

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, March 24, 2023*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from Mr. Rushton Paray, MP, Member for Mayaro, who has requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Member seeks is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Securities (Collective Investment Schemes) Bye-laws, 2023. [*The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
2. Report of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago with respect to the Progress of the Proposals to Restructure CLICO, BAT and CIB for the quarter ended December 31, 2022. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.
3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs to the Eight Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year 2021. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS

Social Services and Public Administration
Victims of Domestic Violence and
Family Conflicts
(Presentation)

Mr. Esmond Forde (*Tunapuna*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following report:

UNREVISED

Fifth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an inquiry into the State's capacity to provide support for victims of Domestic Violence and Family Conflicts (with specific focus on the availability of support mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic), Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Finance and Legal Affairs
Regulatory Framework for the Development of
Fintech and E-Payments
(Presentation)

Mr. Keith Scotland (*Port of Spain South*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present the following report:

Fifth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an inquiry into the Implementation of a Regulatory Framework for the Development of Financial Technology (Fintech) and E-Payments, Third Session (2022/2023), Twelfth Parliament.

PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

Accusation of Unlawful Killings by TTPS
(Initiatives to deal with)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Prime Minister: Given that the U.S. Department of State 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices noted an unacceptable number of unlawful killings by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service due to the slow pace of the judicial process, will the Prime Minister indicate what new initiatives are contemplated to deal with this extremely grave accusation?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, this question is quite misleading because it refers to unlawful killings without determining that, in defence of themselves and the public, and facing armed gangs or armed

individuals, police officers may, from time to time, carry out actions which result in killings. Those killings are not unlawful.

If the Member is referring to extrajudicial killings, meaning that persons are dying without a process going through our judicial system, that is another story. And, of course, I do not know that there is any accusation—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—where police officers are defending themselves against handguns, assault weapons and other offensive weapons and killings occur, Madam Speaker, they are not automatically unlawful. And therefore, the Member is misrepresenting our situation, and we do have significant state infrastructure to investigate and to take action where unlawful killings occur.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: Would the Prime Minister not agree that in the interest of those police officers that are doing their duties and defending themselves, that an increased use of body cameras would assist police officers in being not wrongfully accused of extrajudicial killings?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am looking for that in the question, Madam, I am not seeing it. Because I do not know—no one is taking an issue with that. That is only one aspect of the operation of the police service. And the Trinidad and Tobago Police, Service, through its Commissioner, has made extensive explanations as to who is authorized to use, who is outfitted with cameras, and so on, and that is part of normal police operations in 2023.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Would the Prime Minister, his Government, not give consideration to increasing the investigative and prosecutorial powers of the Police Complaints

Authority given these accusations?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, we do not operate by vaps. These matters, if they are required to be reviewed, they are being reviewed, or they will be reviewed. In talking about extrajudicial killings, the police service has made public statements as to the conditions under which police officers operate and use force. And when that occurs, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has arrangements for determining, and that includes the use of body cameras, and it also includes the investigative work of the PCA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

**Full Operation of Aerial Defence Capabilities
(Steps Taken to Ensure)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Given that three senior Air Guard pilots have reportedly resigned due to alleged significant management and operational issues as well as the inexplicable removal of key crime detection equipment within the Air Guard, will the Prime Minister state what immediate steps are being taken to ensure that our aerial defence capabilities are fully operational?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, I presume that this question comes from an article, and the article referring to the resignation of three senior Air Guard pilots dated the 5th of February, 2023, in the *Trinidad Guardian*, was not factual. These pilots are actually contracted civilian pilots. One pilot resigned and two other pilots remain operational within the Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard. The Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard is unaware of the removal of any crime reduction equipment at the air guard.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Member for Naparima.

**National Reparations Committee
(Details of)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Given that this country hosted a regional anti-slavery forum in early February, will the Prime Minister indicate whether our National Reparations Committee is fully constituted, funded, and functioning to give effect to our national policy on reparation?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, as far as I am aware, the Government appointed a reparations committee. It is functional. And whether it is fully funded, that is subjective. And being functional, I presume, Madam Speaker, it is properly constituted.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Could the Prime Minister indicate who are the members of the National Reparations Committee?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I could not recall offhand all of them, but if the Member files the appropriate notice, I would let him know. That has been a long time since I have had any interaction with them. So I could not say offhand.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Could the Prime Minister indicate briefly what is our policy—the Government's policy—on reparations?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, the policy is that we make the claims and we are doing so through Caricom. There is an active response through Caricom, and Trinidad and Tobago participates in that, and we follow the guidance from the Caricom on this matter. And we do have our own National Reparations

Committee, and we expect that that is effective and sufficient at this time.

Madam Speaker: Member for Chaguanas West.

**Credit Suisse Bailout
(Details of State's Exposure)**

Mr. Dinesh Rambally (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Hon. Prime Minister, given the interconnectivity of the global financial system and the potential for financial contagion, will the Prime Minister advise what is the State's exposure, both directly and indirectly, as a result of the Union Bank of Switzerland's bailout of Credit Suisse.

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has not been adversely affected by the recent difficulties faced by Credit Suisse. This is because the Government did not have any deposits with Credit Suisse that were threatened by that situation.

Credit Suisse has arranged bond financing for the Government, and recently for Heritage Petroleum, but these are not affected since we are not depositors of Credit Suisse.

Madam Speaker: Member for Chaguanas West.

Mr. Rambally: Prime Minister, in light of the lead up to the Credit Suisse failing value in its shareholding over the weekend, where we had the Swiss commercial bank depositing or injecting US \$68 million last week, and then the weekend, we had to bailout by UBS, does the Prime Minister or does the Government have any concerns that any management that may be taking place by Credit Suisse, whether we should be taking any steps to ensure that whatever portfolios they are managing, that it is being done properly?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, we are not, and I do not expect that we will be interfering with the managers of our portfolio in the HSF, largely because the amount of our exposure to Credit Suisse is very small and it would be handled by the managers in the normal way.

And secondly, the threat and the nervousness of the difficulty faced by Credit Suisse have been considerably ameliorated or have been removed by the purchase of Credit Suisse by UBS. And that has stabilized the market and we, therefore, have no real reason to want to talk to our managers about how they handle our small Credit Suisse portfolio.

Madam Speaker: Member for Chaguanas West.

Mr. Rambally: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you, Prime Minister. Prime Minister, there is a latest development where the US Department of State, they are now investigating both UBS and Credit Suisse officials in terms of potentially evading US sanctions. Are you aware of this, and if so, would that also cause any cause for concern with our involvement with Credit Suisse?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, the television news is pretty up to date and pretty continuous, so, you know, we have a small exposure, I just said. It is not sufficient to want to take it into context of anything major beyond the common day-to-day operations of the managers of our portfolio. And what the Member just mentioned there, it is not something that attracts the attention of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to interfere in the portfolio and its management.

1.45 p.m.

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Chaguanas West, in light of the question and the supplemental question, are you still proceeding with question 5?

Mr. Rambally: My colleague, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Oropouche West, yes. Are you still proceeding with question 5?

Mr. Tancoo: I think in light of the response of the Prime Minister to the questions raised, I wish to hereby withdraw the question.

Madam Speaker: Thank you. And therefore, now I am at Chaguanas West. Question 6.

Mr. Rambally: Yes, Madam Speaker, there is—I do not wish to continue with 6.

Madam Speaker: Thank you very much. Member for Chaguanas West, question 7.

**Financial System Stability Assessment Report's Recommendations
(Adoption/Implementation of)**

Mr. Dinesh Rambally (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Hon. Prime Minister: Given that the 2020 Financial System Stability Assessment report made several recommendations to improve the resilience of our financial system to shocks and contagion, will the Prime Minister state if the Government and the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago have adopted and/or implemented any of these recommendations?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago is actively engaged in adopting and/or implementing the recommendations of the 2020 Financial System Stability Assessment report. In addition, the IMF recently stated in its 2023 Article IV Consultation concluding statement that our financial system appears sound and resilient, although there are issues that require monitoring. And the IMF welcomed the progress being made by the authorities towards enhancing the resilience of the banking and insurance sectors in line with the recommendations of the said 2020 Financial System Stability Assessment report.

Madam Speaker: Member for Chaguanas West.

Mr. Rambally: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister. Prime Minister, would you be in a position to share any of the recommendations or adoption of recommendations tailored specifically with treating with any capital flight between Trinidad and the US?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am sure, Madam Speaker, that the Member knows that if he wants that kind of information, he can file a question to the Minister of Finance who will certainly accommodate him with appropriate notice.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

**National Cycling Velodrome and National Aquatic Centre
(Indefinite Closure of)**

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister: Given the importance and relevance of the National Cycling Velodrome and the National Aquatic Centre to cycling and swimming fraternities respectively and the nation, will the Prime Minister inform this House if both entities have been closed indefinitely?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, there is no question of these facilities being indefinitely closed. As a matter of fact, they are not even closed. Recently, there were some issues on a couple of days with the supply of water and out of an abundance of caution for two or three days the facilities were closed until the supply had been regularized. The facilities were closed temporarily for 48 hours but have since been reopened.

Madam Speaker, this was simply as a result of some water supply issues and that is now no longer so. And therefore, there is no question of the facilities being closed indefinitely.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: So, Prime Minister, are you telling this House that the media release that was issued by the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago, in relation to both entities being closed indefinitely, was not a valid media release that was issue?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I know of no media release and I do not trust what the Member is telling me. I know there was a sign up saying that the place had been closed and that was done as soon as there was the issue requiring the cautionary action. The place was not closed indefinitely and I have been in touch with the spokespersons from the sports company within the last hour, and what I have just given the Member and this House is the latest information. It has been reopened since Wednesday the 21st. I suspect the Member has not been to his constituency with his eyes open since then. But I can tell him, since the 21st, the place has been opened.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Prime Minister, based on the fact that you informed the House that both facilities were closed as a result of an inconsistent water supply or the lack of a water supply in the area of Balmain, are you in a position to tell this House if that part of the constituency of Couva South has had a full restoration of its water supply?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Couva South, I rule that question out of order. Member for Oropouche East.

**Mexican Government's Appeal
(Details of Proposed Cost)**

UNREVISED

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Will the Prime Minister indicate the proposed cost to the people of Trinidad and Tobago associated with the Government's decision to join an appeal by the Mexican Government over the failed lawsuit involving gun manufacturers in the United States?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, our association with Mexicans in pursuing this matter at this time has no cost attached to it. It is more of a diplomatic attachment where we are supporting Mexico's actions in the United States' courts. As a sovereign nation, we are making our voices heard and we are standing alongside another sovereign nation that is having the same problem that we have. And it is for our benefit that Mexico is doing this because we all have the same problem.

I do not know if some—if in the future we will be required to make any contributions but at this time we are not required to.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East. Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Would the Prime Minister identify the lawyer or legal firm that will represent the interest of Trinidad and Tobago in the matter?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: No, Madam Speaker, we do not have a lawyer representing us. It is being done through our diplomatic channels and there is no lawyer representing us at this time.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Prime Minister, are you confirming that at this time you know

neither the cost nor the lawyer that will represent Trinidad and Tobago in a matter the like this—

Mr. Hosein: In the US Appeal Court.

Dr. Moonilal: —in the United States Appeal Court?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I have said in English, our association with this matter is largely diplomatic, supporting Mexico, who is leading with a matter, which is an appeal. So therefore, I do not know what difficulty the Member is having about lawyer and cost. At this time that does not arise.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The matter is being dealt with through our foreign ministry as a diplomatic matter, providing diplomatic support. And if it comes to a point where we are required to make other adjustments, then so be it. But at this point in time, our association is not requiring a lawyer and it is not carrying a cost.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, is the Prime Minister aware that this matter will be heard not at the United Nations assembly but in a court of law—

Hon. Members: (*Desk thumping*)

Dr. Moonilal: —where you are required as an interested party to have legal representation? Are you aware of that?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Well, at that stage, if we then have to step into the court of law, then we take all necessary actions, Madam Speaker—

Dr. Moonilal: But you are already in the court.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: —in which case you have presumed.

Dr. Moonilal: Final—[*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East, yes, it is the final.

Dr. Moonilal: Final supplemental?

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Dr. Moonilal: Prime Minister, in light of your responses to this matter so far, could you assure this country that we will not be represented by the current Attorney General, who will not make any deposition in this matter at an American court again?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

URGENT QUESTIONS

Director of Public Prosecutions

(Ongoing Dispute)

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. To the Attorney General: Will the Attorney General provide this House with an update of his highly publicized meeting with the Director of Public Prosecutions on the ongoing dispute over the issue of resources and performance of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions?

Madam Speaker: Attorney General.

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. There is no ongoing dispute with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:—with respect to the issue of resources and performance of the Office of the Director. My meeting with the Director, held on Wednesday the 15th of March, at my office, discussed a number of matters relevant to the respective mandates of the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of

Legal Affairs, and the Director of Public Prosecutions' Office, and my office's support for the independent remit of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. At the end of a fruitful meeting, the Director and myself agreed then that the subject of our discussions will not be conducted in the public domain.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Those discussions are not concluded.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Attorney General, in light of the fact that the taxpayer, the public, pays the \$600,000 monthly rental for that building at Park and Henry Street, could you indicate whether the DPP's Office or any government office will be established at that property in the foreseeable future?

Madam Speaker: Attorney General.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: May I repeat the last part of the answer just given. At the end of a fruitful meeting, the Director and myself agreed then that the subject of our discussions will not be conducted in the public domain.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, to the Attorney General. Are you saying, on behalf of the DPP, that matters like these ought not to be—ought not to inform the public as to a matter involving the rental of accommodation for \$21 million—ought not to be discussed in the public, and the public ought not to know the details of such a matter? Is that your response?

Madam Speaker: Attorney General.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. My response is in two parts. The discussions are not concluded and secondly, I do not purport now or

hereafter to speak on behalf of the Director.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Chaguanas East.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Members. Member for Naparima, Member for Couva South, the Prime Minister, and other Member on this side, the Member who has my audience now is the Member for Chaguanas East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

**Essential Goods and Services
(Price Escalation)**

Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas it is the responsibility of the Government to ensure the well-being of its citizens by facilitating a decent standard of living and quality of life;

And whereas the impending increase in utility rates and the imminent imposition of property taxes will further escalate cost of living and the inflation rate;

And whereas the consistent increases in fuel prices have further negatively impacted the cost of living;

And whereas this Government has failed to take proactive measures to cushion the economic fallouts brought about by the escalating prices of essential goods and services:

Be it resolved that this House call on the Government to outline its short, medium and long term strategies to systematically reduce the escalating and uncontrollable increase in the price of essential goods and services accessed by the population of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.00 p.m.

And be it further resolved that this House call on the Government to take the necessary urgent action to immediately remedy the negative effects upon those living below the poverty line.

Madam Speaker, the decision to file this Motion was driven by extreme suffering, frustration and hopelessness. Madam Speaker, some people seated on the opposing Benches, as you can see, have the opinion that their practices or, let us say, *modus operandi* are shared or comparable by all political office-holders.

Madam Speaker, when a Motion or other issue is brought up on behalf of the general public, those opposite typically respond with phrases like, “We are playing politics”, “You are playing politics”, “You are politicizing the issue”, “You are trying to score political points”. In other words, Madam Speaker, they mock, belittle and literally minimize the legitimate and real complaints, the real experiences and circumstances that the general public face in this country.

Madam Speaker, the filing of this Motion was borne out of sheer pain, was borne out of frustration, was borne out of despair, Madam Speaker. You see, Madam, some on the opposite Bench are of the belief that their methods are shared or similar to everyone that assumes political office. In other words, Madam Speaker, they trivialize, they demean and literally pour scorn on legitimate and real grievances, experiences, situations faced by the public at large. Yet I want to counter such critics upfront, Madam Speaker, by stating that political representation happens when individuals, such as myself, speak and fight on behalf of others in the political sphere.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, that is what Chaguanas East sent me in this House to do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And I will continue to remind, as long as I am in here, that I offered myself to the constituents of Chaguanas East to represent their interests, to represent their concerns and to represent their problems.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And most of all, to be their long lasting friends.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Friend, rather. I asked them to be the advocate, Madam Speaker, and they responded by sending me to the House of Representatives.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And I repeat, representatives. Therefore, Madam Speaker, I can assure—I can assure you as well, Madam Speaker, that this is one MP who does not intend to deviate from my elected responsibility.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And that is to represent my constituents and, by extension, the country of Trinidad and Tobago without fear or favour.

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, in addition to being represented in my Motion, recent headlines that have blasted the nation with information on growing food prices in Trinidad and Tobago include the following, and I would like to share some of those with you. Madam Speaker, headlines such as:

“2022 closes off with record-high food prices, shortages”.

Headlines such as:

“Food prices increased by 9.7% in two years”.

Headlines such as:

“Chamber head urges govt to control surging food prices”.

Madam Speaker, headlines such as:

“No ease: Food prices expected to remain high”.

And headlines such as:

“Teachers save the day for hungry students”.

Madam Speaker, the Motion’s first paragraph, paragraph one, discusses the responsibility of the Government or, more generally, what is its only or overriding goal. Madam Speaker, their method makes it clear that they are disengaged. Madam Speaker, let me enunciate on what are their duties. Just like any other government globally, their duties are to provide the parameters for everyday behaviour of citizens; duties are to protect them from outside interference, both domestically and externally. And, Madam Speaker, I want us all to listen to this one carefully. Yes, of course, citizens must play their part, but it is the duty of the Government to provide for their happiness and their well-being.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, at this given moment, can any of us in this Chamber honestly—honestly believe we are happy in this country? Can we honestly believe that we are happy in this country when single mothers cannot purchase baby formula because of skyrocketing prices? Madam Speaker, can we honestly believe that we are happy in this country when most children are attending school without proper nutritional support or school supplies? Madam Speaker, can we honestly believe we are happy in this country when pensioners cannot partake of a nutritionally sound meal? Madam Speaker, can we believe we are happy when families are constantly facing threats of eviction due to their inability to meet rental payments? Madam Speaker, can we believe we are happy in this country when the old and infirm cannot purchase much needed medical

supplies nor consume dietary requisite meals as dictated by their health providers?
Madam Speaker, can we believe we are happy?

Those who believe that this Motion seeks to trivialize and politicize the terrible living standards that currently obtain in this country, I want to take this opportunity, Madam Speaker, to share with you some of the daily experiences faced by citizens. Because if we do not believe, us as the Opposition, when we hear it from the people themselves, we have no choice but to believe it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, so if you do not believe us, hear the people, and I refer to an *Express* article headlined:

“Public laments ‘madness’ over cost of living”.

And I quote:

“At the San Juan market, vendor Roger Jygoen said: ‘What about poor people? It costs about \$100 to make a pot of callaloo. People can’t afford a whole cabbage at \$30. I have to cut a cabbage in four pieces and sell it at \$12 a piece. People come to the market and they don’t know how to spend their money. They have to cut and cut to make ends meet.’”

And I quote again:

“I wonder if Imbert knows how poor people are suffering?”

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Member, I just—

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: We refer to Members in this House, either by their portfolio or their constituency. I remind Members, when you quote, you adopt the language of—so while you are quoting, you will have to adjust to meet the requirements of

the Standing Order. So I will ask you to withdraw that and say it in the way that is acceptable according to our Standing Order.

Ms. V. Mohit: Sure, Madam Speaker, and I withdraw and I will say it in the appropriate way. And I quote:

“I wonder if”—and they referred to the hon. Member, the hon. Minister of Finance—“Imbert knows how poor people are suffering?”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker:

“Arouca resident Ian Macualay, 67, added: ‘I don’t have any small children but I have to help my grandchildren. When I go to the grocery, I am appalled at the increase in food prices. I wonder how people with two and three children are making out.’

Shaking his head, he added: ‘During the 70s, the PNM said they had enough money to give everybody \$1 million. Look at how people take our money to Panama. Now we have to suffer. Trinidad used to be a paradise. It is terrible.’”

Madam Speaker, those are the voices of the people of this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I strongly advise those opposite who disagrees to read this original article, since regardless of how they may interpret the terminology, the people have expressed their views there. Madam Speaker, they have also sent a loud and clear message that starting from the local government election, hon. Members of the Government Bench, the Minister of Finance, and the Prime Minister would feel the brunt of their anger and discontent.

Madam Speaker, as I close on the opening paragraph one, I want to refer to the debilitating effects on the well-being of the citizens of the country. And I want to refer to a piece by Dr. Margaret Nakhid-Chatoor, who spoke on:

“Increased costs of living, and the effect on mental well-being”.

And, Madam Speaker, she is a psychologist, educator and team lead, and what she said made a lot of sense and actually speaks to the reality of what our citizens are facing in this country. And she said:

“Not all of us can swipe a card easily...”

Reality, Madam Speaker.

“Not all of us can swipe a card easily at the supermarket to pay for groceries...”

Because in reality, Madam Speaker, some of us are checking by the counter and we have to put back on the shelves. Madam Speaker, she said:

“Not all of us...are able to put three square meals on the table to feed our families on a daily basis.”

Further, Madam Speaker, she stated:

“...many job losses and pay cuts in salaries for men and women who have had to make major adjustments to their lifestyles and minimise their eating choices and expenditures. What may seem like ‘no big thing’ for some has become a constant worry, shame and embarrassment for many, when the money has gone and month has just begun.”

Madam Speaker, the reality of what is facing our citizens. Some citizens, at the beginning of the month, the first week, their “salaries done”, it is finished they cannot see it. She also stated:

“...when the money is gone...”

And:

“When the cost of living rise faster than our wages, more people will experience financial difficulties, and money worries will”—of course—
“impact mental health in a serious and debilitating way.”

2.15 p.m.

Madam Speaker, this is the reality. And then we ask ourselves, why domestic violence? Why child abuse? Madam Speaker, this is the reality. Unlike some, Madam Speaker, who claim that we should be riding bicycles, and who the public notices is filling luxurious automobile in Santa Cruz, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, when this piece by Dr. Nakhid-Chatoor is summarized, it clearly demonstrates that everyone in this society is suffering from burnout arising from the emptying and, let us say, the diminishing of all of our pockets, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I now proceed to paragraph two of my Motion, which focuses on the effects of the planned increase in utility rates, including, electricity or, Madam Speaker, as an elderly woman who was crying and shaking recently in my office, and asked me—just like this she asked me, Madam Speaker: “Gyul, how ah go make out when the current bill go up?” And, Madam Speaker, that is just the reality of many persons. Those are the questions many persons are asking in this country. Madam Speaker, you are not prepared for this kind of gut-wrenching experience, but when it comes to standing up for others, you have no choice but to persevere, Madam Speaker, and we on this side will continue to stand up for these people who are our citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I want to share a thought with you. It is not easy a task—it is not an easy task, rather, to listen to aged and poor people when they

are betrayed by the system and you are helpless to provide support and solutions to their plight. It is a real challenge to deal with what I describe as helplessness. Madam Speaker, the RIC proposes an increase of 15 per cent to 64 per cent for residential customers, depending on your consumption rate. However, before I delve further, Madam Speaker, apart from diminishing your pockets, they will have to pay more for goods and services. They compound this with pure deceit by advocating—

Madam Speaker: I will ask you to kindly withdraw that word.

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I withdraw that word. But, Madam Speaker—and I say it in another way. They compound this with a feeling of these citizens wanting to know: Where do I move next? How are these people treating me this way by advocating a monthly billing versus the existing bi-monthly billing? Madam Speaker, this is the telltale sign of a swindle. This is a sign of—

Madam Speaker: I will ask you to withdraw that word.

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I withdraw that word, and I say, this is a telltale sign of a hoodwinking act committed against society.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And, Madam Speaker, this is an obvious attempt to disarm a population that is already bruised and confused into thinking that a monthly billing does not necessarily mean higher charges. Madam Speaker, let us be honest, let us be honest with ourselves as representatives. Let us put ourselves in the feet of our citizens—in the shoes of our citizens, sorry. Let us be honest. If you have to pay increases, one-month billing or two-month billing would not protect you from them. So why are we treating our citizens this way? Why this treatment towards our population that is already in ruins, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker, let me, for argument's sake, surmise that commercial and

industrial operators are in a position to absorb this increase, despite fully aware that such increases will, ultimately, be passed on to the customers of their products and services. So, therefore, they are not in a loss-loss situation. Let us, for argument's sake, say that, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the facts of the matter are residents, households and families are already overburdened with increased cost of living. Therefore, Madam Speaker, electricity rates increase will only bring greater hardship to an already crippled society.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, my colleagues will expand and articulate the true and real impact of this phenomenon on utility rates. However, Madam Speaker, the implantations of this particular hike are all articulated in an article, and I want to refer a bit to the words of Chief Executive Officer of NFM, National Flour Mills. And this article, *Express*, February 06, 2023, headlined:

“If electricity...go up, flour may follow”.

And I quote:

“Consumers could find themselves paying higher prices for flour, cooking oil, and even animal feed, due to the proposed increase in electricity prices. Chief executive officer of the National Flour Mills...Ian Mitchell, told the *Express* that the majority State-owned company ran some numbers and the proposed rate hike will have a significant impact on its costs.

‘It is going to be quite significant. The question is going to be: can we absorb it?’”

And that is the question on everyone's mind in this country. Madam Speaker:

“‘Already we have started looking at what the approach should be to allow us to mitigate and absorb those costs without passing them on,’ said Mitchell.”

Madam Speaker, the Government's—I now move to property tax. Madam Speaker, the Government's decision to introduce the property tax in the midst of an almost destroyed economy, in the midst of rampant unemployment and astronomical poverty reaching historical levels is clearly the manifestation of a regime's desperation to raise revenue, despite the consequences and hardship on the citizenry.

Madam Speaker, I want to deal a little bit again with reality, and I will do so throughout my presentation. Madam, there are persons living in houses to which, at this very moment, they can barely pay their mortgage. And I am sure every MP sitting in this House face constituents on their office days who are facing these types of problems. Madam Speaker, imagine, with no assistance from the Government, someone who is left a house by their parents, who over an inordinate number of years, block by block—and we know how things go—one pallet this month, two pallets next two months and that is how persons build when we say, “block by block”, with the help of family and friends, would have constructed a home. Madam Speaker, the Government, which did not help at all, at all, is now demanding your property tax. Madam Speaker, we are on this side ask: Where is the fairness? Where is the equity? Where is the justification for this heartless imposition of this property tax? Madam Speaker, the audacity of the Government demanding income from your asset.

Madam Speaker, remember when I coined the phrase in this House? I am sure you would remember this. I used it a couple times in a few contributions, where I stated, people in this country are becoming income poor and facing asset risk, and I stand by that. Nothing better describes this current situation, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, property tax would only serve to further destabilize the economy at this time and also place additional increases in the cost of living in already depressed circumstances. Madam Speaker, this imposition would further contribute to increased unemployment levels and continued reduced business activities. Madam Speaker, my colleagues would expand on this dagger called property tax, which has been stuck in the heart of the population simply because they scrimped and saved to acquire a house and now they are punished for their thriftiness.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, all in all, the Government wants you to be exposed to elements. “Rain must wet yuh and sun must bun yuh”. Then they will sit back and advise you to ride a bicycle, use a coal pot and eat macaroni pie less often, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, imagine that. This regime even attacks what is considered a staple in our Sunday lunch. Even our food culture is under threat, not just our standard of living. Madam Speaker, I ask: How do they sleep at night knowing the immense pain and suffering that they have imposed on this fragile population through their inefficiencies, Madam Speaker?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, since this Government assumed office, they have a fixation on increasing fuel prices. You see, Madam Speaker, their solution to financial management is to tax, tax, tax and increase fuel prices. Madam Speaker, let me look at what they have done since assuming office, relative to the prices for super gasoline, which is a fuel normally used by the average citizens. And I want to refer to a piece by Jason Alexander in June 2022, and the history of these prices,

Madam Speaker and I state: October, 05, 2015, super gasoline, TT \$3.11 per litre; April 08, 2016, TT \$3.58 per litre; October 2017, TT \$3.97 per litre; October 01, 2018, TT \$4.97 per litre; and April 19, 2022, TT \$5.97 per litre. Madam Speaker, everybody knows that increases in the cost of transportation via fuel hikes will ultimately result in increased cost of living. Every first-term economic or management student knows this, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I want to look back a little at the father of the PNM, Dr. Eric Williams. Madam Speaker, when he conceptualized the fuel subsidy, he saw it as an equalizing tool wherein this initiative, allowing for every citizens to, at least, benefit from the energy windfall via fuel or electricity. Madam Speaker, whilst not the greatest mechanism for sharing the national pie, people, at least, got the crumb of the crumbs. But the current regime is so callous that they will not even allow the poor that bit of support or even the crumb, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it boils down to, this Government has totally disregarded the blood, the sweat, the tears and efforts of the poor and vulnerable in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: It boils down to where they have totally condemned the poor and vulnerable to further misery with a colossal albatross, an oversized burden on their backs, Madam Speaker.

2.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, despite all these influencing and deleterious factors, which are further occasioning economic harm to the population, this regime continues to meander along, creating blunder after blunder which the already burdened society will inevitably have to ultimately foot the bill. And I just say this, watch out for “Nelson-gate”, and I move on, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, when they speak, they will advance that they have removed

VAT, they have removed value added tax on some food items; given a one-off fuel grant to pensioners, they would say that, Madam Speaker—they have given a one-off fuel grant to pensions and recipients of social services grants. But, Madam Speaker, in reality, ask anyone of them on the Government Bench if they have spoken to the citizens and, Madam Speaker, in reality, ask anyone of them, meaning the recipients, whether their lives improved or advanced by this one-off grant. Madam Speaker, this ploy did not provide any sustaining effect. When you are planning mechanisms such as this, relief mechanisms, of course, you look at the sustainable aspect of it and this ploy of course did not provide any sustaining effect on their cost of living nor reduced food prices for the citizens who would have been in receipt of those grants.

Madam Speaker, I now look a little bit at the Minister of Trade and Industry as it relates to food prices. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Trade and Industry of this Government of Trinidad and Tobago has went on to warn people to exercise caution, Madam Speaker, when using their purchasing power. Can you imagine that, Madam Speaker? Madam Speaker, nonetheless, even the Ministry of Trade and Industry admitted that customers continue to face increased costs, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, if the Government mentioned a number of measures in this article but then admits that they are not having a big impact, Madam Speaker, we have to ask, what is next in this country?

Madam Speaker, I refer to a *Newsday* article when I am speaking here, January 18, 2023, where the:

“Trade Minister urges Trinidad and Tobago to shop smarter as food prices too high”.

Madam Speaker, I do not want to say, what a joke, but what an insult to our citizens of this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, *Loop News*, March 01, 2022:

Ministry of Trade and Industry—“...notes rising food prices, tells the public to shop wisely”.

Madam Speaker, wisely? Madam Speaker, let them go to the supermarkets in this country and see how people picking up, in local parlance, “chirrip-chirrip”—Madam Speaker, “chirrip-chirrip”. You hear them when you are in the supermarket, when they bounce me up, Madam Speaker, “Oh, God, girl, yuh know grocery prices real high, real high. When we will get this Government out of power?”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, the truth and the fact of the matter is the Government must get serious. The Government must realize that radical measures are required to combat escalating food prices in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, finally, the nation is calling on the Government, through this Motion, to outline the short-term strategies, whether by, Madam Speaker, reversing the fuel hike to pre-budget figures, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the nation is calling on the Government, through this Motion, to outline the short-term strategies, whether by postponing the impending utility rate increase until the citizens’ economic plight is addressed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, the nation is calling for short-term strategies, through this Motion, whether by lowering or removing VAT on all foodstuff, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, and I have to remind them that under the hon. Member for Siparia, under her regime, VAT was removed from basically all food items in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, the nation, through this Motion, is also calling for short-term strategies, whether by lowering import duties and VAT on pharmaceutical and medical supplies. You would hear it from our senior citizens, “All of my pension going in medication,” and that is the reality, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, let me highlight some medium-term measures as my Motion states.

Some medium-term measures, whether it be provision of fiscal incentives of food companies locally, Madam Speaker; whether it be, Madam Speaker, revitalizing and overhauling the entire agricultural sector. And when I speak of the agricultural sector, why do we not look at cultivating and placing all arable lands into production, Madam Speaker?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Our farmers are screaming, our farmers are pleading, why do we not look at incentivizing our farmers? Madam Speaker, I looked at you recently at a particular meeting. Madam Speaker, when it comes to some medium-term measures, we must—and I speak about our farmers—address praedial larceny, and my colleagues will expand on this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, which ought to be the beacon in this food crisis fight, remains stagnated, devoid of direction, bereft of ideas, saddled with incompetency, leaderless, clueless, Madam

Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—whilst our population continues to starve and the food import bill remains astronomically high in our country.

Madam Speaker, I am sure we all remember the food box programme which was helping the poor and vulnerable and it was stopped. Remember they said in a short space of time they are reviewing this and in a short space of time they will bring forth a plan and that plan was supposed to be revealed. Madam Speaker, nothing to date.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I want to quickly look at some long-term measures. Madam Speaker, in terms of long-term measures, what is the mechanism to reduce the challenges faced by the business sector? Madam Speaker, what is being done to ease the conduct of business in this country? Are there any plans for new fiscal incentives? Madam Speaker, what about collaboration? Are there any collaborative efforts and partnering efforts with foreign investors, Madam Speaker? Madam Speaker, the nation is yearning for urgent relief and those in Chaguanas East and all other constituencies in Trinidad and Tobago are demanding some form of intervention, and I intend to represent their concerns through this Motion.

Madam Speaker, the Government can no longer sit idly whilst the nation plunges into poverty, whilst our nation is unable to eat, with alarming increases in destitution. Madam Speaker, the only hope and salvation resides in the removal of this uncaring—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—blinkered regime who smiles and ridicules the population because

of their hardship. Madam Speaker, I challenge them. They will come here to give you flowery figures today and tell you, “We did this and we did that.” But, Madam Speaker, I want to quote—Madam Speaker, some of them very well know that everything that I am speaking here today is the truth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I want to quote—and the Member for Toco/Sangre Grande:

“Poverty in a time of Covid”.

Daily *Express*, October 30, 2020:

“I know of their struggles. No money. No income. I know about the daily crises some people face.”

Sitting on the Government Bench, Madam Speaker, what are you saying or doing among your peers?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, that was 2020, we are now in 2023. What are you doing or saying among your peers?

Madam Speaker, how many more hampers can we, as MPs, give and provide to our constituents? Madam Speakers, as an MP, I can tell you, I am always looking for ideas and sometimes I feel as though I am running out of ideas, but I can stand proud to say, I try my very best but it is also hard.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, do you remember Income Support Grant? Madam Speaker, do you remember food support grant? Madam Speaker, do you remember Salary Relief Grant? And I speak poverty in a time of COVID. Madam Speaker, to date, people in this country are awaiting phase one payments.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: So we cannot pay phase one payments but we will come here today to say that we are doing all that is good and well to protect the vulnerable in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity to say to the Government, pay these people quickly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, some persons are banking on that; some persons are awaiting that; some persons, if they get that today, they will head straight to the grocery to make a monthly grocery to feed their families, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, as I close, this dastardly treatment must cease and this Motion is but the first step towards the attainment of that noble goal, Madam Speaker; that noble goal. Madam Speaker, we on this side, the Bench of the UNC, I say, we will continue to fight for you, the members of this population. We will continue to fight for your bread and butter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, we will continue to do all that it takes to state the wrong and recommend the best for our citizens of this country. Madam Speaker, I want to say to you, it will fix, you know, it will fix. We on this side are on the road to victory, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Their time is short and our time is near, Madam Speaker. At this time, with those few words, I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West.

Mr. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, it is my honour to second this Motion and I reserve

the right to speak thereafter.

Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Public Utilities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I rise this afternoon to respond to this Motion that was now introduced in this House by the hon. Member for Chaguanas East. In reading the Motion, Madam Speaker, I take into consideration my duty and my responsibility as a Member of Parliament of this House, representing the constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West, as well as in my ministerial capacity as the Minister of Public Utilities.

But in listening to the Motion, as presented by the hon. Member for Chaguanas East, I often wonder, and I asked myself during her presentation—and I recognized she read her presentation, because obviously she is not the author of that presentation, because she was slavishly reading that presentation. And the author of that presentation—because I refuse to believe; I refuse to believe—

2.45 p.m.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1). If the Chair had a problem with the Member reading, an appropriate Standing Order would have been raised.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Barataria/San Juan, this is not an opportunity to make speeches.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thanks for your protection.

And listening to the words of that Motion, as read out slavishly by the

Member for Chaguanas East, I am of the view that the author of that presentation is a person—

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(6), because my colleague took ownership of her speech.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Hon. M. Gonzales: —that the author of that presentation, Madam Speaker, is full of hate and is full of bitterness, and is not a patriot of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Because listening to that presentation, Madam Speaker—

Mr. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, 48(4). He is using extremely offensive and insulting language.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Continue.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Because in listening to that presentation, that is not the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago that we know.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: This is not the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago that we know. The hon. Member for Chaguanas East stood there, as a Member of Parliament of this House, speaking about the rising cost of living and the issues affecting the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and not at one point speak and made reference to the global context of the challenges that we face as a people in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: As we put on our television, we listen to our radios and we

read the newspapers, Trinidad and Tobago, like every other country in this world, is faced with many challenges, many of which are beyond us; many of which are beyond us.

In the great America, in the great United Kingdom, in all parts of North America, Central America, South America, the rising cost of living brought about by COVID and the war in Ukraine, and so many other international issues that are putting pressures on inflationary matters all across the world, governments are faced with challenges to protect their citizens, especially the weak and the vulnerable. I dare say, Madam Speaker, that as we sit every week to govern this country, and as Members of Parliament, we make decisions that are in the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And as a PNM Government we are very proud, and very proud of our record.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: We are very proud of our record. We run a social safety net of \$5 billion to protect our citizens in this country. I saw on television, and I saw on social media a picture by the same Member of Chaguanas East with a bag running out of St. Vincent Street, out of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, to get grants for her constituents, like all of us. And she stood there for how many—the hon. Member, Madam Speaker—never made reference to the fact that her constituents have been beneficiaries of grants and all kinds of protection and social programmes issued by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

The hon. Member stood there and used words, put on the records of this Parliament all kinds of descriptives about this country and what this country is, crafting in her mind and the minds of her viewers and listeners and supporters. We do not attach ourselves to this. Yes, we have our challenges, like any other

country, but we have a record that we protected our citizens in the most difficult circumstances, in areas where no other country in the Caribbean can boast of having the resources to protect their citizens, as we did in Trinidad and Tobago; as we did in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, during this difficulty—and the hon. Members spoke about we will come with facts and figures. Yes, we will come with facts and figures, because nothing that you said, nothing in her presentation can be supported by facts and figures, and she knows that. So we will come with facts and figures, and come with other things and contradict what we are saying. Because you cannot support what you have said with facts and figures. You cannot.

Madam Speaker, as I have said, we spend every single day governing this country and ensuring that we have programmes in place to move the development programme forward, and to protect the weak and to protect the vulnerable citizens of this country.

We are also Members of Parliament. We see our constituents on a daily basis. We know their pains and we know their sufferings, and that is the reason why we continue to run a social safety programme of over \$5 billion in just one Ministry; in just one Ministry.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And because of the prudence, and because of the management of the circumstances in this country, that despite the ravages of COVID, this Government was able to deliver 25,100 grants to existing beneficiaries of food support.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Where is the callousness that the Member referred to? Where is the albatross? The only albatross that is around the necks of the people of this country is the UNC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is the only albatross. She comes to this Parliament and refers to callousness and wickedness, and albatross and insult, and all of these adjectives. What is the hon. Member referring to? This is not Trinidad and Tobago that we know.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: This is not Trinidad and Tobago. We may have our political differences. We may have our differences. It is fair for us to have our differences. But as a Member of Parliament, when you come here and you make your contribution, do not put any dark blot on the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Do not do it. You are irresponsible when you get on like that. Do not do it. Therefore, I say, the author of that presentation is full of hate and full of darkness—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: —is full of hate and full of darkness and, I dare say, full of evil.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(4) and 48(5), please, and (6).

Madam Speaker: Continue.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. This same Government that she referred to as callous—the hon. Member—

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I stand on Standing Order 48(5), please.

Madam Speaker: Members, we have said repeatedly, while the Standing Order speaks to honourable or portfolio, it is sometimes artificial to be saying “the honourable” all the time. Okay? Whether it is honourable or Member. Please continue.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. This Government in difficult circumstances, managing in difficult circumstances, working to protect the weak and the vulnerable citizens of this country, pursued a programme of fuel relief grants, where over 2,284 citizens benefited.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, 30,335 received an accelerated income tax refund under difficult circumstances. Salary relief grants, 87,000—the hon. Member referred to persons and citizens not receiving their grants. But the records at the Ministry of Finance reflect that over 87,000 citizens benefited from salary relief grants.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Food support for religious groups all over Trinidad and Tobago; Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Spiritual Baptists, religious groups of every persuasion receiving food support grants, so that they can assist their members in difficult circumstances.

Madam Speaker, over 140,000 market food boxes, each at the value—as a matter of fact, with a total value of \$81 million, pursued by this Government in difficult circumstances. So when the Member stands in this Parliament and talks about a callous government, an albatross around the necks of this Government, she can only be referring to the government of 2010 to 2015, and that is the reason why they are there, and we are here.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is the reason why. Madam Speaker, this Government pursued a programme of zero rating of a number of basic food items in fiscal 2022. And the Minister of Trade and Industry, I think she will join the debate and go into more details as to other programmes that the Government would have pursued, to ensure that there is food security for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, where we could have done it; where we could have done it, because there are many things that were outside of our control. But that which was within or control, we took the necessary decision, as best as we could, to protect the vulnerable citizens of this country.

The hon. Member referred to our food boxes for our students; our food boxes for students, the school feeding programme. I am advised that as of January 2023, over 59,429 students benefited from breakfast under this programme as of January 2023, and over 78,383 of or students benefited from lunches, Madam Speaker, serving over 800 schools all across Trinidad and Tobago. And therefore, I ask myself, what and who is the hon. Member referring to? It cannot be Trinidad and Tobago. It cannot be.

Yes, we may have our political differences, but to stand in the Parliament and describe your country, and describe the circumstances of your country in this particular way, when it was so far removed and devoid of reality, it is nothing but a disservice to your country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Nothing but a disservice. And that the role of the Opposition—we do not believe or agree that the Opposition should agree with everything that we present in this Parliament. But I would expect—and I sat and I listened to the hon. Member, as she would have presented proposals, point to areas in the policies of the Government, and present counterproposals, as you would

expect that an Opposition and Members of the Opposition should conduct themselves; point to our programmes, point to our policies that you are having issues with and put counterproposals, and let us have meaningful debate and meaningful discussions, so that we can advance the agenda of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Not to stand in the Parliament here and bad mouth and bad talk your country, and paint it in the worse possible way. That is nothing but a disservice, and this is not Trinidad and Tobago. This is not Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And that is the reason why they will not benefit and they will not participate in anything that is nation building in this country—nothing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: The hon. Member talked about rate increase, I will go into rate increase. I will talk about the role of the Regulated Industries Commission, and its decisions to engage in meaningful consultations with the people of Trinidad and Tobago—the length and breadth of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And you would expect Members of Parliament to mobilize their supporters and go and engage in meaningful discussion, but not to pull black coffins and engage in disruptive behaviour. That is the behaviour of the UNC. They are not about putting forward proposals and engaging in anything meaningful to advance this country. It is all about bacchanal, mayhem, confusions—I wanted to say lie, but I do not want to offend the Standing Orders. I will not say that.

3.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker: So do not say what you did not want to say and what you know you cannot say. So just withdraw that word and let us proceed.

Hon. M. Gonzales: I withdraw, Madam Speaker. I sincerely and honestly withdraw that word—but engage in fabrications and distortions and

misrepresentations, Madam Speaker, and bacchanal. That is what it is.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, all I can say is that the hon. Member who presented this Motion and the speech that she read is nothing but a dark day, another dark day in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. Nothing but that. Madam Speaker, over the last couple months, the Regulated Industries Commission has engaged itself into public consultations with respect to a business plan that was submitted to it by the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission justifying a rate review for electricity in Trinidad and Tobago. As part of its process, Madam Speaker, the RIC would have published its draft determination and engaged in discussions with all stakeholders in the national community as it seeks to arrive at a final recommendation to put before the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, according to the law, the RIC is mandated to conduct a rate review for water and electricity every five years. But the last time in Trinidad and Tobago a rate review was conducted was by a commission referred to as the Public Utilities Commission in 1993, I am told, even before the RIC came into legal existence, the RIC Act being passed in 1998. So the RIC has never conducted, since its incorporation into statute, a rate review for water in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. The last time, however, with respect to electricity, a review was conducted in 2006 and came into effect, I am advised, in 2009, almost over 20 years ago. And we await the work of the RIC, Madam Speaker. It is an independent commission. And I am advised that we, on the Executive arm of the State, must stay far from this process because the Government will have a role to say and a role to play at the most appropriate time.

But in the time being, Madam Speaker, we allow the independent

commission to do its work and to present its finding to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and a decision made. Madam Speaker, any matter, with respect to utility rate increases or review in any part of the world, will be a contentious issue, and that one that needs to be managed, and managed sensibly and responsibly, especially by people who occupy public office and people who are members of Parliament.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

And therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have made a concerted effort to stay far away from this process to allow the RIC to do its work because, as a Member of Parliament and as a Minister in a Cabinet, serving in a Cabinet, the work of the RIC will be presented and the Government will have its say. But what we have witnessed, unfortunately, is a consultation process that has been hijacked by all kinds of political operatives, engaging in all kinds of disgraceful conduct, engaged in all kinds of conduct, disrespecting members of the RIC, and trying to link them to the Executive arm of the State, often times referring to them in all kinds of ways that I do not wish to repeat in this House, but I dare say, it is very unfortunate. And I call on all Members of Parliament, especially Members of Parliament on the other side, to please conduct yourself with honour and dignity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Please conduct yourself with honour and dignity. Because, yes, you have your role and you have your responsibility, but to behave in the way that you behave, as it is clear and it is evident, it is not the way that we should conduct and order ourselves in this country, because the young people are looking at us. The young people are looking at us. And when we behave in this way, we do this country great disservice and dishonour. And I ask myself, and I ask my friends opposite, my honourable friends opposite, please, please, please, conduct

yourself with dignity. And I call upon, therefore, the hon. Member for Siparia, the Leader of the Opposition, to rein in her colleagues and allow the RIC to do its work, and to do so unimpeded and uninterrupted.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Rein in your colleagues.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(6). What is the Member alluding to in relation to—[*Inaudible*—the Member for Siparia to rein in her colleagues?

Hon. Member: Yes. Yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(8), this Motion is not about the Opposition. It is about the failure of that Government and—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed. Overruled.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the issue of rates in Trinidad and Tobago—because—

Mr. Charles: Standing Order—[*Inaudible*—the issue of race, did I hear you?

Hon. M. Gonzales: Rates.

Hon. Members: Rates.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: Wow! Wow!

Mr. Charles: I withdraw. I withdraw.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed. Proceed, Member.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Okay. Members. Members, “I doh need no additional assistance”. Proceed.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think he fell asleep for a short while. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member who presented this Motion talked about this Government being an albatross and being callous, and all of these things, which I rejected, reject out of hand, and being baseless. But let me put in the context of the rate review debate in Trinidad and Tobago. Let me put certain facts in the public domain.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, with respect to the electricity tariffs in the Caribbean, I can tell you that in Trinidad and Tobago, we have an electricity tariff of 52 cents, US cents, per kilowatt per hour. But let us now compare that with what obtains in the entire region, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And according to all of the data and all of the arrangements that were put in place by a number of Caribbean jurisdictions, comparing the rates for water and electricity, Trinidad and Tobago is among the only country in the Caribbean that has the lowest rates for water and electricity, Mr. Deputy Speaker. According to data provided via the International Benchmarking Network, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 2022, Trinidad and Tobago water rate of 31 US cents per cubic metre was the lowest in the Caribbean. Further, data from the Inter-American Development Bank, 2021, the Caribbean Water Study indicated that in 2019, WASA’s average monthly residential water bill of 15 cubic metres of water is US \$4.42, was the lowest among Caribbean countries, some 81 per cent lower than the average of US \$23.87.

With respect to electricity, GlobalPetrolPrices.com as at September 2022, Trinidad and Tobago had the second lowest electricity tariff of 0.052 per kilowatt per hour in the Caribbean region, Cuba being the other Caribbean country with a lower electricity tariff, and globally Trinidad and Tobago had the 23rd lowest residential

electricity tariff in the world out of 147 countries.

For comparison, the average price of electricity in the world for that period was US \$0.160 per kilowatt per hour for household, and in Trinidad and Tobago for US \$0.062 per kilowatt per hour—52. And therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, having one of the lowest rates for water and electricity, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago maintained a subsidy programme for both water and electricity even in difficult circumstances coming out of the global pandemic. The Government maintained these lowest rates for water and electricity. And therefore, that is the reason why I stood here and took serious issue with the position that was put forward in this Parliament by the Member for Chaguanas East.

Because with all of the reference that she made, the hon. Member made, with respect to utility rates and the impending discussions by the Regulated Industries Commission, the hon. Member made no reference to the fact that we continue to maintain a subsidy arrangement in place for water and electricity even in difficult financial circumstances and even with the lowest prices for water and electricity. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can tell you, in 2022, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago introduced an electricity rebate programme, increasing that programme from 25 per cent to 35 per cent for our Rate A domestic customers' accounts with electricity billings of \$300 and below, and apply it directly to customers, thereby benefiting over 220,000 citizens to the tune of \$68 million annually.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is no country in the entire Caribbean, and almost in the entire world, with such low rates for electricity where the Government introduced a further programme of a rate rebate system to further benefit over 220 citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is the record of Trinidad and Tobago. That is the Trinidad and Tobago that we know. A country, yes, with challenges, as any other country in the world, but we can boast of so many programmes and projects in place, that we put in place to benefit the weak and the vulnerable citizens in this country.

And despite that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we go on with another social programme under the Ministry of Public Utilities, the Utilities Assistance Programme. So in addition to the 35 per cent rebate programme, benefiting over 220,000 citizens, there is also a Utility Assistance Programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which extends a subsidy to low income customers of T&TEC and WASA by an application to a credit to the beneficiary utility bill. T&TEC residential customers with an average consumption of over three billing periods of 500 kilowatts per hour or less benefit from an electricity subsidy of up to \$200 per bill or a maximum of \$1,200 annually. And this subsidy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is applied directly to so many customers' bills.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, your initial speaking time has elapsed, you have an additional 15 minutes. You care to avail yourself?

Hon. M. Gonzales: I am gracious to take the extra 15 minutes, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. M. Gonzales: And thank you very much. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to that, the Ministry of Public Utilities maintained its Residential Electrification Assistance Programme, REAP, where over the last five years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, thousands of citizens in east, in west, in central, in south, and in Tobago benefited from this Residential Electrification Assistance Programme, whereby citizens who cannot afford to wire their house or whose wiring in their house may have been

compromised over the years, and may not have the wherewithal to engage in restoration work, we run this social programme to assist many of our citizens.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can tell you, because of the success of this programme, I have dedicated time and energy to provide the necessary resources to the Ministry of Public Utilities to ensure that this programme is expanded to continue to provide support to many of our vulnerable citizens in this country; many of our vulnerable citizens in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3.15 p.m.

Utility assistance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Many of our citizens, low income earners, pensioners, et cetera, that despite low electricity rates for water and electricity, under our bill assistance programme, thousands of our pensioners and vulnerable citizens benefit from our bill assistance programme where we pay the bills for water and electricity for these vulnerable groups, benefiting over 14,000 citizens on an annual basis. This is the Trinidad and Tobago that we know, and not the Trinidad and Tobago as described by the hon. Member for Chaguanas East. This is the Trinidad and Tobago that we know, that despite difficult circumstances, we maintain these programmes because we recognize that as we make decisions to benefit and to keep this country on an even keel, and to ensure that our future generation may have a country and will have a country to benefit and inherit, and to protect the financial interest, that we have to make decisions sometimes, some of them may be unpopular, but as we do so, we must protect the weak and the vulnerable citizens. We must do that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am pleased to tell you that under our Utilities Assistance Programme, we have our water tank assistance programme where many communities outside of the water distribution grid are on a water schedule. We

ensure that you have sufficient storage for water, so that outside of your schedule you may have some level of storage that will take you to another schedule as we continue to pursue programmes to improve the levels of service for water all across Trinidad and Tobago.

I can tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, thousands of citizens are now beneficiaries of this programme. Many of the constituents of my friends opposite are beneficiaries to this particular programme. In Moruga, in Chaguanas East, in Chaguanas West, all over Trinidad and Tobago, they are all beneficiaries of this programme.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Because I can tell, I can tell you, when these files are put before my desk, I do not see race, I do not see religion, I do not see politics, I see honourable citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who must and shall benefit as we do in the PNM; as we do.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And I wish, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we had all the resources at my disposal, I wish I had all the resources at my disposal—I am being disturbed by rumblings on the other side, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I need to speak in some silence.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members—Members, please, silence. Proceed.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You see, they do not like to hear the truth. They like to sit and thump their desks to hear wickedness about Trinidad and Tobago and to spread wickedness about Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: But to hear facts—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. M. Gonzales: Oh, Lord!

Mr. Ratiram:—I rise on Standing Order 48(4), please. The Member can do better than that.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, use a different word. Use a different word.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will use a different word. But they like to thump their desks at things that do not represent Trinidad and Tobago, that do not represent the red, white and black—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—that do not represent our Coat of Arms.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, every single day we go to our jobs, we listen to our constituents, we work for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We do not pose a risk to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And I can tell you, and I am advised by the staff and the technical officers of the Ministry of Public Utilities that given the trajectory that we have engaged and embarked upon, that by the end of this financial year, nearly 33,000 citizens would have benefited from some of the social programmes under the Ministry of Public Utilities: our water tank assistance programme, our Residential Electrification Assistance Programme—our water tank assistance programme, our electrification programme, and over 230,000 citizens will benefit from our 35 per cent rebate on electricity in Trinidad and Tobago.

And if the hon. Member wants to put forward counter proposals, we are more than willing to listen. What about these projects and these programmes that you are opposed to? What about these programmes that you opposed to? Because we are prepared to engage in meaningful debate and discussions, because that is what parliamentary debate and Parliament is all about. But do not come here and

make big statements describing your country in the worst possible way, because that does not represent us.

We continue to have free health care system in this country. We continue to pay our senior citizens their grants, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Our schools continue to provide education for our children, despite difficult circumstances. Our public servants continue to go to work and have their jobs, even in difficult circumstances. We continue to run our social safety net and our social programme to benefit the vulnerable and the weak citizens of this country, whilst we move our development programme forward. And therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Motion is devoid of logic. It does not represent Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: It is unpatriotic, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We cast it aside. It does not represent our children. It does not represent nothing that we stand for and believe in Trinidad and Tobago. And therefore, this House should reject it out of hand. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: Listen to class now. Listen to class, erudition and enlightenment.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Proceed from now, Member.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: As I listened to the hon. Member who preceded

me, it was very clear that he does not know the reality of the quality of life of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And before I say more, I think it is important for us to remember the Motion that has been brought before this House for debate. Because the hon. Member seems to have completely neglected the Motion and went off on his own merry chase looking and finding ghosts behind every post. So then permit me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to read the Motion and to congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Chaguanas East—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and I endorse the comments made by the hon. Member. So here we are with a Motion dealing with the quality of life, the high cost of living and so on, and the Motion reads as follows:

“Whereas it is the responsibility of the Government to ensure the well-being of its citizens by facilitating a decent standard of living and quality of life;

And whereas the impending increase in utility rates and the imminent imposition of property taxes will further escalate cost of living and the inflation rate;

And whereas the consistent increases in fuel prices have further negatively impacted the cost of living;

And whereas this Government has failed to take proactive measures to cushion the economic fallouts brought about by the escalating prices of essential goods and services:

Be it resolved that this House call on the Government to outline its short, medium and long term strategies to systematically reduce the escalating and uncontrollable increase in the price of essential goods and services accessed

by the population of Trinidad and Tobago;

Be it further resolved that this House call on the Government to take the necessary urgent action to immediately remedy the negative effects upon those living below the poverty line.”

So we listened to the hon. Member and nothing within his contribution was directly related and relevant to the issues raised by my colleague from Chaguanas East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And, you know, listening to him, at the start he says, “The Motion as presented, as piloted by Chaguanas East failed to take into account what is happening worldwide,” Mr. Deputy Speaker. So here it was, blame Kamla and the UNC. Now you are going to blame the whole world because of what is happening in the world and then you ended by calling on Siparia, blame Kamla again. But I am not taking that blame, not today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Because you want to say to Chaguanas East, you put forward no plans, no proposals, nothing. We have done that time and time again. But it is your job, you are the Government, you took charge, you are in charge now and it is your job, based on this Motion, to tell us what are your plans, what are your strategies for dealing with the issues in the public domain, impacting on the lives of citizens, on the quality of lives of citizens in our land. And the Government talked about the school feeding programme. The Member spoke of several things he says the Government is doing but fails to tell us that school feeding programme was there before them, before this Government came into office—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —fails to tell us that they have reduced that programme, a programme to help the poor children in this country. They reduced it. They reduced the funding—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—in the same way they have reduced the GATE Programme to help people access proper education. The Member speaks about Salary Relief Grants, talks about food boxes, other programmes that they put into place, but again does not tell us all that has stopped now. They have stopped all those programmes to assist people—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—to help those who would be in need, all of that has stopped. And so, talking about water tanks, talk to my MPs. Any of your constituents got any water tank?

Hon. Members: No!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Right now, in Penal, in my constituency, no water in the taps for weeks upon weeks; in other constituencies. The Member is so boldface and brass face to talk about water tank.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So no plan, no programme, no policies of how to improve the quality of life and therefore, resting back on the laurels of past things that happened. You have met the school feeding programme, what did you do? You come to tell us, you are feeding children, when, in fact, you have broken down—you have stopped it. You stopped the food box programme, that stopped. You mentioned that as something you are doing. You stopped it. You talked about phase one, income support; Salary Relief Grant; food support. Persons still have not received the promised grants under these Heads. And, of course, those

have also stopped, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But you talked about the water tanks, I have mentioned that, all talks speak of effectiveness of this water tank programme. Yes, it is a great programme, and I am glad for those who got it. But the majority of those who need it, have not received it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And up to today, as I speak, my constituents and many others in the Trinidad and Tobago are suffering for lack of water.

So school feeding programme, in 2015, over \$250 million, the last year we were in office, spent on the school feeding programme. Today, \$136 million by 2019. The COVID year saw no help for students during that time.

So these are idle boasts, empty boasts by the hon. Member on the other side who spoke. And then, the Minister goes into a whole tirade about the RIC and it appeared to me that he was building and making a case for increasing the utility rates.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Telling us in the Caribbean, we have the lowest rate for water and the lowest rate for electricity, “blah, blah, blah, blah, blah”. We have the lowest—so his contribution was not about to help people, but it was about how to increase prices and bring further hardship.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So I reject outright the allegations made by that hon. Member about the conduct and behaviour of persons attending the RIC consultations. I reject that outright as untrue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Members of the public attend those consultations and they voiced their frustration, they voiced their concerns, and I do not know

how you can say it is the UNC. I do not know if they were wearing UNC tee shirts. I do not know if it was emblazoned on their “forid”, “Look, I am a UNC and I am behaving bad.” How could you tell they were UNC people? How do you know when members of the public come because they are so fed up and frustrated and worried you are saying they were UNC?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Hon. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. All right? Each one will have the opportunity—

Mr. Indarsingh: Arouca/Maloney is imputing—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, please, Couva South. Pointe-a-Pierre, hold on. Again, all Members will have the opportunity to enter the debate, right?—for this particular Motion. So please proceed.

3.30 p.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I thank you, hon. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Okay. Okay. You will have your turn to speak. Sir.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members. Member. I only recognize the Member for Siparia at this time. Proceed, Member.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. I am making the point that the allegation that they have, “UNC people behaving badly” and their conduct and calling on the Member for Siparia to rein in our colleagues, and so on—yes, there were some MPs, some colleagues were in those consultations. But you cannot ascribe the kind of conduct—you are saying that, it is the UNC and it is the UNC—they were members of the public. And I want to remind you, Deputy

Speaker, because I know you have a good eye and ear for history. We celebrate how many years today?

Hon. Members: Of what?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Or yesterday, yeah.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, no, Members please. Members. Members! Members on both sides. No.

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Couva South, I am on my legs. MP for Princes Town. Members on both sides, please. Member for Naparima, thanks. Members on both sides. Proceed, hon. Member.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I thank you again, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am saying that we disassociate from those who are saying it and I was saying that we celebrated, either yesterday or today, the water riots that you say you want to celebrate those. But I want to remind the Government of those water riots in 1903, eh, 1903—and if there are people out there, we are doing electricity rates, the Minister has signalled that WASA has sent numbers for increasing water rates as well, go, as they say, haste and slowly. Because the population, the majority are living at the breaking point in terms of the economy, in terms of their being able to purchase food and, you know, help themselves and help their families. So, we have to go haste and slowly, as I said.

The Member said that they have zero rated some items in terms of VAT, value added tax. That is one of the greatest hoaxes ever of this Government who came in to say we are reducing VAT from 15 per cent to what?—12 per cent but then you put it across the line, across the board. We had over 7,000 food items zero rated.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So that is—it is giving with the left hand, as they say—giving with the right hand and taking it back with the left hand. So I am not buying the zero rating in terms of the VAT items.

And then, the hon. Member talked to us about, he wants facts and figures. The Member for Chaguanas East had no facts or figures. I wonder if he has any—the hon. Member—if he does have any of those facts and figures? Because if he does, he will see the facts and the figures are totally against his reading and viewing of the population in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Totally contrary, what the Member is saying; totally contrary to wanting to attack Members on this side as painting us in a dark place and so on. We are in a dark place. Trinidad and Tobago is in a dark hole and people are indeed suffering.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So what is one set of data that you can use, facts and figures that could be used, that the Member says Chaguanas East did not present? Chaguanas East gave us the narrative and so on. Others will come and will speak. Let me give you some of that data.

One indicator of whether people are able to sustain themselves and their families has to do with whether they have a job or they do not have a job. Since this Government came into office, thousands of persons have lost their jobs; thousands of persons.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: There are two measures here now, two areas where we get data, with respect to employment numbers, jobs and so on, in the

country, none of which is totally up to date but we can at least use some of that data, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There is CSO data and there is NIB data, which gives us an inclination, an idea of what is happening with jobs in Trinidad and Tobago.

The latest CSO data on the number of persons employed up to the third quarter of 2022 was 562,400 persons. However, when we look at the last quarter of 2015, we would see that there were more persons then employed. In other words, from 2015 to now, over 65,000 persons have lost their jobs under this Government up to last year; over 65,000. This is CSO data, Central Bank data. This is not Kamla's data, or any of us. This is the CSO data telling us over 65,000 persons have lost their jobs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Now, CSO data is not a real figure. How they operate, they use an estimated number. So estimated by CSO, over 65,200 persons have lost their jobs since this Government came into office. The NIB data gives us another figure, which might be closer to the truth. Because what it does, it is based on persons paying into the NIS system and so on. And you do not pay if you are not employed. So they pay persons employed.

When we look at NIB data, the data shows that, pre-pandemic, there were 112,000 persons who had dropped out; pre-pandemic, you know. So when the Member came to talk about the whole world is suffering, the pandemic and the COVID, blame COVID—everything is blame COVID. Well, “de COVID gone”. Whom are you blaming now? “You gone back” again to blaming Kamla and the UNC. So more than 112,000 persons had dropped off the employment roll as at June 30, 2020; 112,000 had dropped off the roll.

The CSO is telling us, okay, estimated 65,200 persons lost jobs. NIB data tells us 112,800 people have lost their jobs. What does that mean? When a person

loses their job, what happens to the family? In most cases, that person is the sole breadwinner for that family to take care of wife, children, sometimes grandchildren. What happens in that home if you do not have a job? All the income support grants that the Minister spoke about, all The Salary Relief Grants the Minister spoke about, all those programmes have shut down. I mentioned it before; shut down. So when you send a man home, you know there was nothing harder for a man in a house or a woman—we have a lot of single mothers who are the working breadwinners of their families, when they lose their job, do you know what it is for that person to go home to wonder what are they going to give their children to eat? What are you going to put on the table for them to eat? And when the Member speaks so glibly, they do not have a clue as to what is happening in this country amongst the poor people, you know, they do not have a clue. They do not have a clue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Member for Chaguanas East raised some of the headlines in the newspapers and this has been ongoing; the crime, the lamentation of people suffering because of not having a job, not being able to put food on their table. So whether we use NIB stats or whether we use the CSO stats, there are more than 65,000 persons under this Government who have lost their jobs. As I say, without the job, how do you provide food and basic essentials for your family? How do you pay your rent? How do you pay that rent? How do you pay your mortgage? Because all those support systems, which were not fully implemented under the COVID, everything has gone. How are you going to be able to send your children properly dressed, properly resourced with the books and the equipment that they need, the clothing that they need?

So we see this level of joblessness and what does the Government have to

say about how you will help those families now who are in jeopardy, who are in need? The Minister did not spend a word telling us that. All these jobless people, how are you going to help them? How are you going to create jobs, sustainable jobs? Not a word. And this is where the Member for Chaguanas East said, tell us your strategies in the short term, in the medium term, in the long-term to deal with the concerns. And then wants to point fingers at us and say, hey, what is the role of the Opposition? What is the role, the Member is asking, of the Opposition? The role of the Opposition includes what we are attempting to do here today. That is part of the role of the Opposition; to raise the concerns of people, the citizenry, our constituents and to demand answers from the Government. Again, once more, no such answers were forthcoming.

When we look at prices—now, I talked about the joblessness, the amount of thousands of jobs lost. We could look at—the Minister says he wants facts and figures. Let us look at the prices because that is what he talked about in the Motion—the substantive Motion. We asked about the issue of increasing cost of living. It has to do with several things, food prices, for example. So, in spite of mass joblessness under this Government and their mismanagement of the economy, prices continue to rise.

Annual food prices increased by almost 14 per cent at last count by November 2022, last year. This means that if you were spending \$2,000 for your family on all your food for the month, you would have had to shell out more money. That increased by 14 per cent. This is at a time where citizens cannot find jobs. It seems that you are always reading, when you pick up the newspaper, about retrenchments and people losing jobs and businesses are closing down. If you look at the newspapers, Deputy Speaker, the food price increases are beyond crisis levels for many families. This is a reality borne out when we examine the

newspaper headlines such as:

“45.9% increase in food...”

That is like doubling.

“45.9% increase in food from 2015—2022...”

—from when we left office to today, 2015 to 2022. In the *Express* reported by a prominent economist on January 18, 2023:

“45.9% increase in food...”

Another headline from the *Express* 03 December, 2022:

“Prices...Sky High”.

A *Newsday* article from Ria Chaitram carries a foreboding message from the Government, 31 March, '22, reading:

“Trade Ministry: Food price hikes coming soon”.

The Minister, when he spoke, the hon. Member, he told us the Minister of Trade and Industry will come to tell us about what?—what the Ministry of Trade and Industry is doing about the matters raised in this Motion. But here it is, an article carrying on a message March 31, '22, Trade and Industry Ministry—the Trade and Industry Ministry is saying:

“...Food price hikes coming soon”.

Another article from the *Newsday*, Wednesday, 18 January, this year, 2023, by Elizabeth Gonzales, headline:

“Public on high food prices: We can't tighten belts anymore”.

And it goes on.

There is a food price crisis in this country. The Government can follow the Minister of Finance and play with words, as he did. When he was asked about the foreign exchange crisis, he said choosing to label it a shortage, if they wish, he did a spin on it otherwise. And the issue does not disappear. What is constant is that

families are in distress and they demand a proper response to bring relief from a Government which has demonstrated it is not prepared to provide same. We on this side, we are saying, if you cannot listen to the cries of families across the nation, then you know what to do, get out of office and call the election now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We have been visiting families across the nation and they are ready—we are ready to bring relief. So whatever you call—whenever you call that election, we shall deliver because we are on the road to victory. The UNC is on the road to victory.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Let us look at inflation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, facts and figures. I did not say it. This is the data. This is the data that is out there for anybody in the public to see; data from the Central Bank on the inflation rate. And we all know what inflation is, the increase in prices, increase in the cost of living. So let us look at inflation.

Inflation has risen the most this year since this Government came into office. And you do not have COVID now. You do not have the COVID blame game excuse anymore. Inflation has risen—Central Bank data in their January bulletin this year. January 2023, the Central Bank tells us that inflation has increased the most since this Government came into office.

Let us look at meat, for example, another basic item in most diets. Meat, protein, you need that. The data tells us from the Central Bank in January of this year—reported, sorry, at November '22, stood at 10 per cent, about, increase in meat—the cost in price of meat. This means chicken/poultry. This means beef, pork, goat, other protein items; meats at 10 per cent increase.

3.45 p.m.

When we look at fuel and lubricants, again, the Central Bank tells us there has been 35.4 per cent increase in fuel and lubricants in this country. I recall when the Minister of Finance sat in a nice big padded armchair and was laughing, laughing, laughing, laughing. He said, I have raised this thing—the fuel price—so many times and they “eh” riot yet. Do you all remember that? They have not rioted yet. It was a big joke how many times we raised it. But according to the Central Bank, fuel and lubricant prices rose last year by more than 35 per cent, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And what would that mean? It means everything, everything that depends on transport, every item is also going to be increased. Because everything that you have to buy or sell, you will need fuel for transporting the items from one place to the next, and that has had a serious effect as well on the cost living.

So for transport prices then, there has been a 14.6 per cent increase on transport prices. That should come as no surprise to anyone because, once again, because of the increased price of fuel. They are satisfied—Government is satisfied as long as citizens do not riot, they happy with that. Never mind the hardships that persons are undergoing.

I move along. Milk and cheese—and this part of my contribution is saying that with the increase in prices, there is more hardship, the cost of living has increased. Again, I am using the data from the Central Bank. Hon. Minister, take note, you want facts, you want figures. According to the Central Bank, the general price of milk, cheese and eggs rose by more than 27 per cent; 27 per cent. This was because the index increased from 99.1 in September 2015—I go back, that is

when we left office. From September 2015, that price index was 99.1 and now, in November '22, which is when we last have data for, it is—the price index is 126.3; 126.3. An increase, as I say here, in eggs and milk, cheese, dairy products, 27 per cent.

Overall, in food prices, citizens has been facing an onslaught in food price increases. Just last year, food prices rose by 14.5 per cent from January to November—last year alone. Over the seven and a half years of this Government, food prices increased by 33 per cent—overall food prices. With the Food Price Index rising 104.1, now to—sorry, an increase in the price index—Food Price Index by 33 per cent.

What this means then is that citizens were paying 1,000 to 2,000 for food every month when we left office. They would now, because of the increases, be paying up to \$700, 350 and so on—they would be paying a lot more increase on what they were already paying. We must recognize that these food price increases are in the face of over the 100,000 I mentioned of persons having lost their jobs. And public servants being offered what?—4 per cent, 4 per cent salary increases. So whilst prices are skyrocketing, you are not seeing commensurate increases for salaries for the public servants in our country.

Ultimately, public servants took the 4 per cent increase and it is clear that they will not even be able to cover the increase in food prices alone. I have given you Food Price Index over 30 per cent and so on. You are getting 4 per cent increase in salary, how are you going to cover these increases?

Prices effective Monday, 06 February, 2023, the nation experienced a hike

in the price of eggs. And we know for many, eggs constitute a basic food item. The announcement was that eggs would rise in price by \$3. However, this is from the egg producers to the supermarkets. So you have an increase of \$3 but then the supermarket will have a further write up added to the price. So the price of eggs, therefore, rose by roughly 15 per cent, from \$25 to \$28, to as high as \$29 to \$32. An increase of \$4 to \$5 on the retail end.

What cause this increase in egg prices? The Association of Trinidad and Tobago Table Egg Producers reportedly blamed the reason for price increase on the additional cost of fuel, the additional increase in the cost of fuel needed to distribute feed and, of course, the actual supplies of the eggs to the various outlets. The egg producers had faced removal of a fuel subsidy of almost 5 per cent. And we warned that all of this is as a result of Government's callous shut down at Pointe-a-Pierre—of that refinery at Pointe-a-Pierre.

This is a consequence of the PNM's actions of November 2018. Four years and two months later, you again being forced to pay for the actions of shutting down that refinery. So what does it all mean?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What does it mean? This was a Government where the hon. Prime Minister stood on a national platform and told the country that, the Government is not shutting down Petrotrin, and in case you were closing your fridge door and you did not hear me properly, I repeat, the Government is not closing down Petrotrin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And what happened? Soon thereafter, all, all, all, Petrotrin shut down. All, all, all, to be sent home. So when they raised the price of fuel now, this is as a result of that closure at Petrotrin, you know, because we now have to buy fuel. What we would be able to produce here and have jobs, created jobs, have people working, we are not producing that. We have to buy, we have to import, we have to find foreign exchange to buy the fuels that we used to produce in this country. And so, that price increases. So what does it mean?

Citizens last month were once more asked to shoulder another increase in prices for basic items. For many families, they would continue to cut back on food needed for a balanced diet. Your doctor would tell you that eggs are an excellent source of protein, vitamins and minerals, among health benefits. Eggs help maintain eyesight. You always hear of the wonders of carrots and other roots, but do not overlook eggs. There are many pluses to eggs but the prices have so increased. Sadly, there are many families who already cannot afford to provide eggs in their diet for their children, and this price hike will, of course, make it even harder for families.

The impending increase in electricity rates. The Minister spent a lot of time, as I said, justifying increasing the rates, telling us we have not done a consultation in how many years and so on. So his entire contribution on that aspect was the RIC consultations and to bring forward—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your original time is now spent. You are entitled to 15 minutes more minutes to complete your contribution, if you so wish.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I thank you very much, hon. Madam Speaker.

Thank you very much. My colleague who is our shadow person for public utilities will deal a little more on the points raised about the RIC consultations and what is happening. But I think something is very shocking with all of this, is that the revelation is that the RIC, in one of the consultations at the Centre of Excellence, indicated that despite not having an up-to-date Household Budgetary Survey to refer to, they have settled on rate increases as a solution to T&TEC's financial woes. So what they are saying is you have not seen that Household Budgetary Survey to know where people are, to know what they can afford to do, how much more they can pay. Nothing of that. This is one of the responses from the panel at the consultations.

Why is the Household Budgetary Survey and the Survey of Living Conditions not important in an exercise like this? The Survey of Living Conditions has been utilized as a main source of robust quantitative data to generate key poverty inequality and vulnerability indicators, and to evaluate living conditions at a point in time. The last such survey was done nine years ago, in 2014, under the Government I led.

And so, we are able to produce so many targeted social interventions from the milk grant, to the laptop programme, because we are using current, up-to-date data at that time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Household Budgetary Surveys are the only truly reliable source of household income and expenditure data which, when combined with other information that is collected, they will produce a source—a rich source

of socio-economic data. We have to be data driven. We cannot operate by vaps. Everything that we do should be data driven to inform our policies and programmes as we go forward.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In addition to this function, data from the survey have become critical in economic and social policy analyses and development planning. The last Household Budgetary Survey was done in 2008/2009. We are now in what?—2023. Why is it that we are not utilizing, or providing, or making sure that we can have that kind of data to plan future programmes for the people of this country?

It is alarming to note that the RIC is going ahead with proposals for rate increases with data that is nine years old; nine years old. That data will show that the conditions—the living conditions are much worse off today than nine years ago, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That data is nine years old; and 14 years old, that is for the Survey of Living Conditions; and 14 years old, in terms of the Household Budgetary Survey. How can we operate in this manner? How can we properly plan to help our disadvantaged or challenged citizens, our women, our children, all our citizens, when we are operating on things that are 14 years old and nine years old, that will be totally irrelevant in today's dark place that Trinidad has become? I have ask that question of the Government.

There is a joint Survey of Living Conditions and household budget being

done that is supposed to end in 2024, which is next year. In my respectful view, the RIC must cease and desist from any rate hikes—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —until, or they must first receive the result of the joint survey next year. Do not run ahead on old data, nine years and 14 years old. Hasten slowly, I say. You are really interfering with the quality of life of the citizens of this land. You do not have long to wait again. Do not rely on 14-year-old data and nine-year-old data.

The RIC must not impose electricity rate increases on citizens at this time. They must stop. They must await that and given how hard it is right now, this is not the time for those rate increases.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Results of the last Household Budgetary Survey, that last survey, the share of housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels was at 26.5 per cent. Health, education, transport was at 4 per cent and 14.3 per cent, respectively. But with the roll back of GATE, the removal of the majority of fuel subsidy, then there could be an encroaching on disposable income—greater encroachment on your disposable income.

Average monthly consumption expenditure in Mayaro, for example, Rio Claro, was just above \$5,000 per month, with the highest monthly income available for consumption expenditure being in Diego Martin \$5,700. So the survey is important. The proposed rate increases by electricity usage, again, will bring further hardship on the citizens of our country. So, Madam Speaker, as I said,

my colleague, the MP for Princes Town, will deal more on those RIC, rate hikes, and electricity and, of course, there is the plan for WASA as well

Now, the Member said, what are our plans? Why did not Chaguanas East come and bring plans, and bring proposals, and bring programmes? Why did the Member not do that? I will answer that in a moment. We have stood in this House and outside this House, and we have shared with the nation our transformation plan, the UNC transformation plan, with matters relating to dealing with—matters for a better quality of life, for reduction of prices, for the creation of jobs. We talked about the establishment of a food security fund. So a lot of that is out there and time will not permit me to deal with that today.

But let us take note. One of the preambles in the Motion deals specifically with fuel prices:

“Whereas the consistent increases in fuel prices have further negatively impacted the cost of living;”

We said the Government has betrayed and broken the socio-economic well-being of our nation through the decimation of affordable food prices. I want to remind us to remember six fuel price increases in seven years. This Government has imposed six fuel price increases in their seven years of office. Six. And that meant six times they have increased the price of fuel, not once, not twice, not even three, but seven times since they came into office.

Imagine a nation that was once the energy capital of the Caribbean, a nation with its own refinery, a nation that sold fuel to the entire Caribbean has now resorted to these increases in the price of fuel in seven years.

4.00 p.m.

In recent months, the Minister has been boasting about his fiscal surplus. He boasted about a country earning more than expected revenue in the last fiscal year. But what did the people of the nation get? They got an increase in the price of fuel again last year. When we left office, the price of super fuel was \$2.70 per litre. Do you know what it is today, hon. Madam Speaker? From \$2.70 per litre, it is now \$6.97, almost \$7. When my government left office, the price of diesel was \$1.50 per litre. Do you know what it is today? Today it is \$4.41 per litre. I mentioned it before that when the price of fuel goes up, every single item of expenditure goes up.

The subsidy, we must remember, was a return on investment to the owners of—okay—subsidy was investment to the owners of oil and gas, that was the citizens, it was part of our patrimony. The whole plan was to share the nation's wealth with citizens and this is where you got the subsidies on fuel; this is where we had low electricity rates, low water rates because it was felt that that patrimony, that wealth should be shared with all the citizens of our land.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The country must understand that the reason the price of fuel increased, it was not due to any war or the pandemic, nothing to do with that. This Government began removing the fuel subsidy years before the pandemic, years before the war, they were already moving that subsidy and, you know, of course, putting it wherever they wanted to spend.

So I have a few minutes left, I want to very clearly support and endorse what my colleague, the Member for Chaguanas East, has shared in this Chamber and I just want to quote from a newspaper article, which was dealing with food prices in the region. And where that article showed us very clearly that in other Caribbean

nations, their food prices were lower and they do not have the benefit that we had. So, this is an article Madam Speaker, newspaper:

“Expect increase in grocery bills as inflation causes prices to soar”. This is from the *Guardian* on the 27th of November, 2022, and they gave us some prices here, “Country, Products, Price”. Trinidad and Tobago—and they using a US price to round it off and make it compatible for comparison:

“sliced bread...Country T&T...(US \$2.21)...Price \$15 TT”

They give us a comparison for condensed milk. They give us for:

“Jamaica sliced bread \$445 JA...

condensed milk...\$327 JA...”

—and it continues with other items of prices.

However, Madam Speaker, as I started off, I will end. Under this Government, food prices have skyrocketed from where it was in 2015 when we left office, fuel prices have skyrocketed and the poverty levels have increased, so much so there is a great deal of suffering taking place in Trinidad and Tobago because of inflation, food price increase, fuel price. I commend again my colleague, Vandana Mohit, hon. Member for Chaguanas East. As I said before, I endorse the sentiments in her contribution. I thank you very much, Madam.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is expected, Madam Speaker, that Members of the Opposition would seek to dramatize this issue. That is their job. However, I do detect an element of frustration which must be borne out by the fact that the Members opposite will be spending 10 years in Opposition and that cannot be nice. So that would be responsible to a large extent for the content of the speeches here today and, Madam

Speaker, for the litany of inaccuracies, irrelevancies, bad information, misinformation, false information, untruths, et cetera.

I listened to the hon. Member for Siparia, and took the opportunity to go and check the Central Bank website and if one goes to that, if you go to the statistics page on the Central Bank website and you check the prices page, which will give you the index of retail prices for a number of things for—Madam Speaker, there is a persistent murmur on that side. “I only talking for two minutes and they getting on”.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So, please proceed, Minister of Finance. Having made the point, I am sure everyone will comply. Please proceed.

Hon. C. Imbert: “Hmph”. You are hopeful, Madam Speaker, Saddam Hosein is screaming again. So let me move on. I went to the Central Bank website.

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(5).

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Madam Speaker. When one looks at the index of food prices, as published by the Central Bank on its website, one goes to the section that says index of food prices—index of retail prices for food. Because if you go to that website, you will see the index of retail prices for everything, for communication, for transportation, for clothing, et cetera. But I zeroed in on the index of retail prices for food, because the Member for Siparia made a particular allegation. And if one goes to that, and you scroll all the way back to May of 2010, which is when we had the unfortunate circumstance of that other Government, the index of food prices in May of 2010 was 58.0. When we fortunately were able to get rid of the other side in September of 2015, Madam Speaker, the index of retail

prices for food was 105. What that tells us, Madam Speaker, that—Madam Speaker, they started again.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: On both sides, I would like to hear the Minister of Finance. He does not have a lot of time so let us allow him to use it to the best of his ability. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: So, as I said, the index of—retail index of food prices in May 2010 was 58.0. In September 2015, it was 105. What that means, Madam Speaker, is that under the tenure of the Member for Siparia, the price of food in Trinidad and Tobago increased by almost 100 per cent. Those are the statistics, Madam Speaker, Central Bank website. Whereas under our five-year tenure between 2015 and 2020, the increase in the retail price of food, Madam Speaker, from September 2015 to August of 2020, Madam Speaker, the increase in food prices in that period was only 11 per cent; 11 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The retail index for food increased from 105.0 in September 2015, to 116. I apologize, it was 12 per cent, Madam Speaker. So under our tenure, under our first five years, the price of food increased by 12 per cent. Under them, Madam Speaker, for their five years and three months, the price of food increased by 95 per cent. Those are the statistics. And I thought it was necessary to let the population know that.

In addition, Madam Speaker, in addition—I know they do not like to hear truth, you know. In addition, Madam Speaker, when I became aware that I would have to contribute today—Madam Speaker, come on.

Madam Speaker: All right. So, you know, I am hearing a lot of, I do not know if it is grumbling, but I just want to tell all Members, if they want to join the debate, they will get the opportunity. If they want to make an interruption, they know how to do that. All right? Otherwise, let us keep the volumes low, stop the running commentaries and allow the Minister of Finance and all other Members in their turn to make their contributions. Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, Madam Speaker, when the Member for Siparia was speaking, I did not say a word. Now, let us look at—I asked the Central Bank to do some calculations for me on the true effect of increases in the price of fuel on inflation. There is a lot of misinformation in the system, Madam Speaker, so I asked them to prepare a paper for me and they have done so. So that the Central Bank has provided me with the following facts:

Fuel prices account for 19.5 per cent of the transport sub index—this is within the calculation of inflation—and the transport sub index accounts for 14 per cent of the retail price index.

So you have the overall retail price index for the country, which is everything. So it would be food, it would be transportation, it would be communication, it would be clothing, et cetera, other household goods and so on, retail price index. So that the transport sub index accounts for 14.7 per cent of the retail price index. And within the transport sub index, fuel prices account for 19.5 per cent of that sub index. This means that fuel prices account for 2.9 per cent of the overall retail price index in Trinidad and Tobago; 2.9 per cent. So in the calculation of inflation, fuel prices account for 2.9 per cent of the total price index and based on those calculations, the increase in fuel prices has added 1.0 per cent to inflation in 2022. Let me repeat that, 1.0 per cent to inflation in 2022. Those are the facts, Madam Speaker, so let us just leave that be for the time being.

I also, Madam Speaker, heard the hon. Member for Siparia say that under our tenure, 60,000 or 65,000—the number changes all the time—have lost—65,000 people have lost their jobs. Madam Speaker—they are at it again. Madam Speaker, I am asking you, tell him to stop.

Madam Speaker: No, no, just one minute. Members, let us get on with this. You know, any Member who needs to carry on a long conversation can freely leave and return when the conversation is completed. It is nice to know that you all could converse but it cannot disturb the proceedings. Okay? Thank you so much, Member for Oropouche East for agreeing.

Dr. Moonilal: What!

Hon. C. Imbert: So, yes, Madam Speaker, I went back again into the official statistics, and what is important to understand, that in 2014, the total labour force in Trinidad and Tobago was 658,600 persons; 658,600 persons. In that year, there were 636,900 persons employed. These are official CSO statistics which would have been published in their day.

Let us fast forward now to present day. So the labour force in 2014 was 658,600. In 2022, Madam Speaker, the labour force is now 604,900.

4.15 p.m.

So eight years ago, in 2014, the labour force had in it 50,000 more people—54,000 more people, actually—let me get the precise number—yes, 658,600. It is now 604,900. So, there were 54,000 people in the labour force in 2014 than there are now. And you ask, why? It is obvious. We have an ageing population, Madam Speaker. People are living longer. So that the number of persons—and, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: All right. They needed to exhale. Please continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, they cannot handle reality, you know. When you look at the National Insurance Actuarial Report and you see the predictions that the National Insurance Fund, unless action is taken, unless urgent action is taken, the National Insurance Fund will be completely depleted by the year 2035. And you dig deeper into that report, you will find that the number of persons employed, compared to the number of persons on retirement, is constantly reducing, Madam Speaker. You have less people employed contributing to the system to contribute to people's retirement pensions, Madam Speaker. So that we have 50,000 people less in the labour force in 2022 than we had in 2014. So you have to deduct that 50,000 people from the statistics, Madam Speaker, because if you are looking at absolute numbers, if you are looking at the absolute number of persons employed, you have to compare it to the labour force.

And for those of us to do statistics, for those of us who can do mathematics, for those of us who are numerate, unlike the person who wrote those speeches on that side, obviously, when you look at the unemployment rate, which has remained steady at approximately 5 per cent for the last 10 years, approximately 5 per cent—it drops to 4, goes up to 5, 4.5—but it is approximately 5 per cent is our employment rate for the last 10 years—why? Because the labour force is reducing commensurate with a reduction in the number of unemployed persons, Madam Speaker. The better thing to do is to look at the number of persons unemployed. That is the statistic you should be looking at, the number of persons unemployed, Madam Speaker. And when you do that analysis, Madam Speaker, you will find that the number of persons unemployed in 2015 was 22,000 and the number of persons unemployed in 2022 is 30,000. So you are only looking at an 8,000 difference, not a 65,000 difference. So it is necessary to debunk the bogus data presented in this House by the hon. Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: But, more importantly, Madam Speaker, let us look at inflation. Inflation has two components in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Orders 48(6), please.

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, I know they are new, you know, but they should read. So when one looks at the dynamics, the inflation dynamics in Trinidad and Tobago, what does it tell us? It tells us that after COVID—because we were very fortunate to have a government, Madam Speaker, that was able to reduce inflation from 5 per cent—actually 5.5 per cent in 2015 when we came in. That was the inflation rate. In fact, under the previous administration, the 2010 to 2015 administration, inflation reached a high of 12.04 per cent in 2011. Madam Speaker, 12.04 per cent, and continued at those levels. In 2012, Madam Speaker, 9.28 per cent. In 2014, 5.7 per cent. So the country experienced a period of extremely high inflation, extreme increases in food prices under the UNC administration between 2010 and 2015. And that is why I come back to my statistic that the price of food literally doubled under the administration of the Member for Siparia—12 per cent inflation, 10 per cent inflation and 9 per cent inflation. Those were the kind of annual figures you were seeing. We came in, Madam Speaker, and because we had a very prudent approach towards fiscal discipline and monetary policy, we were able to reduce inflation systematically.

So, in 2016, for example, Madam Speaker, we were able to reduce inflation from 5.5 per cent to 4.6 per cent. In 2017, we were able to reduce it down to 1.88 per cent, Madam Speaker. In 2018, we got inflation down to 1.02 per cent, Madam Speaker, and in 2019, we got inflation down to below 1 per cent, 0.6 per cent. That was the increase in the retail price index in the 2019 period, below 1 per cent.

So that when the other administration was in power, their inflation rate was 12 per cent, 10 per cent, 9 per cent per year. When we came in, we got it from five down to one, and it is only because of the COVID-19 pandemic that we have seen a systematic increase in inflation back up to the 5 per cent range, Madam Speaker. But if you take the average for our period, you would see the average for our last seven years is somewhere in the vicinity of 3 per cent. So we have managed to control inflation, including food price inflation to an annual average of approximately 3 per cent, whereas under the former administration, their inflation rate was 10 per cent and 12 per cent. And, as I said, the price of food doubled under them.

So let us look at the inflation dynamics at this point in time. What are the facts? We had the COVID-19 pandemic. Anybody who had to import essential items into Trinidad and Tobago, including food and other items, you would have seen the increase in shipping costs. Anybody who follows international news would have seen that the price of a container of goods from China, for example, increased from \$2,000, one container—to ship a container from China to Trinidad and Tobago in 2019, the cost was US \$2,000. By the time COVID hit us, it had gone up to US \$20,000, Madam Speaker. You had a 1,000 per cent increase in shipping rates. You had supply chain disruptions. You had disruptions in the staple items in the advanced economies. The price of grain, for example, COVID affected all of that.

So we, unfortunately, in Trinidad and Tobago, we import grain. We are a society that eats a lot of wheat-based products. We eat pasta, we eat bread. We eat all of these things that are derived from wheat—roti, doubles. These are all derived from wheat, Madam Speaker. And because of the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain disruptions, huge increases in shipping costs, we in Trinidad and

Tobago, regrettably, have had to face the brunt of increases in staple foods. We have had to face it. But I am very pleased to say, having looked at world developments and looking at what is going on with shipping prices—I was reading an article just last week and I am seeing that shipping costs out of the major metropolitan countries to Trinidad and Tobago—the countries that send us the items that we need: cheese, beef, rice, grain—shipping costs are coming down considerably and we may very well see, it is predicted, that shipping costs may come down to the pre-pandemic levels. But still, when one looks at what we have been able to achieve, if one looks at Europe, inflation in Europe is 10 per cent. Inflation in the United States is close to 10 per cent. Inflation in Trinidad and Tobago is 5 per cent. And the reason why our inflation rate is half of the advanced economies—it is half or less than half of many other countries in the world—is because of our macroeconomic policies.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: We, in Trinidad and Tobago, I have seen just this week, people with a private agenda demanding that we devalue the Trinidad and Tobago dollar. We are not doing that. Because one of the reasons why we were able to reduce inflation from 5 per cent to 1 per cent, between 2015 and 2019/2020, was because we maintained a fixed exchange rate. If you look at all the other countries in the Caribbean that have moving exchange rates, exchange rates that float from time to time, you will see that they experienced—and in Latin American as well—they have experienced hyperinflation. So if we were to allow our exchange rate to move, we would have immediate hyperinflation, and it is a policy of this Government that that is not going to happen.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So I want to send that message loud and clear to all those who

keep this ridiculous demand on this Government that we devalue the dollar. And when I made the point, Madam Speaker, that we have a foreign exchange shortage in Trinidad and Tobago, not a crisis, I thought I was talking to educated people! Because if you are an economist, you will understand the meaning of the words, “a foreign exchange crisis”. And allow me, Madam Speaker—because it is clear to me that Members opposite do not know or if they do know, they have been deliberately politically dishonest, Madam Speaker.

When you speak about a foreign exchange crisis, there are two types: there is a first order crisis and there is a second order crisis. A first order foreign exchange crisis occurs when you cannot manage your balance of payments, when you cannot balance your budget, when you cannot control your expenditure, when all your macroeconomic fundamentals are out ofwhack and your foreign reserves go to zero. We still have healthy foreign reserves of US \$7 billion, Madam Speaker. After seven years, we have US \$7 billion in the bank. We also have a Heritage and Stabilisation Fund that has US \$5 billion in it. Our current account is in surplus and it is expected to be in surplus for the foreseeable future. Our balance of payments is positive. So, Madam Speaker, there is no chance of a first order currency crisis in Trinidad and Tobago because we are managing our finances well. And everybody is saying that, “including the IMF say so”. So that is a first order crisis.

What is a second order crisis? A second order crisis occurs when people think you are going to devalue, they think you are going to devalue, and that is why I have to come every time I hear this foolishness about “devalue the dollar” and say, “we are not devaluing the dollar”, and that is how you would avoid a second order crisis. It is a speculative crisis, where people believe that “they go” wake up tomorrow morning and hear that the dollar has been devalued. That is not

happening under this Dr. Keith Rowley administration. It is not happening.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: When they come in, they could do what they want, and maybe that would be in the year 2039.

So let me go on, Madam Speaker. Let me deal with some issues because it is a lot of old talk outside there about what the PNM administration is doing and what we are not doing. Let me talk about what are some of the things we are doing. I asked the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries to give me how much it costs the Government to subsidize cooking gas every month. And in March of 2022, the subsidy on cooking gas was \$30.6 million. In April, it was \$24.7 million. In June, it was \$21 million and so on. The subsidy, the difference in price between the actual price of LPG cooking gas and the price charged to the consumer—the \$20 for the cylinder, or \$22 or whatever it is—was \$228 million. That is what this caring PNM Government has spent subsidizing cooking gas for the last 12 months; \$228 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: If you go—I heard my colleague from public utilities speak about the price of utilities in other Caribbean countries, but you go in another Caribbean country and try to buy cooking gas. You think it would be \$20 for a cylinder? No, Sir. It could be \$200 for a cylinder. That is one of the things that, as a policy position, this Government has decided to subsidize that element of fuel, Madam Speaker.

But coming back to the issues that have been raised here, I heard a set of noise about property tax. Now, if one takes the average rental for an ordinary person in Trinidad and Tobago, it would be about \$3,000 a month. That is what the annual rental value of a property would be, \$3,000 a month.

4.30 p.m.

The property tax rate is 3 per cent of that. That works out, Madam Speaker, at \$90 a month; \$90 a month! Let me say that again, the average property tax for the average rental value, because you do not value the cost of the house, you do not value the sale value of the house, you value its rental value, so when property tax is imposed it will be imposed on the rental value. Let me say that again, because Members opposite love to go and take the cost price and multiply it by the 3 per cent, which is just dishonest. It is 3 per cent of the rental. So if you take a 3,000 a month rental, the property tax will be \$90 a month, but what is that tax going to be used for? We have already passed the legislation and put into the legislation, the local government reform legislation, that residential property tax shall be collected by and used by all 14 local government corporations. Right now we have 14 corporations, seven of which are controlled by the PNM, seven of which are controlled by the UNC, so that means that all 14, including the seven UNC, will be beneficiaries of residential property tax which they can use to provide services within the regions.

Now, Members opposite like to speak out of both sides of their political mouths; on one side demanding improvement in services provided at the local level: improvement in secondary roads, improvement in local drains, improvement in garbage collection and so on, improvement in the maintenance of recreation grounds and cemeteries, and so on. Members opposite continuously come into this House and carry on and rant and rave and demand improvements in the infrastructure in the local regions. But when this Government decides to create a system where every corporation, including all seven UNC corporations, will be the beneficiaries of residential property tax which they can then use at their discretion—we are not telling them what to do, at their discretion they can use that

property tax that they will collect for the maintenance of streets, the maintenance of local drains, the maintenance of recreation grounds, the collection of garbage, and so on, “Côté Ci Côté La”.

I worked it out, there are 400,000, approximately, residential properties in Trinidad and Tobago. If we use \$3,000 a month as the rental value and \$90 a month as the average property tax; \$90 a month, it will generate approximately \$400 million. That will mean that those seven UNC corporations will get approximately \$30 million per year, that they would not normally get, to deal with infrastructure for their burgesses.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Why are they opposed to this? Why? Why come and yell and scream and say that, “We want improvement in our local infrastructure,” but you do not want to have a revenue stream to support the improvement in the infrastructure? And to counter the commentary made by the Member for Chaguanas—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member—

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes?

Madam Speaker:—you have one minute of your ordinary time left. You are entitled to 15 more minutes to wind up your contribution if you wish.

Hon. C. Imbert: Sixteen with your permission, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So I heard the Member for Chaguanas carrying on and saying, “Why you want to attack these people’s asset?” That is so ridiculous. Nobody is attacking the asset.

The house does not stand in the middle of a lake. It is not an island. A property is on a street, it has a drain next to it and it has a garbage truck that comes in front of it to collect garbage. Who is going to pay for that? If somebody wants to own a property in Trinidad and Tobago and, at the same time, demand a high level of service associated with that property, the maintenance of their local communities—they demand that, as they correctly do, they are entitled to that; a high level of maintenance of their local community, a high level of maintenance of their street, a high level of maintenance of the watercourses in their area, proper garbage collection, a recreation ground that they could go to that is properly maintained, they demand all of that. Who is going to pay for that? And that is the answer to the nonsense that has been put into this debate by hon. Members opposite. The money has to come from somewhere. You cannot fix roads and clean drains with “jumbie” beads. And this is the argument that I will always make when I hear these nonsensical arguments from the other side, Madam Speaker; nonsensical.

So, okay, we will not have a property tax, well, who is fixing the road? How are you cleaning the drain? How are you collecting the garbage? Where does money come from to provide goods and services for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago? It does not fall out of the sky. So that if more money is required to be spent on developing local communities, which I agree should be done—it must be done, more money must be spent on developing local communities and giving everybody in this country, regardless of who they are, where they live, regardless of geography, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of religious persuasion, everybody is entitled to a proper standard of local infrastructure in their community. Where will the money come from?

If you cannot get it from a property tax which is a specific special purpose

tax designed specifically that when the tax is paid, that tax is then ring-fenced, given to the local representatives and used to upgrade the community—if you are not doing that, what will you do? You will increase income tax? That is what you want? Increase value added tax? That is what you want? We are not doing that. The whole world does it. There are so many countries in the world, every country in the world recognizes that in order to provide a proper standard of living in terms of infrastructure for residents, you have to generate a revenue stream from property tax. The same people over there, all of them have properties in Miami, or most of them or some of them. I know I could say, “some of them”, without contradiction. And when they are called upon to pay taxes on their properties in the United States, or London or wherever it is, when they are called upon to pay those taxes, they pay it willingly. You know why? Because they understand what the tax is for.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So I do consider this argument to be a misplaced argument and if Members opposite do not wish us to collect property tax and give it to UNC corporations to improve the standard of infrastructure in areas now represented by the UNC, well, come up with a better alternative. Come up with an alternative. Just political “ole” talk, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And let me now go, with my last few minutes, Madam Speaker, to what this Government does for people. Because the Member opposite tried to claim the school feeding programme. For the record, that was commenced by a PNM Government in 2002; for the record!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: When the school nutrition company was established in 2002 under a PNM Government—we established the school feeding programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And GATE, I had the honour to be the Minister of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education to introduce the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses programme, GATE. “Is we” introduced that, not you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And I had the honour, as Minister of Health, to introduce the Chronic Disease Assistance Programme, CDAP—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—where we now provide medication for over 200,000 persons free of charge. “Is this PNM do that”, not you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: We introduced GATE. We introduced CDAP. We introduced school feeding. We introduced free bus transportation. We introduced free transportation on the ferries. “Is we do that”, not you.

So when I look, Madam Speaker—when I look at what the Government spends on its social programmes—let me just look at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, for example. In the senior citizens’ grant, Madam Speaker, in 2023, it is expected we will spend \$4.1 billion, helping over 100,000 elderly people. And “is we” introduced the Senior Citizens’ Pension in this country. “Is PNM do that”, not you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And in social assistance, we are going to spend \$360 million, Madam Speaker, and it is the PNM that introduced social assistance in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And for disabilities—persons with disabilities, Madam Speaker,

\$625 million has been allocated. “Is we” introduced disability assistance in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So when I hear these words from the other side, I disagree. It is this PNM Government that has increased the personal allowance from \$5,000 a month to \$6,000 a month, to \$7,000 a month, to \$7,500 a month, meaning that 300,000 people in Trinidad and Tobago no longer pay income tax. “Is PNM do that”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So, Madam Speaker, I reject this Motion. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute today on this Motion brought by my colleague, the Member for Chaguanas East, and I hope that in the minutes afforded to me, that I would be able to bring this debate back into where it should have been, which is about the rights and the responsibilities, the needs of citizens and the facts as outlined in the Motion.

Madam Speaker, before I get into the meat of my debate, I want to treat with a couple of issues, just a couple of issues raised by the Minister of Finance. You see, the Minister of Finance wants us to focus on what he wants us to focus on. So he would spend hours, if given the opportunity, focused on trying to convince the citizens to look at the—Madam Speaker, sorry, he would be trying to convince citizens to look at the numbers he wants you to look at, which is the labour force and the number of persons employed. Madam Speaker, I want to look at—sorry,

the number of people unemployed. But I want, Madam Speaker, to look at the facts, and the facts are we are not talking about the number of people that are—we are speaking frankly about the number of people with jobs, because that is how you measure who has jobs and who does not have jobs.

The Minister wants you to believe that between 2019 and 2020, 113,000 people died, because that is what the information from the NIB reports that he had brought—we threatened to take him to court to bring, 113,000 contributors disappeared; 113,000 contributors disappeared, Madam Speaker, and there is a reason for that, people no longer had those jobs. The Minister wants us to focus on 65,000 and 25,000 and 10,000—Madam Speaker, these are official documents. These are official figures. In fact, if the Minister was truthful to himself he would admit that between December 2010 and today, there are still less people with jobs. So even if people died, Madam Speaker, as he is claiming, what happened to the jobs? They just disappeared? They have. They have, Madam Speaker, because under this Government and under this Minister, persons have lost jobs and businesses have closed down.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Businesses have closed down, entire industries have collapsed and that is where the jobs have disappeared, Madam Speaker. So the facts are, while the Minister wants you to focus on the labour force and so on, we want to prove to you, and we have, Madam Speaker—the figures are official and the Minister himself raised those figures. He tried to shy away from it but the facts are that there are less people employed today—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—than there have been since 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015; even under your term, jobs are being lost.

Madam Speaker, the other issue that I want to treat with is the Minister's attempt to be clever with distraction when he started speaking about the property tax. Madam Speaker, the issue is, not that people are afraid of property tax, you know, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the issue that people have right now is the methodology. The Minister is looking at—and he is clever in his words; \$3,000, the annual rental value. Madam Speaker, what happens if I am not renting my house? I am not renting my house, my mother is not renting her house and she has to pay as if she is renting a house. She has to pay as if she is renting her home, Madam Speaker. That is wrong.

Hon. Member: Could you explain? Please clarify. Please clarify.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

4.45 p.m.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Can you allow me to speak? You have the opportunity right afterwards.

Madam Speaker: So, Member, you will direct your contribution to me. And all Members, I know this is most probably very exciting but you all will get your opportunity to make your contributions in time. We cannot speak back to the Member when he is behind the shield. Okay? Please continue.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Facts apparently offend substantially.

Mr. Manning: Madam Speaker, we are having a difficult time understanding the speaker.

Mr. D. Tancoo: What is your Standing Order, Sir?

Mr. Manning: Please clarify his last statement, please. 48(1), thank you.

Madam Speaker: Overruled. Please continue.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The fact is that

the structure of property tax, as exists now, how they are proposing to implement it, is based on what they calculate as the annual rental value, whether the homeowner is renting or not. And the point is that it is patently unfair to have somebody pay a tax for an income that they are not receiving, and that is what they are promoting right now. But it gets worse. The hon. Minister referred to the Members on the opposite side, Members of the Opposition, as being dishonest. The hon. Minister referred to persons on the Opposition Bench as being dishonest with regard to the property tax, but hear what the problem is. The Minister stands on the opposite side and advises that corporations, UNC corporations, will be able to get—and his figure was around \$30 million. What is the problem with that? Well, I will tell you what the problem is with that, Madam Speaker. I could tell you what the problem is.

The fact is that the State still controls the funding for local government bodies. So if it is that through property tax—that they are trying to push down people's throats—the regional corporation gets \$30 million more, what the Government will do is simply reduce the allocation to the regional corporation by the amount of money that they are getting from the central government. So there will be no increase in the allowance and the allocation to regional corporations. As a matter of fact, what we have seen is the opposite side, and worse than that.

We have seen clearly—and information has been brought to the House before, and I would be honoured if I have the opportunity, at the next opportunity when we speak about local government, to bring this information again—that clearly shows that certain regional corporations get more money, substantially more money per square foot and per capita than other regional corporations. There seems to be a deliberate attempt by the Government to treat with specific corporations differently and not in a positive light. Madam Speaker, that is

unacceptable. But it follows the Minister's attempt to create the illusion that things are different under him.

The Minister also spoke about the need for regional corporations to focus. "Where else?" "You live in an area, you are not living in a lake", et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. "We need to get services." "Where would you get the money from?" Madam Speaker, this is the very same Minister who has presided over the death of procurement legislation in Trinidad and Tobago. This very same Minister. Nothing is happening. Nothing is happening.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: The legislation was passed in this House. The legislation was passed in this House and this Minister has been holding back the procurement legislation from being implemented. And if they do, the procurement regulator, the head of the procurement regulation agency, has already advised that on average \$5.2 billion is lost because of the failure of the Government to implement the procurement legislation; \$5.2 billion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: You want to know where to get the money? You want to know where to get the money? They are not going to get that much money from property tax. They are not going to get that much money from increasing electricity rates. They are not going to get that much money from increasing water rates, and all three put together will not get that much money. But instead of eliminating corruption, instead of putting the legislation in place that has already been passed by this House, instead of putting that in place so that they can save \$5.4 billion, the Government turns a blind eye and wants you to focus on taxation instead, increased taxation rather than treating with corruption that pervades the system right now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, the Minister also spoke about GATE and school feeding programmes, and “only the PNM could do that”. What he chose to leave out is the fact that in the last seven, going on eight years, only the PNM reduced GATE. Only the PNM reduced the number of beneficiaries in the school feeding programme. Only the PNM reduced the number of persons benefiting from several social grants. Only the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: He wants to talk about the history. The present fact is the Government—under this Government, there is substantial frustration. And that is what this Motion is about.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: That is what this Motion is about. So I want to remind the Minister too, and any Ministers that would speak further, of the recital part of the Motion:

“Be it resolved that this House call on the Government to outline short, medium and long-term strategies to systematically reduce the escalating and uncontrollable increase in the price of essential goods and services accessed by the population of Trinidad and Tobago;”

Please, Ministers, when you get the opportunity, come here—come here and tell the population what you are going to do to fix the problem.

You know, I cannot understand, for the life of me, how—Madam Speaker, I am truly disappointed, truly disappointed, that anyone, anyone opposite, can deny the facts of this Motion. There have been increases in food prices. There have been increases in the cost of living. There have been increases in the inflation rate. There have been increases in the crime rate.

Madam Speaker: Let us be careful. I am so happy that you read out parts of the Motion. This Motion is dealing with escalating prices of essential goods and services, and the cost of living. Okay? So let us keep it there. Some tangential things were said, and people have to tie it in, but this is not about crime.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, thank you very much for your ruling. Going back to the Motion, it is a fact that there has been a worsening of the cost of—there is a higher cost of living, a worsening of the standard of life, a higher inflation rate, and that the Government has failed to take proactive measures to address those.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: That is what this Motion is about. So all the ranting and the raving of the Members opposite, all the distractions of all sorts of other things, the fact is that every Member of Parliament elected here represents upwards of 25,000 persons. I challenge any Member opposite to stand up—I will give way, if you could stand up and prove and say openly—say openly—I challenge them today, to say openly that where they are, their constituency does not suffer from poverty, from unemployment, from increased problems with higher cost of living. That their constituency does not have a problem with higher water rates and water supply and electrical supply.

Madam Speaker, the fact is that every single Member of Parliament here, if they are doing their work, on a regular basis faces individuals who would come to them and tell them how difficult their circumstances are. That is a fact. Circumstances are extremely difficult. Citizens right now are suffering. And what we hoped that this Government would have come to do with this debate, and during this debate, is provide some sort of hope that the Government, having recognized the facts as outlined in the Motion, would come with some proposal, some suggestion that they have recognized this problem and they are seeking to resolve

it.

Madam Speaker, food constitutes one of the largest components of household budgetary expenditure. The hon. Leader of the Opposition indicated previously that it works out to about 25 to 29 per cent. The Food and Agricultural Organization, the FAO, warned in a March 2023 report—warned—that some prices on the world market had fallen, but that droughts, floods, currency weaknesses, foreign exchange crises, macroeconomic factors have caused domestic prices in some countries to remain high and to increase.

Now, while Trinidad and Tobago is not on the list of low income, food deficit countries, because of how that is defined, there is no doubt in our minds, or in the minds of anyone who is living in Trinidad and Tobago, that we are in a food crisis. Another Member, another Government Minister, when he contributed, openly boasted that he was very happy with the performance of the Government in treating with some of the issues that we were raising in this Motion. He was very contented that they are doing the right thing.

Madam Speaker, I want to turn to a survey. I want to reference a survey. It is called the “Caribbean COVID-19 Food Security & Livelihoods Impact Survey, Trinidad and Tobago, Summary Report”, dated July 2022. This survey was conducted by a series of international bodies, and I want to cite their conclusions. This is July 2022:

“Food prices are increasing, and 98 % of respondents reported higher than usual food prices...”

I am quoting, Madam Speaker. That is one part. Allow me to continue a quotation:

“Nearly one third of respondents experienced challenges accessing markets in the week prior to the survey, primarily due to a lack of financial means.”

They did not have the money.

“Respondents are increasingly buying cheaper and smaller quantities of foods than usual.”

I continue the quotation:

“Based on survey responses, half of respondents (51%) are estimated to be moderately or severely food insecure, with the lowest income households being the most food insecure.

More people are going...”—without food for an entire day—“...without eating and skipping meals compared to February 2021. Lowest income households were most likely to resort to negative coping strategies, and availability of food stocks deteriorated...More respondents...”

Madam Speaker, this is the quotation from the study:

“More respondents are resorting to severe actions, with 72% drawing on savings to meet immediate food needs, half reducing expenditures on education and health, and over a third selling productive assets.”

What that means is that persons today—this is July 2022, and I will come to current. This is July 2022, where people were saying that they were sacrificing their future in order to make sure that they had food to live today.

I quote again, Madam Speaker:

“Fourteen per cent of respondents have received some form of government support...”—14 per cent.

So 71 per cent are living day to day, having to borrow money or to dig into their saving deposits to buy food to live, or sell off their assets. But only 14 per cent overall of the respondents claimed to have received some kind of government support. And the Ministers come here today to boast about how much government support and how much money they have spent on government support.

My colleague for Chaguanas East indicated that phase one, phase two, people are still waiting on government support for years now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Government support that should have come during COVID. People are still waiting for it. The absolute conclusion, Madam Speaker—so that is a failure of the social support system. But the absolute failure, the report concludes, and I quote:

“Food insecurity risks are deepening in Trinidad and Tobago, given continued economic impacts of COVID-19, supply chain disruptions, rising inflation, and global reverberations of the Ukraine crisis.”

And this is the advice to the Government:

“It is critical to invest in the strengthening of national and regional food systems, social protection and emergency preparedness to promote recovery and protect people from future shocks.”

This is not me saying this. This is an international study published in 2022, and it is a public document, which any good, decent, caring government should have grabbed the opportunity to learn from, so that they could prioritize their expenditure, prioritize their policies to ensure that these matters are resolved, these matters are issued.

Again, this is a collaborative effort between the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations; the World Food Programme; the Caribbean Community, that is Caricom; and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency. It is those institutions who collaborated to provide this information that shows that in Trinidad and Tobago today—in Trinidad and Tobago, in July 2022, 71 per cent of citizens were surviving just barely. They were in a food crisis.

<https://www.wfp.org/publications/caribbean-covid-19-food-security-and-livelihoods-impact-survey>

And the Government is fully aware of this report. It is a national document.

5.00 p.m.

Like I said, Madam Speaker, any caring government should have taken it and used it to address the problems identified, but not this Government. They only care when it is time for election. Only when it is time for election they could put it in a slogan, in a song, and try to fool the population that they care. But the population of Trinidad and Tobago does not believe that anymore. Madam Speaker, Minister after Minister would probably come here and read their processes, read their prepared public relation speeches to create the perception that Trinidad and Tobago is doing well. The last Member who spoke, the Minister of Finance, said that, “Trinidad and Tobago is doing well.” The Minister who spoke before him said as well, “We are very proud of where we are.”

Madam Speaker, the IMF said so, “We are doing well.” But this is 2022. This document is 2022. The same period of time for which the Minister was boasting about a \$10 billion surplus in 2022. So while the citizens, 71 per cent of the respondents are saying, “We are barely surviving, we have to give up medical needs to pay for food”, “We are doing without food for days on end”, while these people are saying that, our population, our taxpaying citizens, our citizens are saying that, the Minister is boasting about \$10 billion in surplus. Is that not ironic, Madam Speaker? That on one hand, we have a Minister boasting of how well the country is doing, and on the other hand, the citizens are crying, desperate and frustrated.

One Minister came here today to create the perception that—in fact, it was the Minister of Finance that said that, “You know, they are in Opposition for 10

years and that is the basis of the frustration.” Madam Speaker, the basis of the frustration that is manifested in this Motion comes from the fact that this Government has spent over \$460 billion, and instead of Trinidad and Tobago getting better it has gotten absolutely worse.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: And no amount of public relations spin will change that fact. No amount of blame game will change that fact. And, Madam Speaker, before some half-baked junior Minister comes to read a speech prepared for him by his more intelligent wife, Madam Speaker, let me say that this information was from July 2022. This information was based on July 2022. And what has happened between July 2022 to current, that would have fixed that problem? What were these people, this 71 per cent of the population surveyed, what could have been done by the Government? What was done by the Government to improve that? Madam Speaker, absolutely nothing. Because if you think things got better, Madam Speaker, despite what they are saying, things have gotten incrementally and substantially worse.

Madam Speaker, my source is the Central Statistical Office. My political leader, the hon. Leader of the Opposition has already made clear, citing figures clearly to show that there has been a substantial increase in the price of food between 2025 and current. I do not think anybody in their right sense could deny that. A substantial increase in the price of food. In some instances, Madam Speaker, the price of food has increased by over 100 per cent. I want to target now, just between 2021, December, and 2022, December, just to show that based on the statistics that were provided by this study that things did not get better, Madam Speaker.

According to CSO, CSO tells us, the Central Statistical Office tells us that in

that one-year period, December 2021 to December 2022, there was an increase in the price of food by over 17 per cent, just in that one year. Now, you would have heard the Minister of Finance just now give different figures. I do not know where he is getting his figures from, Madam Speaker. We all know that you simply cannot trust anything that this Government says. The Central Statistical Office in a publication, which I checked just before I came to this podium, Madam Speaker, in a publication sited, named, “Retail Price Index Data Highlights for 2022”, and Members opposite could feel free—if they can use the computers—to check it, 17 per cent over one year, the price of food has increased.

So if it was this bad for these individuals in July 2022, imagine what a 17 per cent increase in the price of food would have done to them, and it is not just food. Over the same period, the same CSO report also says that transport increased not by the 1 per cent and the 7 per cent that the Minister has banded about today, transport increased by 15 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: 15 per cent, Madam Speaker. Housing, electricity and water and gas also increased, and that is figures up to December 2022, because the CSO does not have figures thereafter.

The point being, Madam Speaker, the point being that we know that three quarters of the population surveyed was suffering in early 2022. We know that things have gotten substantially worse because food prices have increased by 17 per cent, transport by 15 per cent, electricity, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, have also gone up. So therefore, these persons are in an absolute worse position now. Now, some Minister may come to tell the population that that is not so because the Government settled their wage negotiation, 4 per cent, Madam Speaker, 4 per cent. So if it is that they gave them 4 per cent but the costs have now increased by 17

and 15 and 20 and 30 per cent, what you have just done, Madam Speaker, is create a class of working poor.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: My colleague had a better phrase for it just now, which I do not remember now, but what you have done is created a class of persons who may be working all day and all night and still not be able to meet ends—to have their ends meet, still be suffering, and that is the frustration that was the root of this Motion, Madam Speaker.

And that was December 2022. What can we look forward to in 2023? Can we look forward to a government actually doing something to help the citizens that we now have established are suffering, and their “sufferrations”, and their pressures, and their frustrations, have now worsened since COVID? What is this Government doing—and that is what we had hoped Minister Imbert and others would have been able to provide here today, and they are not. What is this Government doing to tackle that? That is the last part of the recital in this Motion. Madam Speaker, what this country can now look forward to is property tax, higher fuel prices, higher electricity rates, higher water rates, and God knows what other penalties that this PNM Government will now come and force down the backs of citizens of this country.

Madam Speaker, I want to touch a bit on the inflation rate. My political leader has already—the Leader of the Opposition, Mrs. Persad-Bissessar has already indicated basically what the inflation rate is. I just want to tie that a little bit more, Madam Speaker. Because if you have a 17 per cent interest rate—sorry, a 17 per cent inflation rate on food, what that means, Madam Speaker, that is for one year where you would have had \$100 that you would have spent on food in year one. Because there is a 17 per cent increase in inflation, you now need \$117 to buy

the same amount of food or you have to buy less food. The fact is, and the Minister himself admitted it, although he downplayed the value of the inflation, the fact is that inflation has risen substantially. So what is required from a government that is thinking, what is required from a government that is thinking, a government that is caring, is to find ways of treating with the causes of inflation and treat with it.

Instead the Minister of Public Utilities would stand on the podium opposite and say, “Tell us, bring your plans.” You have been in Government for eight years, if you do not have plans by now, you should not be in government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: The prediction by the International Monetary Fund, whom the Minister referenced, Minister of Finance referenced himself, and the latest prediction from the *World Economic Outlook*, which is an IMF document, is that inflation in 2023 is going to continue to be high, leading to continued high food prices.

Madam Speaker, public servants today are facing prices, they are facing a reduction in their purchasing power over the period 2015 to current, of upwards of 40 per cent. A reduction in your purchasing power means that you cannot purchase the same amount of goods and services that you could have. You can only purchase 40 per cent or less, and this Government recognizes that. And instead of treating with the facts of inflation they proposed to, and gave public servants the choice that—they did not have much choice anyway—they forced them to stick with 4 per cent. That means that a public servant is now 38 per cent worse off because of this Government not considering the fact that inflation has eaten away so much of their time.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have one more minute of ordinary time left,

you are entitled to 15 more minutes to complete your contribution, if you so wish.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, I will be grateful to access it.

Madam Speaker: Please proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, if you are lucky to have a job—and hundreds of thousands of persons, despite what the Members opposite are saying, are currently searching for jobs, and many persons cannot get jobs right now. I have had persons come into my office, Madam Speaker, and I am positive that Members opposite—like I said, if they are true to themselves, will also accept and admit that it is true. You have persons coming with high qualifications, degrees, certificates in one thing or the other, who cannot get a job. But if you are lucky to have a job, then at minimum wage, Madam Speaker, you have to work one hour to buy a loaf of bread. One loaf of bread. You have to work between four and five hours to buy a chicken, you have to work three hours to buy a can of salmon. Madam Speaker, people are being forced into poverty.

Madam Speaker, I want to reference a newspaper article. March 18, 2023, *Trinidad Express*, the headline is: “Food prices remain high”. And in this, the Supermarket Association of Trinidad and Tobago provided some statistics which I find to be very alarming. Allow me to share some of these figures. According to the Supermarket Association, and they are looking at between March 2022 and March 2023, a pound of cheddar cheese which was last year \$26.95 has gone up to \$29.95. Madam Speaker, curry:

“...500 grams went from \$27.95 to \$36.95...”—an increase of 32 per cent.

Country Pride flour, a two-kilogramme package:

“...went from \$15.95 to \$19.95...”—an increase of 25 per cent.

“A box of Crix which was priced a \$51.95 is now \$57.95...”—an increase of 13 per cent.

“A crate of eggs that cost \$43.95 last year is now priced at \$59.95...”—an increase of 36 per cent.

Golden Ray butter that we put in callaloo and everything else:

“Golden Ray...butter jumped from \$11.95 to \$19.95...”—Madam Speaker, an increase of 67 per cent.

And, Madam Speaker, the Supermarket Association provided us with a substantial list of products that have increased. So it is not just the 17 per cent, because that is the overall, there has been substantial increase in the very basic food products that citizens of Trinidad and Tobago use; citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Somebody said it earlier today, I believe, that it costs now a \$100, you have to work all day to be able to afford a regular meal in this country for yourself and your family. So that means that people do not have money to save. They are literally living day to day. Nothing has gotten better, Madam Speaker. In fact, the facts are, the proof is that it has gotten worse.

Madam Speaker, the recital of the Motion asked—referenced the fact that the Government has not taken any proactive measures to treat with these crises that I just described. The fact is that February—July 2022, 71 per cent of persons said that they were in a desperate way, had to do without food for days on end, or sell their assets in order to buy food, had to do without medication to choose for food, 71 per cent said that. And from then to now because of inflation, because of higher prices, because of increase in fuel, things have gotten worse, and the future looks even more difficult for citizens of Trinidad and Tobago because of property tax and the increases in the utility rates.

We were looking for this Government to come with some proactive

measures. What we heard today is the Government's policy of increase in dependency. They came here today not to talk about diversification; not to talk about new industries, new initiatives, new job creation opportunities, Madam Speaker; not to talk about how they are going to treat with agriculture, which my colleague will deal with; not to talk about how they are going to help farmers treat with issues that they are facing now. What they came today to talk about, hampers, grants, food cards.

5.15 p.m.

Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago citizens, my fellow citizens are proud persons.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: We want the opportunity to have jobs. We want the opportunity to earn an income. We do not want a handout, Madam Speaker, we want a hand up.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: But it is the policy of this Government to create dependency. That is why the Minister could talk about, glibly, having water tanks, water tanks provided to communities and how much money they spent on water trucking. We want waters in the pipe, that is where we want water—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—not in water trucking. It is an illusion, Madam Speaker. They are talking about digitization and diversification—well, they have not spoken about diversification today but they talked about digitization. Madam Speaker, the proactive measures mean that if you know you want to go down the road of diversification, if you know you want to go down of digitization, if you know you want to go down the road of agricultural development, then put money in training,

show us, Madam Speaker—and that is what you were supposed today. Show us what they are doing with regard to training, educating, providing the infrastructure to ensure that their policies, which they speak so glibly about, can actually be implemented and it is not just public relations.

Madam Speaker, we have not seen any such thing. What we have seen, however, is no planning, a “vaille-que-vaille” method of treating with the future of Trinidad and Tobago. It is all PR, Madam Speaker, and that is not acceptable. Even the food boxes that the Minister would have spoken about in October last year, that they promised that they were going to bring, we are halfway through the financial year. In fact, we are more than halfway through the financial year and to date, not a single food box has been provided to a single person in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Farmers, Madam Speaker—if you are going to go to food boxes, farmers need to be put on notice. Increased agricultural opportunities must be created for people to farm more, so that when you get into the food box, you are not going to be taking supply out of the existing supply. You should be adding to the supply. Instead, this Government continues its “vaille-que-vaille”, incompetent, illogical manner of doing things.

The Minister of—both Public Utilities and the Minister of Finance also spoke about comparisons with other countries. Madam Speaker, they spoke about lowest rates in Trinidad and Tobago, have the lowest rates for electricity, et cetera. That is great, that is wonderful, but that should not be the reason why citizens cannot get electricity now. That should not be reason why citizens cannot get water now. It should not be the reason. It seems that because the Ministry has done their fieldwork and they have come up with the fact that Trinidad and Tobago has low cost for electricity and low cost for water, they believe that they must now

raise the price of water and raise the price of electricity above and beyond the means of regular citizens. That is the wrong reason for doing it, the absolute wrong reason. And there are also not—while they are talking about prices, they are not talking about delivery. They should be talking about delivery because the quality of service throughout Trinidad and Tobago, both for water and for electricity, is horrendous.

As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, even the infrastructure is horrendous, even the situation with education is horrendous, even the situation with the health sector is horrendous. People are still having to wait years, Madam Speaker. I had an individual come into my office last Tuesday complaining that she was supposed to be serviced with urgent medical attention and she was being told—for a heart problem, and she has been told that she has to come back in 2025. All that time they are suffering, Madam Speaker. That is illogical and irrational, not what we want in a 21st Century—

Madam Speaker: I am just reminding you about the substance of this. All right? Please.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you. What we want, as a government, as a country, what we want from this Government is a mindset that shows positive movement forward.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: What this country wants desperately is hope. What they want to see is that a government cares for them. Instead, when they look at the Members opposite, what they will see is completely otherwise. They will see a government whose only focus is finding ways to pick their pockets, to tax them over and over—

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

Madam Speaker: Okay. So that last phrase, I would ask you to withdraw it and find another way.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Absolutely withdrawn, Madam Speaker. What they see opposite, Madam Speaker, is a Government that does not care about citizens—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—except as a source of funds for five years and as a source of a vote when it comes to election time. That is all they care about. That is all they care about, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, as I wrap up, I want to remind Members that will come afterwards from the Government Bench, through you, of what this Motion is. Members, Ministers would come and give you figures of all the things that they have done. I urge Ministers to come and dispute any of the recitals here, any of them, dispute any of them, and I am challenging the Ministers—because I know that they cannot. These are all facts, and because they are all facts, Madam Speaker:

“Be it resolved that this House call on the Government to outline its short, medium and long term strategies to systematically reduce the escalating and uncontrollable increase in the price of essential goods and services accessed by the population of Trinidad and Tobago;”

And:

“Be it further resolved that this House call on the Government to take the necessary urgent action to immediately remedy the negative effects upon those living below the poverty line.”

That remains valid. It remains a valid claim.

Madam Speaker, I want to salute the speakers on the Opposition Bench who

would have spoken before—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—and I want to fully endorse—I want to fully endorse this Motion but I want to caution the negative effects upon those living below the poverty line are substantial. People are suffering and when people suffer like this, they may be inclined to get involved in activities which are not healthy for our country. It is for the benefit of Trinidad and Tobago that this Government stops playing games with the lives of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and focus on trying to implement policies which will improve the state of being, the standard of living and the quality of life of Trinidad and Tobago citizens. If they cannot, if they have no ideas, if they have no clue about what to do, as they have clearly demonstrated over the last eight years, then what they need to do is resign and call elections now. Madam Speaker, I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Chairman: Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Motion. Madam Speaker, I want the Opposition to remember that—are you hearing me now?

Hon. Member: Yes.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Okay, good. I want the Opposition to remember that facts are stubborn things and they will not go away. A significant fact that must be highlighted is that this Government, led by Dr. Keith Rowley, continues to proactively invest in the people of this country—

Hon. Members: Yes.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—to ensure that they have a good quality of life. But before delving into the details of the Government's programmes, strategies and policies aimed at assisting the vulnerable and the poor in our society, it is crucial to acknowledge the current socio-economic climate which has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation, of course, of lock down and other public health and safety measures to safeguard both lives and livelihoods.

According to the World Bank, the global poverty rate fell from 36 per cent in 1990 to 10 per cent in 2015, and based on these numbers everyone was optimistic that the world was making progress in reducing the poverty rate. However, no one catered for the pandemic and the drastic changes it brought to life as we knew it. As you recall, the WHO declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020. And a mere two months later, it was characterized as a pandemic. By then, the International Labour Organization estimated that nearly half of the global workforce was at risk of losing their livelihoods due to the pandemic. So as more data became available, it was feared that the world's poorest people could take up to a decade to recover from this pandemic.

Moreover, it was estimated by the World Bank that the pandemic pushed an additional 88 to 115 million persons into extreme poverty in 2020 alone. An increase that brought the number of new poor to between 110 to 150 million, with the total number of persons living in extreme poverty rising to between 705 to 729 million persons.

So, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago was not immune to these shocks or spared the hardships that the pandemic brought to the world's doors. There is no denying that COVID-19, which is still very much with us, contributed significantly and negatively to global poverty rates. But the Government did not

just throw its hands in the air and let nature take its course. We recognized and understand the numerous factors including: economic inequality, unfair distribution of resources and, of course, natural disasters which can change the trajectory of anyone's life in a very short space of time.

So we continue to put in place measures that catch our poor and vulnerable even before they fall and when we are unable to do so, we are ensuring that there are measures in place that will help them to get back on their feet. And for this reason the Government developed a "Roadmap to Recovery" that focused on the following, and actually there were short, medium and long-term measures. And some of the following areas are focused on: measures that need to be implemented immediately, measures to reignite economic activity and ensure social stability, and measures to transform a new economy and a new society. Maintaining the health and wellbeing of the people of this nation is at the heart of all that we do and we continue to implement a robust safety net, of course, to cushion the negative effects of COVID-19 on the poor and vulnerable.

So, Madam Speaker, even if subsidies are removed or reduced, this Government continues to use the savings generated from them to improve the lives of poor and vulnerable persons. It was just two months ago that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services executed the one-off transportation grants and not the fuel grant as stated by the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas East; 175,000 persons who were already receiving Senior Citizens' Pensions, Disability Assistance Grants and food support received an additional \$1,000. And I want to say, Madam Speaker, this was a one-off short-term measure and this was intended to cushion the impact of the increase in fuel prices as a result of the removal of the fuel subsidy. And many persons—I understand that the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas East stated that it did not do anything. Well, many

persons called and we have recorded their appreciation for the fact that they got this \$1,000 transport grant—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—which was an additional amount for them. And as a matter of fact there are persons from your constituency, Chaguanas East, who said that they were very happy to receive the grant and, “Great is the PNM.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: In fact, it was a double benefit for our senior citizens because our senior citizens are already eligible for free transport from PTSC. So this was a double for them because they already can travel on the bus free of charge and now that \$1,000 transport grant is an additional benefit for them. So individuals and families in need can still access several grants through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and, of course, I know you all do not like to hear the figures. Why? Because of the fact that they are evidence and we need to say the figures. Okay? I understand, I heard two Members, Couva North and Chaguanas East made comments about figures. Yes, we have to quote the figures—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—because the figures, they are proof and they are evidence of what we are doing.

So our Disability Assistance Grant is a safety net programme where the Government provides financial support to those certified as permanently disable. And they receive \$2,000 per month, the children receive \$1,500, because we also have the disability grant for children. And our Minister of Finance mentioned the amount of money that was spent, \$625 million, and 22,055 adults; 2,956 children under the age of 18 with disabilities, they also access this support. Is this not the

work of a caring government?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Public Assistance Grant is another avenue of social protection by which the Government provides financial aid to the nation's vulnerable citizens. And this is for persons whose household incomes are deemed inadequate.

5.30 p.m.

And this includes, but not limited to, the unemployed individuals who are unable to work or have little means of supporting themselves. This grant has undergone several changes over the years to meet the needs of our citizens. In February 2015, it was increased by \$300, while in January 2019, recipients received another increase by \$150. So, presently, the monthly payments are as follows: \$1,300 for one person; \$1,550 for two persons; and as much as \$1,900 for four persons.

Madam Speaker, in the last fiscal, 16,993 individuals benefited and the Government spent \$373,605,000 on this grant. And this is for the poor and vulnerable. This is our Public Assistance Grant.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Of course, our Senior Citizens' Pension is one of the primary grants utilized by the Government for protecting our vulnerable elderly citizens. This grant provides financial assistance to persons age 65 and over who meet the qualifying criteria for the grant. This year, a total of \$4,118,000,000 has been allocated for the Senior Citizens' Pension, and this expenditure will support 108,613 senior citizens who are eligible to receive it.

Our food support, and this Food Support Programme prevents vulnerable persons and families from falling below the food poverty line by providing grants to purchase basic food items necessary to meet their daily nutritional requirements.

So I am hearing talk about the fact that so many persons are under the poverty line, but our Food Support Programme assists in moving persons above that line.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: The Ministry's records indicate that as of September the 23rd, last year, there were 22,069 households in receipt of our food support grant. This year, the Government has allocated for fiscal 2023, \$181,539,521 for food support to our citizens. Based on the circumstance of the individual or the family, they can access the temporary, short-term or long-term food support.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Madam Speaker, the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas East stood there and gave the impression that this Government is not doing anything to help the poor and vulnerable in our country. Through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the Member of Parliament and indeed all Members of Parliament, just three months ago at Christmas, received 200 food cards from the Ministry to give to poor and vulnerable persons in their constituency.

We are not saying that that is enough because the need varies in different constituencies, but it is an effort by the Government to assist the poor and vulnerable, and it must be acknowledged. As previously mentioned by the Minister of Finance, this Government removed VAT on an expanded list of food items. This was done in consultation with the Supermarket Association who indicated the most commonly purchased items in the supermarket. So the removal of VAT was done in consultation with the Supermarket Association, and they are the ones who indicated which are the ones that the VAT should be removed. And the list was reviewed to determine which items had customs duty and valued added

tax on them. The basic food items that were not tax free were listed for the removal of VAT.

Madam Speaker, I move to our Urgent Temporary Assistance Grants, because we know that sometimes unexpected things happen in families. And in circumstances like this, the Government steps in and offers urgent temporary assistance to citizens. These are short-term interventions intended to remedy short-term challenges being experienced by vulnerable citizens. So we cannot say that we do not have short, medium and long-term, because I will outline them. One of the short-term measures here is our urgent temporary assistance where persons, in the event of a disaster, there is a Clothing Grant; Dietary Grant; Education Grant; Funeral Grant; Household Items Grant; Medical Equipment Grant; rental assistance grant; Prosthetics Grant; School Supplies Grant. Up to September, a total of 3,087 persons benefited from this grant, and for fiscal 2023, a total of \$15 million has been allocated for Urgent Temporary Assistance Grants.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: So, as a result of a natural disaster, as we had last year, the Clothing Grant, Household Items Grant, rental assistance, School Supplies Grant and food support are utilized to assist the affected individuals and families to recover lost items and to get them back on their feet as soon as possible.

Some of the items under the Household Items Grant are a stove, fridge. The maximum amount paid though would not be the maximum amount of the cost. So this is one of the things that we need to know. It is an assistance. A stove, fridge, bed with mattress, wardrobe, living room set, dining room set, washing machine set, chest of drawers, kitchen cabinets; and additionally, temporary food support is also provided.

Our National Social Development Programme provides grants for minor house repairs, materials and/or labour, and materials for sanitary plumbing to eligible citizens who need this support. Madam Speaker, these amenities enhance the standard of living of thousands of our citizens and protect them from the elements and disease. The minor house repair grant is for \$20,000 in material only and the sanitary plumbing assistance is \$15,000 in material only. A total of \$5 million has been allocated to the National Social Development Programme this year.

SEED, which is a programme that is very important, because it is one that takes people out of dependency to one of independence. The Ministry's Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development Programme, which we also call SEED, provides a mechanism through which citizens, who are considered vulnerable but who have an interest in starting or improving a business, can gain access to investment funding. They can either start a new business or expand an existing one. So, Madam Speaker—and this alone can lead to financial independence, self-sufficiency and long-term prosperity. Would this not lead to a better quality of life for the individual families and their generations to come? Three hundred and thirty-four applicants received grants last year in the sum of \$1,411,153.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Madam Speaker, all of these grants are available to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, as long as you meet the eligibility criteria; persons who are vulnerable. And this is, of course, a long-term measure. Over \$5 billion has been allocated to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and most of this allocation goes towards taking care of the poor and vulnerable persons in our society.

Madam Speaker, the measures I highlighted were only for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And there are many that I can speak about. But I would like to speak about a few others. Food support is also provided for deserving students throughout Trinidad and Tobago, through the School Nutrition Programme. Students receive breakfast and lunch to ensure that they achieve a head start in their quest for academic excellence. The provision of school meals contributes to one-quarter and one-third of a child's recommended dietary allowances for breakfast and lunch, respectively. Not only do poor and vulnerable families benefit from this measure, but the farmers who need to have a ready market to sell their produce also appreciate this programme.

For the period October 2021 to June 2022, 871,119 breakfasts and 72,465 lunches were provided. For this fiscal, over \$88 million has been allocated to provide meals for poor and vulnerable students.

I would not speak about the personal income tax allowance, which we know and which, of course, is a measure which would help stimulate economic activity consumption and sales because consumers now have more money in their hands because of the personal allowance. This is the third time that this PNM administration has increased the personal allowance which will put additional disposable income per year into the pockets of over 300,000 individual taxpayers.

There are housing subsidies for persons who are vulnerable. There is a subsidy for Housing and Village Improvement Programme. Through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, citizens or residents of this country can access the Housing and Village Improvement Programme subsidy. Through this subsidy, eligible applicants get funding to construct a housing unit with two bedrooms from \$145,000 upwards.

Urban Upgrading and Revitalisation Programme, this is a Home Construction Subsidy that can also be accessed through that Ministry and it seeks to enhance the housing conditions of low-income households. Persons who are eligible for this grant must be living in an urban settlement that is located on state-owned lands and is desirous of improving their living conditions. The home construction subsidy provides funding of up to \$50,000 to assist families with the construction of a new home. Applicants must be 18 years and older, and the household income must not exceed \$96,000.

An applicant who is the owner of land or who has permission to occupy land and is desirous of constructing a new house will be eligible for a housing subsidy. And the applicant must satisfy, among other things, the requirements for a loan or mortgage, or having completed the necessary work, or by showing evidence of the ability to carry out the construction of the residence.

Through the Home Improvement Subsidy of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, applicants can get up to \$20,000 per beneficiary household to conduct home repairs. Of course, the household income must not be more than \$96,000 per year.

We have the National Commission for Self Help Limited. That is another area which provides Minor Repairs and Reconstruction Grants, Emergency Repairs and Reconstruction Assistance Grants and infrastructure development projects. This is another facility that citizens can access.

There is also the Government's Aided Self-Help Housing Programme. This is another one that is worth mentioning because it is administered under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development also, and it is part of an affordable and high-quality housing programme. Through this programme, citizens can benefit from fully developed lots at subsidized prices, 30 per cent of the market

value, and can access subsidized mortgage loans from the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Finance Company Limited. They are also able to get pre-approved house plans, technical assistance and oversight for the construction of these affordable, high-quality homes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Of course, this will be achieved through a combination of self-help and the engagement of small contractors.

So, Madam Speaker, additionally, through the home improvement and home construction programmes, many citizens are enjoying a decent standard of living and better quality of life. And these are many measures that the Government has put in place to raise the standard of living of our citizens.

This PNM Government continues to invest in these initiatives because we believe that they will substantially help, empower and transform the lives of individuals and families who access them. And these are some of the long-term strategies that our Government is implementing on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago to make them more resilient and resistant to unforeseen negative circumstances, such as the pandemic.

We are also investing in our youth because the Member of Parliament for Couva North spoke about, “What are we doing.” Yes, we are investing in our youth. The Government is committed to investing in the lives of our future leaders. There are several programmes that provide the vulnerable young people with the knowledge and skills they need to lead productive lives and lead them away from a life of poverty and towards wealth creation and independence.

YTEPP is one, Member for Couva North. Through the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme, young persons are provided with a suite of technical, vocational, life skills and entrepreneurial training to prepare for

employment and pursue high levels of training. The programme targets at-risk, unskilled and unemployed youth. And some of the young persons who are targeted come from under-served communities. For fiscal 2023, over \$40 million has been allocated for this programme.

We have the On-the-Job Training Programme. This is another pre-employment programme which offers participants, between the ages of 16 and 35, an induction into the world of work and focuses on the acquisition of occupational skills.

5.45 p.m.

Four thousand and seventy active trainees were participating in this programme last year.

Madam Speaker, young persons are not only getting work experience, they are also receiving stipends that help them to provide their basic needs and contribute to their households. So for fiscal 2023, over \$309,395,000 has been allocated to this programme. Are these not worthwhile investments that will bear fruit in the long term? Definitely so. And they received their stipends. There are levels. Okay? For persons with CXC, they get \$3,035 a month; CAPE or A levels, \$4,356; level three, associate degree, \$5,445; level four, undergraduate degree, \$7,562; level five, post-graduate degree, \$8,712.

So therefore, Madam Speaker, so when we talk about the Government is not doing—and the Government is not, you know, trying to alleviate poverty or trying to keep people away from poverty, what is this doing? If we look at it, all these programmes that we have, particularly for the youth, this is what we are doing.

There is also the GATE Programme that was spoken about and this has been allocated for the Government Assistance for—\$400 million was allocated for the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses, which is 2023. The GATE

Programme, we call it, benefits many students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds who need to work and study at the same time.

MIC training subsidy. The MIC training subsidy seeks to facilitate human capital development for the workplace, predominantly in the manufacturing sector. In fiscal 2022, 10 engineers in training and 46 journeyman trainees commenced the programme and benefited from this training. Is this not a programme to take people away from poverty?

There is also the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme that empowers young farmers to use modern farming techniques, and the young farmers in this programme are provided with land that is leased to them by the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. Land identified for the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme is located at Fyzabad, Field Road, Chatham Dairy Farm, Kendal Dairy Farm in Palo Seco. Other areas that have been identified for this homestead programme are Valencia, Gran Couva, Pointe-a-Pierre, Todds Road, Lopinot, Santa Cruz. And this programme provides the opportunity for young persons to earn a sustainable income through the sale of produce and livestock.

So, Madam Speaker, there are many other youth paid programmes that young persons can access, and all of these programmes have received substantial allocations for this fiscal 2023. And some of these programmes are: School Transportation Services, SERVOL Junior Life Centres; MIC craft programmes; Helping Youth Prepare for Employment, HYPE; Multi-Sector Skill Training Programme, MuST; SERVOL Hi-Tech and Advanced Skills, SERVOL's human development and skills training; MIC National Skills Development Programme; Civilian Conservation Corps; Military-Led Academic Training, MiLAT; Military-Led Programme of Apprenticeship and Reorientation Training, MYPART. And we have substantial allocations to these programmes to assist our

youth to stay away from poverty.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education's school transportation services provides free transportation for primary and secondary school students to be transported to school. This significantly helps their parents to be relieved of the financial burden of having to get money to send them to school. A total of \$50 million has been allocated for the school transportation services of 2023.

And this Government has taken an all-of-government proactive approach to help individuals, the elderly, families, young persons and even businesses in this country. And when we look at the number of social protection initiatives that are implemented by this Government, it speaks volumes that we are committed to ensuring that no one is left behind.

Health care. Madam Speaker, someone mentioned about not being able to afford health care. You know, citizens have accessed free health care, including CDAP, which costs \$6 billion each year. And I repeat, citizens have been able to access health care, including the CDAP medication which costs \$6 billion each year. And those in need, cardiac health is available at the public health institutions through the Ministry of Health's adult cardiac programme. The Ministry of Health also procures cardiac services from private health care providers on behalf of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And these include angiograms, angioplasties, echocardiograms and open heart surgeries.

So, Madam Speaker, to date, hundreds access cardiac procedures in the public and private health care systems and are alive today, because of the interventions made by this Government. Madam Speaker, I can continue to speak at length about all that the Government is doing to take care of our vulnerable

citizens, but I will conclude here and assure the nation that this Government will continue to advance its work to ensure that no one is left behind. Notwithstanding our detractors, we will continue to invest in all our citizens to ensure that they have the best possible opportunity to develop their talent, skills and realize their true potential.

We will continue to implement social protection measures that will help empower and transform their lives. We will continue to nurture a caring society. We will continue to create a better Trinidad and Tobago for you and me. And, Madam Speaker, I thank you, and Members of this House for the opportunity to contribute to this Motion. I thank you, the people of this great nation of ours, for giving us the opportunity to serve you. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate currently on a Motion brought the Member for Chaguanas East. Madam Speaker, on the onset, I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate the Member for Chaguanas East for bringing a relevant and timely Motion—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—that reflects the pulse of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, especially against a backdrop of high levels of unemployment, despite the charade and the dance given by the Member for Diego Martin North/East. The reality on the ground, Madam Speaker, is that everyone knows somebody who is unemployed in this country and in every household, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, in many instances, it is more than one person

in a household that is unemployed. Madam Speaker, this Motion comes against the backdrop of high levels of crime. It comes against the backdrop of high levels of cost of living and high levels of food prices, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, after listening to the contribution made by the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, I want to say to the hon. Member, the Minister that is, for Family Services and Social Development—the Minister spoke in glowing terms of the amount of work that is being done in that Ministry. But hon. Minister, you are speaking about a broken system that does not take into consideration that a lot of the programmes and policies geared towards those in this broken system are not reaching them. And that is the reality that exists in Trinidad and Tobago today.

I heard the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West was at pains telling us, “This is not the Trinidad and Tobago we know.” Madam Speaker, it really made me sit back and reflect on what the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West was really saying to Trinidad and Tobago. Because the reality of a Minister of Government, earning a salary of 40 to \$50,000 a month, advising to the population to withhold from eating macaroni pie two and three times for the week, is a far cry, Madam Speaker, from a mother who does not know where she will be able to get money to put food on the table or buy milk for her child as indicated by the Member for Chaguanas East.

You see, Madam Speaker, I also heard the Minister of Finance indicate that the Opposition was speaking on both sides of our mouths. And I want remind the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Finance, we were not the ones saying the economy is booming. We were not saying that it is a turnaround and in the same breath then say, “Things are not as good as it was and brace for rough seas.” That was the Member for Diego Martin North/East, Madam Speaker.

So when the hon. Member wants to speak about the Opposition speaking from both sides of his mouth, I think the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East really was misguided and truly was reflecting on the position and the modus operandi that he adopts when he speaks to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, not knowing if they are going or they are coming.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West spent half of his contribution reflecting on things that were said by the Member for Chaguanas East, the mover of the Motion. And instantly, after listening to the rhetoric of the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, I could not help but think of the words, vacuous, empty, vacant—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—to describe the Member's contribution. And I simply could not believe that was a Member of the Cabinet of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. But then, when I reflected on who heads that Cabinet, I was not entirely surprised, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You see, Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West told us that the Member Chaguanas East was reading a speech of hate, and the Member was reading things that were evil, and those were the exact words, “hate” and “evil” used to describe a Motion that was brought by the Member for Chaguanas East, looking after the interest and the welfare of every man, woman and child in this country, Madam Speaker.

But, Madam Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, I am not surprised by what came from that Member in terms of what passed as his contribution. Because that hon. Member is singing for a place at the table while he describes the Member for Chaguanas East's presentation as evil. But I want

remind the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West what is really considered to be evil. You see, when one seeks comfort in things like the Les Coteaux jumbie that could be considered evil.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You see, Madam Speaker, when the Member speaks about what is evil, I want to remind the hon. Member, evil is when a Prime Minister can stand up on a platform and say that the last man that put him out of a Cabinet, “You know what happened to him.” That is evil, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, I want to remind the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, evil is when you could take bread and butter out of the mouths of babies and come here to pontificate to poor innocent citizens on whether to eat macaroni once or three times for the week. That is evil.

Madam Speaker, evil is when you are drinking champagne and eating caviar, but totally oblivious to citizens’ pain and suffering. That is evil, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, evil is when you take away laptops from children and leave them ill-equipped to survive in a society that is determined by technology, Madam Speaker. That is evil. Evil is when you support the denigration of women by supporting comments about advocacy or women’s rights as “jammetry” by a Prime Minister. That is evil, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, evil is when you come to this House to talk about Members of Parliament conducting themselves, and they must conduct themselves with dignity and honour, but jumps up and down when your leader, when your leader, Madam Speaker, disguises and displays—displays, sorry, not

disguises, displays disgusting attacks on sitting Members of Parliament talking about “lice-headed” and persons with fleas, describing those Members of Parliament, Madam Speaker. That is evil, Madam Speaker. That is evil.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, after listening to the contribution made by the Member for Siparia earlier, and reflecting that yesterday we observed 120 years of the Water Riots, right here in this Parliament when the Red House was burnt to the ground, 120 years and one day ago, Madam Speaker, I listened to the contribution of the Member for Siparia reflecting on that situation in the context of the Minister of Public Utilities at a function and a conference that was dedicated to water and water conservation in Trinidad and Tobago.

6.00 p.m.

And, Madam Speaker, it was really the *Guardian* editorial of yesterday that put things into perspective with respect to what was being uttered by the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): I do not want to be described as evil but—

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you so much. I do not want to be described as evil, Madam Speaker, but I beg to move that the House be adjourned—

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

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—and in my most angelic voice, Madam Speaker, I beg—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Now, that is evil.

Adjournment

2023.03.24

Hon. Member: That is right.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: I beg to move that this House be now adjourned to a date to be fixed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

SPIRITUAL/SHOUTER BAPTIST LIBERATION DAY

GREETINGS

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, before I put the question on the adjournment of the House, Members will remember that on Thursday, March 30, 2023, our country will observe Spiritual/Shouter Baptist Liberation Day. I now invite Members to express greetings. Member for La Horquetta/Talparo.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*].

The Minister of Youth Development and National Service (Hon. Foster Cummings): Madam Speaker, it gives me great pleasure as the resident Spiritual Baptist in the House—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Cummings:—to bring greetings on behalf of the Government to the Spiritual Baptist community of Trinidad and Tobago, as once again, we celebrate the liberation of the Spiritual Baptist to worship freely in Trinidad and Tobago following the repeal of the legislation that prohibited the practice of the Spiritual Baptist faith. Later this week, on the 30th, Spiritual Baptists from throughout Trinidad and Tobago—and indeed the celebrations have now extended to our neighbouring islands as delegations visit from several of the islands to celebrate with us here in Trinidad and Tobago, and we will all join with the community in this celebration at various locations throughout the country. It is a signal that in this country as our anthem says:

“...every creed and race finds an equal place...”

UNREVISED

Greetings (Spiritual Baptist Liberation Day)
Hon. F. Cummings

2023.03.24

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Cummings: So, on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, to all my brothers and sisters who are practitioners of the Spiritual Baptist faith, we wish each and every one would have a great and grand celebration and that we will be the light to this part of the world, and far beyond, that there is freedom of worship in Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: We are now going to get greetings from the Member for Naparima.

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. It gives me great pleasure on behalf of the political leader of the United National Congress and the 300,000 people that we represent, to bring greetings to the Spiritual Baptist community and to celebrate the annual public holiday which is celebrated—well, commemorates the repeal on the 30th of March, 1951, of the 1917 Shouters Prohibition Ordinance that prohibited the activities of the Shouter or Spiritual Baptist faith. Madam Speaker, it was in part due to the significant effort put by Albert Gomes who pioneered the repeal in the—at that time, the equivalent of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. We celebrate the tenacity, the strength, the courage of our Spiritual Baptist brothers and sisters to persevere, despite severe discrimination, to ensure that their beliefs never died and morals were passed on for future generations.

After the repeal of the Ordinance, our Spiritual Baptist brothers and sisters renewed their spiritual enlightenment to uplift our nation. Their practices

Greetings (Spiritual Baptist Liberation Day)
Mr. Charles

2023.03.24

revitalized our way of life and their faith offered renewed hope for a nation. It was because of this that a former Prime Minister of Trinidad and a leader of the United National Congress decided to—that this should be celebrated as a part of the ongoing development and commemoration of the spiritual and community development of Trinidad and Tobago. It was because of we on this side that we gave a primary school to the Spiritual Baptists.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: We gave also an early childhood centre. And to the London Baptist, the most modern primary school at the time, Fifth Company Baptist School in the year 2000, was given to the London Baptist who joined the Spiritual Baptist in terms of the struggle against the domination and elimination of the cultural and spiritual development of that group. So to that group, we need their spirituality, we need their courage, we need their tenacity to take us through these difficult times. So on behalf of those on our side, on this side, we wish our Spiritual Baptist brothers and sisters a happy spiritual celebration of the Spiritual Baptist Liberation Day. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*].

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I too would like to offer greetings to the Spiritual/Shouter Baptist community as they prepare to celebrate Spiritual/Shouter Baptist Liberation Day. Hon. Members, you may recall that the Spiritual/Shouter Baptist Liberation Day was declared as a national holiday in Trinidad and Tobago, in 1996, to commemorate the 1951 repeal of the Shouters Prohibition Ordinance of 1917.

The Spiritual/Shouter Baptist faith emerged in the West Indies as a consequence of the fusion of the religious rites of the slaves from the Congo, Dahomey and the Yoruba tribes with Christianity, the practice of which was

suppressed for several decades. This holiday, therefore, signifies the importance of freedom of worship and the liberty of religious expression which are important human rights which the Spiritual/Shouter Baptist were denied. The history behind the Spiritual/Shouter Baptist faith serves as a powerful reminder to all Members of the importance of resilience and determination, specifically the determination of a community to thrive despite all odds.

Today, the Spiritual/Shouter Baptist commemorate their faith with vibrant song and dance propelled by bells and drums, all relics of a once oppressed religion. As we celebrate with our citizens of the Spiritual/Shouter Baptist faith during this season of Lent for Christians and Ramadan for Muslims, may the principles of unity, inclusion and respect for diversity continue to order our steps as a nation and may we never take for granted that fundamental human right and freedom enshrined in section 4(h) of our Constitution:

“freedom of conscience and religious belief and observance;”

I, therefore, take this opportunity, on behalf of the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and on my own behalf, to extend best wishes to the Spiritual/Shouter Baptist community.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.10 p.m.