falling number of persons employed carrying the weight of the population unemployed and that is a difficult, difficult thing to continue which is now creating some serious social and economic difficulties.

Madam Speaker, in the few more minutes available to me, I want to spend a few minutes talking briefly about some of the crises that we face in my

constituency. Madam Speaker, every single time rain falls, my constituency floods, every time. Today, as I stand here today, there are people sweeping out flood waters in Oropouche West. Now, I accept that severe rain could cause flooding, Madam Speaker, but that flooding exists whether rain is for a short period or a long period because of the failure of the Minister of Works and Transport to desilt the rivers and clear the riverbanks, build higher riverbanks and make sure that all is done that is required to curtail flooding in Oropouche West.

Madam Speaker, I have searched the budget documents presented last Monday for some indication that the Minister would have made some effort to keep the promises that he has made to the tens of thousands of persons in the southland facing these flooding. Unfortunately, that has not happened. So, today, we have farmers in Rahamut Trace, in Puzzle Island, in Woodland, in Pluck Road, et cetera, who continue to be regular victims of praedial larceny and flooding, and there is nothing in the *Development Programme* to give them any hope that this Government is going to take any of the billions that they spend and contribute in taxes to pay to the State. There is no hope that this Government would take any of that to spend to improve their condition.

But it is not just flooding, Madam Speaker, it is not just flooding. Because while we have flooding on the outside, we have a poor, very poor track record on behalf of the Minister of Public Utilities in providing water to the population of Oropouche West; very, very poor. The Minister had the opportunity today to come and tell us what the plans were, how he was going to fix the water shortage problem in Oropouche West and elsewhere, and he failed to do so, preferring to stand here and laugh and make joke, while people in my constituency are suffering for a basic human necessity as water.

Madam Speaker, I have written to the Minister with responsibility for CEPEP almost two years ago, seeking additional CEPEP gangs to ensure that the smaller watercourses are cleared and maintained so that the flooding issue that we have would not be as bad as it is. I have not had the courtesy of a response from that Minister to date. Residents of south Trinidad, residents of my constituency and other constituencies in south Trinidad have said to me that they feel that they are being subjected to discrimination, geographic discrimination because of the neglect and disregard by this Government against them. Next week, when we discuss and debate at the Standing Finance Committee, the *Estimate of Expenditure*, I want to signal my intention to ask the Minister, the current Minister with responsibility for CEPEP, for a breakdown of the number of CEPEP gangs by constituency.

I am not interested at this point in who they are. I do not want the names of the contractors, I just want the numbers. You see, in Standing Finance Committee, for fiscal year 2021, the then Minister had provided a breakdown showing how many gangs were in existence and in operation in each constituency at the time. It was available by constituency then but weeks and months afterwards, when we asked for an updated figure, Madam Speaker, the very Ministers on the opposite side told us that that information is not available because they do not do it like that anymore; they do not do it like that. They brought it in fiscal 2021 but suddenly, when they realized what it showed, they stop providing the information. If there is nothing to hide, Madam Speaker, then why are they hiding? And I want to tell you why they are hiding, Madam Speaker.

I would like the Minister—in fact, let me say it differently, Madam Speaker, I challenge the Minister in the Ministry of Finance and the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, who is now responsible for CEPEP, to

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explain to the country, to the population why my constituency of Oropouche West, which has 56 square kilometres, much of it rural, bushy and with poor infrastructure—thanks to this Government—and high unemployment, why a 56-square kilometre constituency has 12 CEPEP contractors; 12 as at 2021?

I challenge the Minister to tell us if there is more because I have not seen an increase, 12 CEPEP contractors, 56 square kilometres. Do know that San Fernando West; do you know that San Fernando West; do you know that San Fernando West, which has 10.3 square kilometres, with good roads and drainage and lights and little forested area has 46 CEPEP contractors; 46?

Hon. Member: “Nah!”

Mr. D. Tancoo: If that is not geographic discrimination, Madam Speaker, I do not know what is.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1), which surely includes the truth, but that is just not true.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister—

Madam Speaker: Continue. Continue, Member.

Mr. D. Tancoo:—[*Inaudible*]—the Standing Finance Committee to provide the truth because in 2021, this was the facts provided by the Ministry, by the finance—this were the facts provided. So, if there was geographic discrimination in 2021 and there is none now, Minister, you have the opportunity to prove it, correct it then. “Doh talk now”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, we also have some of the worst roads in this country, some of the absolute worst roads and, quite frankly, I join with my fellow constituents and I join with members of the public in this country to criticize and

condemn this Government for the “ole” talk and “mamaguy” that they have been providing for the last two to three years, that they did not have the money because they were spending it to save lives.

Madam Speaker, if that were true, the statistics would bear it out. But the data, facts are strange things and the data does not lie. Facts are strange things. If it is that they were spending the money elsewhere instead of fixing roads, because they gave another priority, the priority was not saving lives because the numbers do not bear it out, Madam Speaker. We have the worst roads in the country right now and no matter how many times we have written to the Minister, he has never responded. There is a plan that the Minister would come forward now to say that they are going to fix roads, but that is talk and we have been hearing that talk for the last seven years. It is today, it is not last year, it is not during COVID-19 time that the roads were bad, the roads have been bad for seven years. And while in my constituency they have refused to fix the roads, we see paving, on top of paving, on top of paving, on top of good roads being paved in other constituencies.

So, you have a situation where a Minister could stand up today and boast of the roads being paved in his constituency. Well, bring it down to south. We need it more than them, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, the Minister in his budget presentation laid out a groundwork of things that he said that his budget was going to do. It was going to lift the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Sadly, Madam Speaker, he is following the same path that he has done for the last seven years. The same plans, the same policies, the same prescription and it is going to cause the same chaos. It is going to cause the same distress. Madam Speaker, I do not think that this Government is

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even aware because they live in ivory castles protected by armed guards. They live in luxury but they are missing what is going on outside. Citizens are frustrated and they are fed up, businessmen and frustrated and fed up, Madam Speaker. With those words, I would like to suggest to the hon. Minister that he wheel and come—
[Inaudible]

Madam Speaker: Member, your speaking time is now spent. Leader of the House.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the House do now adjourn to Saturday, the 1st day of October at 10.00a.m.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: I know we are all anxious to go home.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.44 p.m.