

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Friday, October 06, 2023*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023**

[Second Day]

*Question proposed.***Madam Speaker:** Leader of the Opposition.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC** (*Siparia*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Can I get the mike, please? I look forward to contributing in this budget 2024 debate and I thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity as I thank Members of this honourable House.

We undertake budget consultations every year, pre-budget consultations, following upon the founding principles and tenets of our great UNC party to be the true voice of the people and to faithfully represent all their interests and needs in the Parliament, for they are the ones who have put us here.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** It has always been our mantra that no citizen would ever be left behind by the UNC. Through us, they will always have a voice.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So I want to thank citizens and representatives from all the NGOs, labour unions, business organizations and other groups who attended the many national pre-budget consultations and stakeholder meetings that the UNC held across the country. I want to also thank those NGOs who sent us

written submissions. Thanks also to all our MPs and Senators, councillors, aldermen, the staff of the constituency Opposition offices, the staff of the office of the Leader of the Opposition and, of course, I express my ongoing gratitude to the great constituents of Siparia for electing me to serve as their MP since 1995.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** At our budget consultations, several issues were raised but the number one issue was crime, coupled with that was the issue of water or lack thereof, the high cost of living, joblessness, infrastructure amongst others. As has happened before, this budget contains some new promises by Government which has not even kept the promises they made yesteryear. Instead of addressing promises made over the last eight years, the Minister ignores those commitments, re-promises some of them and makes new promises which, of course, again, will not be kept. What is most concerning is that this budget for 2024 ignores the realities facing citizens, the brutal violent crime crisis was mainly ignored. The Government fails to understand that there can be no prosperity without safety and security.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** There can be no prosperity without safety and security and in this regard, the budget is irrelevant. It is irrelevant because even as I speak today even as we are here comfortably ensconced in this Chamber, talking highfalutin talk about the economy, some innocent citizen will be robbed and murdered. There is a war on the outside. Criminals are at war with innocent citizens whom the Government has left to fend for themselves. I say again, there could no prosperity without safety.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Just yesterday, the TTPS said they have solved 13

out of every 100 murders. What that means is that 87 murders out of 100, they are never caught.

Government has chosen to bury its head in the sand. While they boast about how to prosper, all we see is how people suffer. The Government is no longer in charge. They have ceded control to the criminals. Criminal enterprises flourishing and prospering under this Government. How can you say prosper and enjoy when the Government's mantra is "suffer and destroy".

For the past eight years Government has done everything to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Their policies have been to the disadvantaged of the working man and woman. They have destroyed the foreign used-car industry which benefited the working man. They have provided forex to their financiers while starving the SMEs and regular citizens into bankruptcy.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They pass laws to force citizens to cede control of their money to the banks who then extort high fees in return. They put VAT on 7,000 food items, which were VAT-free under my government while concentrating our nation's food and medicine supply into the hands of their financiers through their biased allocation of forex.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They have refused to raise the minimum wage to the \$25 per hour or above comfort to the working class and working people. Shamefully, that minor increase in this budget is being celebrated by some businesses who seem relieved that they were not being required by law to pay their workers a liveable wage. Security officers must guard the wealth of the rich, while at the same time being unable to feed themselves and their families.

The policies of this Government are always meant to benefit the fake elites

while in every budget they throw a pittance towards the working man and woman.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And again, year upon year their promises are painful, broken promises. They promised free access to public broadband wireless network in all areas. That has been repeated five times in this Chamber, 2016, 2017, 2021, 2022, 2023 and today it has not materialized.

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

**Hon. Member:** Shame. Shame.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Typical PNM, “Promises Never Materialized”.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Pension reform which will benefit so many of our citizens has been repeated four times, 2016, 2020, 2022, 2023 and today, promise has never materialized.

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

**Hon. Member:** Shame. Shame. Shame.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They have promised subsidizing mortgage loans and lower interest rates. That has also been repeated several times, 2016, 2018, 2021 and today, promise never materialized.

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

**Hon. Member:** Shame.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They promised the reintroduction of a rent-to-own programme to assist low-income households, repeated three times, 2016, 2017, 2018. Today, promise never materialized. All these broken promises to the working man after eight years of the most expensive “misgovernance” our country has ever seen.

Did you know, Madam Speaker, that it has cost taxpayers \$420 billion since

they have taken office and will cost a further \$59.2 billion over the next 12 months? This is almost half a trillion dollars that has been spent, yet they have no achievements tangible to benefit the honest working people.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The rage many people feel now because everyone knows that this Government has been captured by the fake elites and the grovelling oligarchy. The Government are like prisoners of the fake elite and not protectors of the people. You notice the Government's inaction, some members of the fake elite funded by narco money have embedded themselves into parts of the economy thus fuelling crime. A large portion, a large percentage of our economy, namely the underground economy, is financed by drug money. Our economy has become awash with drug money fuelling violent crime. Only the ignorant refuse to see it, this narco-funded crime is an inflictor of great pain on the population.

Madam Speaker, only recently we saw the murders of four innocent, beautiful children. The mother of those children, Anisa Mohammed, said this to reporters, when her four precious and most beautiful children were gunned down in their sleep, she said:

I never study hair or shoes or nails because as we get money, it was for groceries.

The four Peterkin children, Madam Speaker, innocent children, three were minors, one was 19. You have seen their photos in the media, children too beautiful for words, now all Anisa's money has been used to bury her four precious and most beautiful children. Four beautiful children, Madam Speaker, they were tucked in their beds at night and they were zipped in body bags before sunrise.

Many citizens were inconsolable at the sight. We all grieved from afar with this family. Pain happens to humans we know. The family does not have to know

me or know us, but I know we hurt along with them. Many people were raging mad. Indeed, Dr. Moonilal, MP Moonilal, was raging mad because people were not outraged by this tragic and outrageous action.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Many people could hardly contain themselves but there was silence from the “eat-ah-food” oligarchy for which some in this Government pander. Not a word about the murders of these four children by wannabe elites who grovel for contracts, who grovel for state briefs, for rents and national awards, whilst at the same time they pontificate to real people with fake lectures of piety.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** A whole nation is being kept awake not by noise, but by thick and dense pain. A whole village in Guanapo cannot work, not for lack of motivation but because there is burning pain every time they move. Many cannot eat, their bellies are bloated with pain and grief, pain is stabbing and stabbing and stabbing. And as if pain of their children’s mass murder was not enough for the parents of the Peterkin children, there was the cruelty of disrespect for their bodies. They were left to decompose.

**Hon. Member:** Shame.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Shawn Peterkin, the children’s father said and I quote:

“When they buss open the (body) bag with in children in it - if you see the children. They actually getting blue. They rotting. They smelling sink. They sink up the whole building. They come and slaughter my children...”—

**Hon. Member:** Shame.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—“now they leave them to rotten.”

**Hon. Member:** Shame.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We must remove the pain of the stench of murder.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Do any of you know the stench of murder? While I was studying in Jamaica, working, I discovered the horrible scent of murder. I had a little yellow Volkswagen Bug. I was driving along in front of the university hospital when I encountered a young man who was shot and lying in the street. I stopped and with the help of some people, we dragged him into the car. I dropped him off at the hospital.

I returned home in shock and fear. I scrubbed that car all evening. The suffocating metallic smell of blood like rusted iron was branded in my mind. The gurgling, scraping and rattling sounds from his chest and throat. Does anyone of you present even understood the sight, the smell, the sounds of murder?

**1.45 p.m.**

I was so shocked, Madam Speaker, and full of fear, that the sight, smell and sound of murder have been imprinted in my mind ever since. It has never left me. Too many families in our land, and police officers as well, have gone through similar experiences. And as if the murder of four beautiful children was not horror enough for families and communities, as if it was not heart-breaking enough, we are seeing another innocent and beautiful child murdered in her sleep just a couple of weeks ago. A beautiful innocent 13-year-old Andrea Lallan. She went to bed, and in the night she went from dreaming and warm to cold and dead in a body bag. She went to bed to have dreams of being maybe a great dancer, maybe a singer, maybe a doctor, or just a great human being. Sleep was her escape from the reality that she had just returned from, reporting to the police that she was raped. Instead

of having sweet dreams, this beautiful innocent child was murdered in the ongoing saga of the nightmare that is overseen by this Government. At 13-years-old, brutalized, raped and murdered; a short brutal life of poverty and pain.

Madam Speaker, her sweet dream became a body bag. Her uncle, wheelchair-bound, paraplegic, was also shot dead. Her father is still fighting for his life. So how can anyone living in this country not honestly believe that the only function of this Government is to be handmaidens to the grotesque? The only function of this Government is not to function. This is a fact. When will our dreaming beautiful children stop ending up in body bags? Imagine at 13-years-old, after a life of poverty and pain, brutalized, raped and murdered. Many of you listening do not care because she was not your child. She was not your grandchild. She was not your relative. But be warned today, the rain is falling on the home of the Lallans and the home of the Peterkins, and tomorrow it will fall on yours, because that is the crime scourge in this country

How do you all live with yourselves buying more body bags than book bags for our children? The favourite bags of other world leaders are computer satchels and brief cases; yours are golf bags and body bags. Are you all not ashamed that everyone is seeing you doing nothing? This is a government detached from reality, Madam Speaker. I watched on the TV the other night, I think it was TV6, where Ministers appeared on a talk show post-budget, and I saw Ministers Al-Rawi and Manning, who from birth lived exceedingly privileged lives paid for by taxpayers of this country, who knew nothing of the realities of life, they were chosen to speak on working people's issues at the TV6 post-budget forum. How much more detached from reality this Government can be to send a man whose family is collecting hundreds of millions in rent to justify \$20.50, and minimum wage?

**Hon. Member:** Shame! Shame!



**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** How can this Government and their friends justify citizens working for \$164? These citizens' lives are paralyzed. This is our paradise country. This is our country where tens of thousands of parents sacrifice their personal needs to give their children a fighting chance. Therefore, those thousands of parents, hundreds who are already going without, must bury murdered sons and daughters. I ask: Why do you all not act to remove the pain these parents feel for their slaughtered sons and daughters?

In our country today there are more murders per year than good local songs. There are more murders per year than bright inventions. There are more murders per year than good paintings. There are more murders per year than concerts. There are more murders per year than gold medals that we win. There are more murders than trophies. Murders made in Trinidad and Tobago are more popular than cultural events it seems. Murder has become more popular than culture. Indeed murder and pain every day are the new cultures of Trinidad and Tobago. Blood is our culture. Pain is our culture. Everything is pain. Everywhere is pain. Everybody is in pain, and everybody is in fear. Only some on the other side, or their friends and families, the fake elites in this country, see, hear and feel no pain. Perhaps it is because they are insulated by 10-ply money and power from office. This paralyzing pain did not fall from the sky. And to say like the Prime Minister said that we are a violent society, is to think that violence is like pollen, it spreads in the wind.

If a child had said that you would have laughed at them because you think their brains are not yet developed to understand cause and effect. We are not a nation of five-year olds. Neither are we a nation of fools. We do not make glib statements like we are a violent society and leave it at that. We identify the problems and the causes and try to find solutions.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We know problems have been added to more problems. These are multiplied and then shared. Violent crime, Madam Speaker, is like a giant terrifying monster. It keeps changing shape. A giant monster of which all we know is paralyzing fear, anxiety, hopelessness and crippling pain. It was only today, Madam Speaker, that the hon. Chief Justice talked about the anxiety stemming from the increasing murders. And by the way, Madam Speaker, may I thank the Parliament and your good self for accommodating some of our lawyers to attend the law opening which was this morning. We want to thank you for that opportunity.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I intended to go but other constraints prevented me from so doing. So we want to thank you for that accommodation. So as I move on, I say that the crime is like a monster. It is a monster that can be tackled, however. It is a monster that must be tackled. We must be humble. When offered help we must take the help. We must be brave. We must be honest. We must always have respect for people. And we have to get serious. We have to get serious.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You cannot run away from the responsibility to protect citizens. The Minister in his statement on Monday did not address any tangible new plans for the current crime crisis. The Prime Minister is the only person in this country who appears to have confidence in the Minister of National Security. The Minister is not even mediocre or average. He is bluntly incompetent.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And in being incompetent, the Minister seeks refuge in the claim that he is not responsible for citizens' safety. This is an official admission that they are a failed government. It represents an abdication by Government of the sacred responsibility to protect and defend people and keep them safe. This Minister says it is not his duty to keep people safe.

**Hon. Member:** Shame.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And he says that is not his duty. But Minister, you have a statutory constitutional duty which you are also breaching, and that duty, every Minister of National Security since this Government came into office has failed in their constitutional duty to file reports in the Parliament pursuant to section 66D of our Constitution. And so they have failed to file. They have failed to file the Trafficking in Human Persons report. Very important report so people could see what is happening, why it is happening, and what is happening. They failed to file that for every year since they came into office in 2015. In some critical reports, as I say, Trafficking in Persons annual report, the last one laid was in 2015. The Administrative Report of the Ministry of National Security, last one laid in 2016. This is a constitutional duty.

**Hon. Member:** Incompetent.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You are breaching the Constitution, the law of the land, the supreme law of the land, by your failure to file these reports in the Parliament.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Outstanding reports for the SSA, outstanding reports for the interception of communication, outstanding reports for the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board, outstanding reports for the Police Service Commission.

**Hon. Member:** Shame!

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You have failed to deflate this pursuant to section 66 of the Constitution.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So if your duty is not to make citizens feel safe, then what is your duty? What is your duty? It is your sacred responsibility to protect and defend people to keep them safe. If a government cannot provide this legal guarantee of safety and protection for citizens' lives, limbs, families, properties, homes, then that government is no longer a government for the people that stands by the people.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We live in an unprecedented stage of emergency with self-imposed curfews. Only the gun-toting bandits and gangs can roam the streets at nights as they prey upon innocent citizens. Citizens have been forced to barricade and burglar proof their homes with higher fences and barbed wire as if living in a prison. And in there we are not safe with the onslaught of home invasions. Criminals have become so boldface and brazen due to Government's incompetence and failure, where they are coming with blow torches to cut through the steel burglar proofing. Make no mistake about this, this is a direct result of Government repeatedly saying, it is not responsible for the safety of citizens. .

How do you expect criminals to interpret such a statement? How do you expect them to act when Government gives them a free pass to attack and terrorize citizens? The Minister in his statement on Monday gave not a single new idea or plan as to how Government will rescue the population from the nightmare of crime. And yet they have the unmitigated gall and temerity to blame everyone, to blame the Opposition, to blame citizens. The fight against crime must be holistic.

It must include prevention, detection, conviction and rehabilitation. In this regard, failing on the part of the Minister to present any new, tangible crime-fighting initiative, I am prepared to share with you some of our plans for national security.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I am still awaiting the courtesy of a reply from the hon. Prime Minister in response to the letter I sent to him some time ago about crime-fighting proposals that we shared, and the Prime Minister had undertaken to share their proposals. I thought maybe at first they did not share them because maybe in the budget they were coming to share them, but there are no tangible—no new crime-fighting initiatives. No new items.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** As Anita—MP Anita Haynes has said to me on Monday, just more money but no ideas and no plans.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Some of these plans can be implemented right away to reduce crime. I call on Government to consider these initiatives. One: strengthen a rebranded highway patrol unit. Properly staff the E-99 call centre. Currently, it is severely understaffed. I am told there are—about 12 persons are supposed to be on the switchboard daily but there are usually less than three, so citizens are forced to wait for long periods of time and no one answers. And imagine, this call centre is for emergency reports of criminal activity. I say reactivate the community comfort patrols, reactivate them now, that will not take you any time. You can do this now. Reactivate the community comfort patrols.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Increase and maintain CCTV cameras throughout T&T.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** What is so hard about that? Every year we come to this Parliament there is always some excuse as to why the CCTV cameras are not up and running. All kinds of Nancy stories. Look, just get it done. We need it done. Get it done.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Properly support the Transnational Organized Crime Unit. It is poorly utilized. It is understaffed, so there are few good results from it. In fact nobody hears about this unit anymore as Government fails to equip and utilize it properly. Increase covert operations at our sea ports and airports. The complaint is the guns that is coming in—the guns are— “Look, don’t you point at me, yuh know.” You will have your turn to speak Member.

**Hon. Member:** Yeah, tell him.

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

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

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

**Mr. Charles:** Warn him.

**2.00 p.m.**

Increase covert operations at the seaports and airports. There is always the complaint that the guns and the narco—the drugs are coming in through the ports. So why are we not increasing the operations there? Why are we going up to the US to try to use their system to stop their manufacturers from manufacturing guns?

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Enhance and fully implement the National Operations Centre. You have disabled that.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Install security electronic billboards; provide electronic data access to all police vehicles; integrate a fully computerized crime stats and reporting system to include computerized vehicle maintenance and service records; computerization of all police stations and provision of internet access via the National Operations Centre; equipping every police vehicle with GPS and link back to the NOC; indoor and outdoor shooting ranges for all the protective services; a training swimming pool facility to train all arms of the protective service, police, fire, coast guard and the army; a simulation training theater for the TTPS; proper health and fitness facilities for the TTPS; provide customer service and public relation support for the TTPS; standardize and acquire fit-for-purpose vehicles for the TTPS. There are some other areas that we can go on. I am doing this deliberately because you have given us no plans tangible to fight crime.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** None, none whatsoever. We do not have to reinvent the wheel, many of these we had in train when we brought serious crimes in this country down to the lowest in decades.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** But when you came in, when you came in you dismantled, you allowed audits to lapse, and what has happened? Crime has escalated and continues to escalate. We propose stand your ground laws, stand your ground laws.

**Hon. Member:** Stand your ground.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I heard on the social media somewhere where they are saying, gangs are now saying—I think it is in one of the newspapers today—

gangs are saying, “knock it on d Police”. Well, I say “knock it on the criminals”.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We have to knock it on the criminals, we have to knock it on the gangs. This is what we do so we need the stand your ground laws to give people the laws and the means to protect themselves and their families. Create the offence of home invasion, giving allowance for the right to bear arms, and modifications to the current legislation to make acquiring firearms by lawabiding citizens easier. Change the legislation to make gated communities easier; increase the complement of municipal police; introduce police officers full time in all schools; restructure the Ministry of National Security—we have said this before—Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Justice. Increase the retirement age for the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force to align with other arms of the protective services.

I have been saying this for years. We had begun the work in 2015 when we were in office; when this Government came in, they scrapped it. I saw last night on the news where the TTDF is calling for this exact measure to increase the retirement age. You know why? Because they are losing so many skilled and experienced persons because they retire so early. So this is something that we were called on, and it does not take much to make that happen. It is not a long, lengthy process. That can be done very quickly.

Diploma and undergraduate, postgraduate degrees in policing to be implemented for recruits combined with a police apprenticeship programme, pretrial detention and bail reform, individual risk and financial assessments, minimum security detention centres, law to prevent incarceration of non-violent drug offenders, ankle bracelets and house arrest. By the way, what has happened with these ankle bracelets? We had put the law into place since we were there.



What has happened with the ankle bracelets?

**Mr. Charles:** Talk.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** What has happened? Give state support for children of incarcerated persons so they would not end up—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—criminals as well. Establish a fund for children who have lost one or both parents to crime—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—so that they are taken care of. Seriously revamp the witness protection programme.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** When we met in 2016, that first meeting with the hon. Prime Minister and his team, the UNC team met, this was number one on our list, to revamp the witness protection programme so that persons have to go to court—maybe the young girl who was a victim of rape, after she reported the crime of rape she was murdered, maybe this would have helped to protect her life. Revamp the witness protection programme. Construct a forensic science complex and training facility at the UWI Debe Campus. You have the place shut down, closed down, you have a state-of-the-art campus there, put a forensic science centre—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—and training facility. Up to today we do not have a proper forensic science centre, even though we have been hearing it from the other side over and over again.

**Mr. Charles:** Talk.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Provide personal licensed firearms to all active

TTPS officers and prison officers; enforcement of the drug and liquor laws against minors; enforce the zero-tolerance approach to any physical violence in schools. Any student physically attacking another student must be immediately removed from school and only be allowed to return after completing neurodiagnostic testing and a proper counselling programme approved by the State. In the interim the student can keep up with their lessons via virtual learning. What we see in schools now is more than just bullying. We are seeing violent crimes being committed and the emergence of gang cultures in our schools.

Review the legislation for the allowance of marijuana use. There is an exponential increase in the marijuana usage and addiction among teens and young adults. Due to the absence of state agency oversight and control of supply, users are smoking marijuana laced with cocaine, illegally imported, and then we wonder, yes, and then we wonder why the crime levels are so high.

**Mr. Charles:** “Dey doh know dat.”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** My government gave this country’s youth laptops so they could learn.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This Government gave them marijuana, legalized marijuana. Install a task force to address the imminent arrival and use of fentanyl. It is coming, if it is not already here. Review legislation to enable citizens to hire private attorneys representing their interests at hearings for party and bar licences. The current system is corrupted. Legislation on mandatory cut-off times for all public events requiring dancehall licences that are not held within an enclosed building, exceptions to be made during the Carnival season.

The other side has been talking about the noise level so long, coming out of these events. I know the MP for St. Augustine is always having numerous

complaints about noise pollution out of these kinds of places. Carry out a performance assessment of social projects in national security. Restructure global social programmes that have become gang and criminal activity havens. Perform a short term assessment to identify the scale of involvement of illegal immigrants in criminal activity, so a comprehensive plan can be developed from this data. There are some other measures, I continue, because crime is the number one issue in this country.

Measures targeted at children and young persons. There are many social and educational programmes to assist, to help empower our youth to reach their fullest potential—

**Mr. Lee:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 53. I am being disturbed. I cannot hear.

**Mr. Charles:** Yes, constantly talking.

**Mr. Imbert:** [*Laughter*]

**Madam Speaker:** Minister, Minister of Finance, Minister of Finance, please, let us comply with Standing Order 53.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Madam Speaker, for everything it is a joke; for them it is a joke. This is serious business.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** People are being murdered.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** People are being murdered. You are laughing. It is the same way the Minister laughed when he said he raised gas so many times and “nobody riot yet”. You all remember that?

**Hon. Members:** Yes.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They have no care or concern. This is serious

business we are engaged in, in this Parliament, and so I continue. Many social programmes, educational programmes that exist to help empower youth to reach their fullest potential and to guide them away from crime. I remind of the Higher Education Loan Programme; the MIC craft programmes; the Helping Youth Prepare for Employment/Education Programme was commonly known as HYPE; the Multi-Sector Skills Training Programme, commonly known as MuST; and my MP to my left, MP Lee knows of many of these because at one time he was the head of the MIC. On-the-Job Training Programme, OJT; Servol Hi-Tech and Advanced Skills Training Programme; the retraining programme for displaced workers; the Military-Led Youth Programme, MiLAT, I think it was, apprenticeship programme and reorientation training; YTEPP; Metal Industries Company Limited; National Skills Development Programmes; and the Youth Academy Training.

I strongly recommend increasing the financing and monitoring of these programmes to keep our young people occupied, educated and away from the life of crime.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** At the same time in our schools, all schools should have the full complement of required deans of discipline, security officers, school safety officers. We had launched, Madam Speaker, the first National Student Hotline to provide professional counselling to students with confidentiality. Today I ask, what is the status of this, and this programme should be reinforced. We also established a circle of hope where students would have weekly special sessions to speak with trained teachers on issues they may have. Again, we need to reinforce this.

Government has ensured staffing the full complement of student support

services which constitutes guidance counsellors, guidance officers and school social workers with educational, behavioral and clinical psychologists looking after our children in need. We had implemented the Retiree Adolescent Partnership Programme, RAPP, a community oriented programme that utilizes skills and experiences of retired persons to aid and supervise low school performance and out of school adolescents between the ages of 12 and 16. Again I say, what is the status of the RAPP, and this needs to be reinforced.

We implemented after school homework and study centres; Dial-a-Teacher programme, providing free help in Math and English for SEA students, and Math, English and Integrated Science for CSEC students at no cost to them or their parents, courtesy Ministry of Education and TSTT. What is the status of this programme? Introduce proper and continuous testing and neurodiagnostic of children to test for special needs. We got some submissions, Madam Speaker, in our pre-budget consultations from the Autistic Society which I will share in a short while. Fill out all teacher vacancies—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—all vacancies, and strictly monitor teacher absenteeism; introduce a financial incentive programme for dedicated and high performing teachers based on their students' end of term exam results, across all levels so teachers are also given an incentive. Introduce the anonymous anti-bullying app for students so they can make reports. Introduce parent patrols in all schools, where a parent of each enrolled student must spend at least one full day at their child's school to help maintain discipline with deans, teachers and student support services. I say all students must undergo free mandatory annual physical and medical screening by state-approved public and private medical doctors to examine for physical abuse, substance abuse, sexual abuse, malnutrition and

diseases. After school meals for children who apply to be supplied by the school feeding programme, and—after school meals I am talking about, not just in school but after school; a daily multi-vitamin supplement could also be provided with meals because malnutrition is a main cause of poor learning.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We had a suite of government community programmes. Some good programmes are: community mediation services; free counselling sessions; parental support booster, single parents and victims of family violence; peer mediation; parenting workshop to address parent/child conflict; parental rejection; parental communication; proper parental supervision and identification of criminal behaviours in children. I say we fund, faith-based weekly community mentoring and guidance programmes. Each community we know has a place of worship which should be open every day after school, 2.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m. perhaps, Saturdays and weekends, Sundays, and they can act as community homework and activity centres. The Government can then provide funding for meals and students supplies and pay a stipend to staff who can be drawn from the congregations, from the community elders, for volunteer teachers and parents.

This way we can integrate the parent, the school, the community and religious bodies into children's lives. We have always heard the expression, "It takes a village to raise a child."

**2.15 p.m.**

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We have just completed the local government elections, and may I say congratulations to all our councillors and aldermen throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** After that election, Madam Speaker, the Government is now a minority government.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Some say a lame duck government. They lost in their backyard in Tobago and they lost in Trinidad—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—and the next thing they will lose is the “and”. So they will lose all of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So through the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government—I know Government has been talking a lot about local government reform—here is something we can do to help the communities through local government. All councillors could oversee the formation of a community support council in each polling division of the electoral district. I suggest this is the manner to do it as the boundaries are already germinated, alienated and the demographic data is already present.

These community support councils will act like the old village councils to provide guidance, mentorship and support to children, young adults and parents, and will also serve as a direct link with police and government representatives, and then prominent persons of good character within the community can come forward to support the councils within the area. The aim again is to integrate citizens better, prevent marginalization, encourage communities to directly affect, monitor and regulate their development. These community councils should also be funded with a stipend from Government.

We will share other detailed plans at the consultations, whenever that may

be. We also have many other detailed plans which we can share during those consultations and with all willing stakeholders. Again, I call upon Government to prioritize anti-crime measures, crime-fighting strategies and policies.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So I said before the crime is like a monster. We on this side can address the monster that is crime, but the monster problem is fed by two sides of the same coin. On one side, this Government uses all the mental energy to create selfish policies and budgets to focus on designing themselves and the fake elites into a rich and powerful in-group. On the other side of this coin, the real working people are neglected. They feel that life is unfair under this Government. They see that everything has fallen apart. They see no hope.

This is not the quality of life that people want for themselves. Hundreds of thousands of citizens feel their potential is being wasted. They feel that opportunities are only for the rich and infamous. They feel this Government does not hear or speak to them respectfully. I repeat, as I began, all these measures in this budget, there can be no prosperity without safety and security.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Madam Speaker, after eight years of serial deception, what can be done? How must the giant monster of loss, and grief, and hopelessness, and pain be fought? The Government must do what the UNC has been doing for years. We in the UNC talk directly to people. We are the working people's party. We talk directly to people. We are the working people's party, putting people first because we listen to the people.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The PNM has their consultations in the Hyatt, I believe, and some tell me you have to pay to gain entry. Well, this year they did



not have any. They are having a post-budget exercise but that is not a consultation. They are going to talk down to the people in a meeting.

This Government is based in the Hyatt. They only care to listen to those who can afford entry. That is the arrogance of this Government. People must go to them, whereas we in the UNC go to the people.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We go to where they are in their communities. We go to their schools, the community centres, the church halls, the recreational grounds and we listen to them. We are in their backyards, their front yards, homes and workplaces. For the past weeks that is what we have done. We have engaged people in budget consultations nationwide in the regional corporations. We humble ourselves and listen to the people's dreams, aspirations and needs to learn what kinds of lives they want.

We do more than listen, Madam Speaker. We help them formulate the nature of problems and find solutions. This is the UNC. This is what we have been doing every week. Simply, the Government does not know about the people's pain and hardship, and some think they just do not care. That is the worst part. People think they just do not care. Even areas represented by the PNM, both at the local level and the parliamentary level, citizens complained that not one government official or one rep has visited them to ask their views about the budget. Not even one, Madam Speaker.

They have not had a single consultation with their supporters or otherwise. This is why this Government's budgets are so anti-people. They do not take the people into account at all, not their experiences, not their points of view, not their hopes, not their dreams. Government rams policy cuts and oppression down the throats of people and does not think twice about the pain and hardship and

suffering they have caused. The UNC is the voice of the people.

I will now put on the *Hansard* recommendations from the groups and the individuals who respectfully answered our requests for consultant. We own them a duty to let their voices be heard in this seat of our democracy.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I begin first of all—time will not permit to give all their recommendations but with their permission we will post their entire recommendations on social media. I will attempt as best as I can to summarize, paraphrase recommendations made by the various organizations.

I begin with the paraphrased recommendations of the Tobago Chamber through Mr. Martin George, and I thank the Chamber and Mr. George for sending in their written submissions.

1. Immediate and unconditional repeal of the Foreign Investment Act to facilitate the inflow of foreign direct investment. The Act, they say, is an absurdity because it prevents what we need, scarce forex and dwindling FDI.
2. Crime and security: Place vehicle scanners at both ports of Port of Spain and Tobago, along with sniffer dogs and undercover officers on the ferry.
3. Officer should have a list of names and photographs of wanted criminals who may come to try to hide out in Tobago. On a national level we respectfully believe that simply increasing the number of police recruits and throwing more money at the TTPS appear insufficient to deal holistically with the menace of crime and criminality plaguing the nation. In this regard, they recommend that the Minister and Government introduce legislation to create a Tobago

regional police force in much the same way as there are municipal police officers in the Trinidad regional corporations. They further propose the establishment on enhanced CEPEP/URP programme, not just for Tobago but nationally, and these programmes be restructured and revamped to create full-time whole day employment in the revived and reinvigorated agriculture sector.

4. Interisland transport: They state that the air bridge by Caribbean Airlines is an essential service and ought to be given the necessary funding and resources to make it more efficient and effective. They also propose that there be a second cargo vessel to assist on the Tobago run.
5. Duty free/VAT free zone: They propose that Tobago should be make a duty free/VAT free exclusive economic zone, similar to what obtains in Panama.

I want to thank Mr. Martin again and the Chamber for their submissions, and I take pleasure in putting their voice on the *Hansard* in this House.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We also received oral submissions and written submission from AMCHAM. In this regard, I want to thank Mr. Stuart Franco, Mr. Nirad Tewarie, Mr. Stéphane Picarle who represented AMCHAM. They presented a 27-page comprehensive document of recommendations. Again, time will not permit me to put all on the record today. Again, I will paraphrase them.

Suggestions from AMCHAM for stimulated growth in the short and medium term:

1. Develop a progressive economic development fund with an independent board to mobilize private capital by providing future tax

credits over three to five years for expenditure in this fund, similar to the art and culture tax allowance or sport sponsorship tax allowance.

2. Widen the tax net by enforcing the existing tax laws for noncompliant businesses and bringing more people into the tax net by December 2023, but make it clear that no penalties for past periods will be applied.
3. Incentivize a venture capital and private equity by amending regulations to allow institutional and private investors to invest a portion of their capital in such funds.

I continue with the recommendations from AMCHAM:

4. Consider allocating less than 5 per cent of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund for investing in private equity as an investment asset class, alongside the private sector and the State in revenue-generating projects and diversification centric investments based on transparent evaluation and investment criteria.
5. Green light approvals for all existing projects awaiting state land sales, transfers, land leases, leases, operating permits and construction permits once the state board or recovery committee has approved these.
6. The Government should settle its debt to private companies because many are struggling to obtain positive cash flow.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So businesses are crying out. They are suffering and struggling because of cash flow, thereby reducing the very thing you want, their tax contribution.

7. Articulate and share a comprehensive energy sector strategy that

addresses the entire value chain for the monetization of our nation's hydrocarbon resources and transition to renewable sources of energy and fuel.

Government seems dependent only on the hydrocarbon sector.

8. Develop a nearshoring strategy for Trinidad and Tobago.

Recommendations for immediate focus and action:

1. Focus on information technology enabled services.
2. The Government must develop a deliberate strategy for nearshoring to fulfil a national objective of job creation opportunities with ITES as phase one, and robotics process automation, software development, ICT platforms and services, energy engineering services, education training and manufacturing in phase two.
3. Implement a national task force with a specialized team, budget and mandate around a five-year national strategy for the development of Trinidad's near shoring industry.
4. Formal engagement on the multilaterals during the strategy development is required to secure technical and financial support for implementation.
5. NES should be around quality of labour, pool versus quantity. Develop and promote higher value added nearshoring segments.
6. Combined and collaborative Government efforts and initiatives to create industry presence and to build strong support for human capital.

I take pleasure again in putting some of AMCHAM's recommendations on the *Hansard* record.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We also received oral submissions from the Joint

Labour Union Movement as well as a written document, written submissions, and they proposed as follows, and again we thank them for their contributions. They were Mr. Ozzi Warwick, General Secretary, JTUM; Michael Annisette, General Secretary, NATUC.

**2.30 p.m.**

Ermine De Bique-Meade, President General, CGWTU; Robert Benacia, President, IGSWU; Gerard Gordon, President, POA, Prisons; Idi Stuart, President, TTRNA, from the nurses' association; David Forbes, General Secretary, TTPW; Cassandra Tommy, General Secretary, AWU; Akeba Wilson, Assistant General Secretary, CGWTU; Francis Sylvan, Senior Trustee, SWUTT; Dennene Mohammed, Deputy Treasurer, FSA.

Ma'am, I take the opportunity to put the names on the record because we truly appreciate that they gave of their time, of their energy and their efforts to bring their suggestions to the forefront to make a better Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Their recommendations include:

- increase the minimum wage to at least \$30 an hour;
- reduce fuel prices;
- no NIB penalty for retiring at age 60;
- continue to pay the NIS retirement benefit at age 60;
- create decent jobs for young people; and
- strengthen collection mechanisms instead of punishing persons for retiring at age 60;
- no property taxes at this time.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Labour Economic Alternative Plan, LEAP 2024.

In this budget, they claim, they say the Government should provide a controlled and transformational stimulus package with fiscal injection of 3 per cent of the GDP to be activated annually over the next three years. This financing should be used to invest in four areas: agriculture, infrastructure, expansion of energy products, special projects and manufacturing, maritime and tourism.

With respect to monetary policy, they suggest establishment of an industrial development fund to finance a comprehensive industrial policy. They propose that a wage-led growth policy should be embarked upon.

With respect to the Petrotrin refinery, JTUM strongly recommends the conclusion of the sale of Guaracara Refining Company Limited, Paria Fuel Trading Company Limited Terminal to Patriotic Energy Services Company Limited.

With respect to the steel plant, the labour movement suggests that the steel plant be restarted and then transition to ecologically sustainable systems. They also propose that trade unions actively participate in a just transition in Trinidad and Tobago to ensure decent work, protection for the vulnerable, programmes should target those in need. There should be a proper debate on the approach to address global decarbonization and the solar and economic needs of the people.

Maritime Industry: They suggest ship repairs can be developed and used for apprenticeship programmes giving youths opportunities to learn the skill for this industry.

Health: They suggest nursing and midwifery personnel be the backbone of the health care system, that there should be retention strategies rolled out to strengthen our health care system in this regard.

With respect to housing, the trade union movement has developed the skills

and knowledge in constructing and delivering adequate affordable housing. The NUGFW Construction Company can partner with the Government to build affordable houses for their members. They speak about labour multi-purposes co-operatives. Through NATUC, the labour movement has embarked on a development programme of a multipurpose co-operative including a food cooperative. Government is requested to lend support and assistance to this venture by allocating a parcel of land to construct a warehouse and headquarters of the NATUC. They talk about the establishment of an industrial policy. There is a need, they say, to establish an industrial policy team which includes Government, labour and business. In terms of tax incentives for trade unions, they propose the transfer of generational wealth for working people and the stamp duty exemptions. No T&TEC rate increases.

Participatory budgeting: Participatory budgeting is a democratic process where citizens make direct decisions about how Government money is spent in the community by identifying and prioritizing public spending projects. Again, I thank the members of the labour movement and I take pleasure in putting their suggestions here on the *Hansard* record.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Greater Tunapuna Chamber of Industry and Commerce also sent us written submissions. We thank them through their President, Mr. Ramon Gregorio, for recommendations which I will share today. They would like to see focus placed in the national budget to reduce operational costs for SMEs; to address access to finance, namely in foreign exchange, to support growth within the sector and incentives to get involved in new markets. They would like to see focus placed on, one, crime. Again, almost every group I am saying, whether it was in the open air consultations or in written submissions or



our submissions, the issue of crime. Boost community involvement with public-private partnerships. Tax incentives to be presented to the private sector to increase this activity.

Two, innovation: Incentivize innovation to foster SMEs to trade as well as implement ISO management system that can bring about greater access to foreign markets. This is against the backdrop of facilities and grants to assist, to encourage exporting.

Finance: They would like greater access to foreign currency, another burning issue in the country, that can aid SMEs with imports. As an essential trade hub of the Caribbean, many SMEs import goods, they add on value and then they export, thereby also bringing in forex. SMEs now are trying to survive on credit cards and as we all know recently, Republic Bank had cut the credit card limit so they are in a bad way, these small businesses.

VAT returns: They propose replacing VAT with the standard sales tax. Now, Madam Speaker, this is a very interesting concept and one that I am inclined to consider. In the United States, you go in and you buy, you pay your sales tax, you do not have all the paper work. With the VAT, you pay the VAT and then it is held for years, your money is like it has been kidnapped by the Government, because you do not get the refunds time over time and your company is starved in a sense of that money. So it is something I would ask the Minister to seriously consider, a sales tax to replace the VAT.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Five, this is again from the Tunapuna group, agriculture. Incentives to the private sector to adopt community projects to grow and farm. This focus would be to provide opportunities for youths through trading and incentives to encourage investment.

Again, I thank the members of the Greater Tunapuna group and Mr. Ramon Gregorio who provided us with these recommendations and we take pleasure in placing it on this record.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We also received written submissions from the Autistic Society of Trinidad and Tobago. We thank this society and Ms. Teresina Sieunarine for their recommendations. They claim that families experience problems to receive a diagnosis and high cost of psycho-educational assessment. Madam, let me declare my conflict of interest in this matter. I am not reading this because of that conflict but I will declare it. My granddaughter is on the autistic spectrum and many of these things that the society shared with me—I am not a member of the society—many of it I am familiar with because I know the hardships that the families go through.

So they say that they have real problems receiving diagnosis and the high cost of psycho-educational assessments. The earliest appointment for a parent is given, they tell me, at Mount Hope clinic for diagnosing a child was 2026.

**Hon. Members:** Wow.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** 2026, three years away.

**Hon. Member:** Wow. Number one in the world.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They say that if ASTT is to continue to provide services, they must get help for more qualified staff, sufficient funding. Currently, they pay salaries to 10 staff members at two centres: D'Abadie and Point Fortin. The society is thankful for their subvention from the Ministry of Health but it covers only part of the cost. Fundraising and donations are important to supplement costs. And, yes, of course, we all do that for various activities but they are asking for a reconsideration of the subvention.

Some students who are accepted in schools require a teacher's aide and cannot get one for their child to appropriately access education. Each family should have access to suitable ICT devices and Internet WiFi connection, but again, we cannot give our children who are not on the syndrome or our challenged children, can we give these challenged children who would need these devices? They need help with paying property tax and payment of utilities and Internet. They only have two centres and it is estimated—I cannot remember the exact number, but there is a large number of children on this spectrum. They need a building for the Point Fortin centre because right now they are paying rent for it. They say it is important for local government to coordinate assistance with NPOs and civil society organizations so that persons can get emergency help regarding funding and be provided with hampers. They say that an individualized approach is required since the specific needs must be addressed.

Many of the families are questioning the Disability Assistance Grant form for children with disabilities under 18 years. Children diagnosed in the level one of the spectrum are not considered eligible for this grant. However, they also have a lifelong disability and require support, services and therapy, but because they are on level one, they are not eligible for the grant. I call on Government to reconsider this position.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services: Special arrangements for children with disabilities should be made so that they have access to therapy sessions and they may also require things like dental care and other services, in-home services support to be included. Visits by qualified personnel should be available to make sure children on the spectrum are being well looked after.

TT must address poverty. It should be done at the community level. The media has reported many examples of persons and children with disabilities being abused and died because of domestic poverty issues. ASTT says they provide hampers mainly to families in need and persons in the environs of their centres. They suggest a government-coordinated community response during times of crisis as being essential. In addition to providing needs, the community response will protect vulnerable families from persons who take advantage of others during crises.

The Society contributes to the Green Fund but they say they have seen no evidence that it helps their families. As such, they would like funding to set up their own agro project so they could grow their own produce and sell produce and so become more sustainable.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They say that they can then set up grow boxes or even hydroponic gardens that would help them to earn revenue in the long run. The business community, they suggest, be given incentives to assist employees with disabilities and registered NPOs. To reduce poverty, the business community can assist families in learning entrepreneurial skills or even setting up microenterprises.

As this point, as I thank the ASTT for their recommendations and place it on the record, I also want to congratulate Maya Nanan from Claxton Bay who was awarded Commonwealth Young Person of the Year 2023—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—for her inspirational work within the autistic community. She is the daughter of Dr. Radica Mahase who was recently awarded the Chaconia Medal Silver for her life-changing work as a founder of Support

Autism TT.

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

**2:45 p.m.**

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Do you have a time check please?

**Mr. Lee:** “Yeah. One hour pass.”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The business community should be given incentives—I am sorry, I said that already, Ma’am. Moving along, SWAHA board and executive also sent us written recommendations. So pundit Ishwar Madho Maharaj, the Secretary General of the board. That board suggested the following:

Local government and social development: Increased allocations to local government to facilitate effective infrastructural works and efficient delivery of essential services to all communities.

Increased engagement with NGOs, NPOs for social development programmes.

Two on the issue of crime.

Focus on developing a crime action plan to reduce serious crimes, including the introduction of nationwide CCTVs, drones that patrol borders, and automation of ports and Customs.

Seek foreign consultants to plan and execute crime plans.

With respect to VAT and other taxes and duties.

Remove VAT on essential foods and everyday pharmacy items. Remove duties and taxes on baby food and products. Remove the 7 per cent online purchase tax.

With respect to education:

GATE: Allow funding for programmes with a need or future need, and do not limit persons who have already benefitted.

Expansion and upgrade of the textbook management programme to include greater availability of e-textbooks.

**Mr. Charles:** Good.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Good, I agree.

Complete construction of unfinished primary, secondary, and ECCE schools. Legislative agenda.

Revisit procurement legislation to promote transparency and accountability. Proclaim legislation on data privacy, data protection, cyber security, and full proclamation of the Electronic Transaction Act.

Property tax legislation to be reviewed in the context of current unresolved issues.

Taxation, automation of BIR, including cashless payments and refunds. Revisit the tiered approach to PAYE. Tax incentives for non-institutional investors to increase participation in the securities market.

Seven, micro small and medium enterprises, public private equity fund or venture capital fund. Expand NEDCO funding. Government guarantee for MSME loans; reintroduction of the FairShare programme; further incentivize SME listing on the TT stockade exchange.

Again, I want to thank the SWAHA organization for their suggestions, some of which we totally agree with, and I offer for the consideration of Government.

We turn now, Madam Speaker, to the recommendations from real people on the ground. These organizations have sent their recommendations, and let us see what are some of the recurring themes that came out from the consultations held by our councillors and aldermen and MPs throughout the country.

Agriculture: Danny Rogers highlighted the pressing issues affecting crop reduction. Currently Nestle is importing milk and poultry production has hit a low

point. He has recommended for the Government to present a comprehensive plan for the agriculture sector. We totally agree.

Crime: Selvon Mitchell from Montrose suggested taking all existing residential and commercial security cameras in Chaguanas into an overarching security system that systematically covers the areas in collaboration with artificial intelligence to identify criminals as they move from place to place.

Culture: Banjela, the 2020 calypsonian king of T&T, recommended the establishment of partnerships with educational institutions to educate/integrate cultural education into the curriculum, fostering a series of cultural pride and identity from an early age.

Education: Jasmine Ali recommended the completion and the reconstruction of the Preyal Primary School. Students of that school currently are being housed at a community centre for the past five years.

### **2.50 p.m.**

Health care for kids, disability grants come up again. Patricia Lezama asked for the wait time and lack of beds at the nation's hospitals to be addressed. She expressed concern with the funding given to senior citizens and persons with disabilities. I am sorry. Water, thank you. I have some people concerned, Madam—Thank you. Thank you, MP—concerns about funding given to senior citizens and persons with disabilities. And Patricia recommended that the funding for differently-abled children be increased, as it does not cover their medical expenses.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Kristen Townsend of Mayaro revealed that residents have to go to Sangre Grande or San Fernando to access hospital care, and recommended the upgrade of the Mayaro Health Facility.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Dr. Narendra Roopnarine spoke about the need to improve the quality of health care provision and quantity. He suggested maternal health education be part of the curriculum.

Legal firearm access: Ms. Rajendra Singh mentioned difficulties in obtaining an FUL, Firearm User's Licence, and recommended that the process be made easier.

Infrastructure: every consultation nationwide, people highly and rightly complained about the state of our roads and bridges.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Christopher Jackman from the OWTU has emphasized that the shutting down of Petrotrin not only meant that we no longer produce fuel for domestic consumption, but also did not produce bitumen. So we now have to import bitumen to fix our roads. Bitumen is necessary for paving roads. So when we shut down Petrotrin, not only did we lose the goose that laid the golden egg, we lost also all the products that the refinery produced. So, all the refined products, we now have to pay for them, bring them from outside, including the bitumen.

Residents nationwide are complaining about the dilapidated state of recreation grounds nationwide. And we have received serious concerns, similar to the NIB fund that is now collapsing upon itself, not because of what the Minister tells us, but because they have mismanaged the NIB fund.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And they are doing a same thing—a similar thing is being done to the Petrotrin pension plan. Mr. Goolcharan, a former employee of the Petrotrin, raised concerns about the status of the pension plan



which has been steadily deteriorating since the company's shut down. He recommended and others from JTUM also recommended that Government should allocate money to bolster the Petrotrin pension plan, and for the Minister to provide an update on what has been happening with this pension plan.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The workers are exceedingly concerned about this Petrotrin pension plan.

Another area in our consultation, praedial larceny. Many farmers raised this problem. And it really deserves special mention. The farmers suggested that the Government provide the Praedial Larceny Unit with vehicles, proper equipment and staffing—what is it? it is almost non-existent—to provide the farmers with the help they need.

Nigel Moses from Arima suggested the need for a proper payroll system in Trinidad and Tobago, which could help with the judicial system, to ensure crime goes down and this is in the area of prisoner rehabilitation. Mr. Kenneth Rampersad from Tunapuna wants to see more recreation grounds illuminated and up-kept, as there is a need for more persons to be out there in sport and exercise and to increase family bonding.

Scholarships: Emerson Chadee of Siparia requested increased allocations to provide more scholarships for poor and disadvantaged students. This was a government that decreased the 500 scholarships which were based on meritocracy, based on how well you performed; took that away, reduced it and instead now gives bursaries. We do not know what is the criteria of how—if it is waving a PNM card—you get these bursaries. But before, it was based on merit, meritocracy. So, we are asking again, people are asking more

scholarships for the poor and disadvantaged students.

Special needs citizens: Helen Narinesingh from Arima recommended more special needs schools and an increase in special needs grants. This is a serious matter in the country; very, very serious matter.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Tourism: in Sangre Grande and Mayaro, residents recommended tourism development along the east coast. They requested that the east coast be developed to become a premier tourist destination in the Caribbean.

Water, this is another burning, burning, burning issue. Citizens all over the country have complained of the lack of water and the fact that not only does the Government expect them to pay bills and not receive its service, but Government is looking now to raise water rates. You know in my own constituency, I received a petition from about 168 persons, fairly recently, they have had no water in their taps for months, no water. And this is not special to the constituents of Siparia, it is something that is happening throughout the southland and elsewhere, of no water in the taps. MP Padarath who shadows the portfolio of public utilities, will speak more on those matters. But I think it is important to highlight it.

And again, the Minister makes these glib vague promises, which never materialize; promises never materialize. So let us see what happens with this, and let us see if we are really moving to raise water rates and T&TEC rates. So, residents complain they are not getting pipe-borne water for almost 50 days. Some citizens call for the CEO of WASA to be removed.

Youth Unemployment: Ms. Ambika Gosine highlighted her concerns about employment for youth, regarding the oversaturation of the on-the-job

programme. She highlighted that the waiting period for a first interview can take years. Earlier I spoke about using the OJT programme to help in the fight against crime. Here we are seeing people saying to get an interview can take years. She recommended that the Government address the issue.

So I have gone through all of these and I am saying if Government had consulted the people before this budget, the Government would have had an accurate list of priorities to impact areas of greatest concerns positively.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That is what we did when we were in government. When you talk to people they will often give you very useful solutions. Indeed, citizens are very creative and informed. Many of them came to these consultations well prepared; some with pages of ideas to share, and that is the tragedy of this Government. They do not harness the potential, the experience, the ideas or the greatness of our society. That is the attitude of that Government.

We on this side are showing the country that our philosophy and practices are different and the way we govern is participatory. People have given the Government endless chances for cooperative participation, but Government fails them every time.

Year after year, this Government comes to this house and delude themselves and the country or try to delude the country, that the country is doing well, that the population is doing well, but citizens know the truth. It has cost our citizens, as I said before, \$420 billion since they have taken office and will cost a further \$59.209 billion. This will be, as I tell you, almost half a trillion dollars.

This year, the Minister themed the budget Building Capacity for

Diversification and Growth; Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth. I wonder if we do a word search and try to find out how many times the word “diversification” is found in this document. I see the Minister is giving us his usual grin. How many times is the word found? But even more important, what is inside of that budget for diversification? There is absolutely nothing.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** There is nothing to diversify the economy, absolutely nothing but zero measures during almost four hours about diversifying where he themes his budget. Why does the Minister do this, Madam? Every year, every budget theme is not reflected in the actual budget statement. When I was preparing, I had gone through every single one over the past years. They are all—nothing in the statement—fluff inside there, I am being told. Nothing in the statement to substantiate what the theme says. And once again, it has happened again, nothing about any new revenue streams. In fact, the Minister said that they are going to still be heavily dependent on the energy sector, which is a very myopic view in developing the economy and growing jobs, and so on.

Let us look at energy prices because the Minister is—we are going to be very stuck on energy. We will still be tied to the energy sector. The Minister spent the first few minutes of the presentation, as always, trying to convince us that he inherited a country in crisis caused by low energy prices, but he was so good that he was able to reverse the trend and move towards growth. Nothing is further from the truth, nothing.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Indeed, the energy prices collapsed when we

we were in government, and we were able to hold the economy together. So, when the Minister now boasts that low energy prices in 2014/2015, Minister, you were nowhere there. Your Government was not in government in 2014, 2015—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—that you had to manage those low-energy prices. I say nothing is further from the truth.

The Minister gave us two other areas of challenges that distracted him from achieving the growth; one was COVID-19. And let us be fair and remember, this Government crashed the economy long before COVID, long before COVID.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And the second—I think he called them headwinds. So one headwind was the COVID. So that the trajectory of growth was deflected. And the second was the “Great War”, the Russia-Ukraine war. So, the Minister complains that the low energy prices were something bad that he inherited and that it was hard for him, and so on. And then the Ukraine war, he said the high energy prices now, deflected him as well. So what is the truth? There was a crisis with the low energy prices, Minister. And then you tell us there was a crisis when you got high energy prices. But that crisis is the one that gave you the extra money you claim to put into the accounts to have a surplus. It was the high energy prices, because of the war. And it was nothing to do, Madam Speaker, with what the Minister or his Government did. There was no intervention on their part. There was absolutely no intervention. And I challenge the Minister to tell me what intervention there was that caused us to get that higher revenue and that

surplus in the economy.

So, when we look at our macroeconomic indicators, again, nothing is further from the truth, about the growth trajectory the Minister is speaking about that he and his Government is responsible for. I mention again there can be no prosperity without economic security.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And we will see from the data that this Government has decimated the economy. We have no economic security at this point.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Let us look at some of the macroeconomic indicators. And I am using the Government's own data. I will come back to that in a moment when we talk about the national statistical institute promised, how much—every single budget, year after year; again, PNM, promises never materialize.

Let us look at the GDP to start with. This Government's anti-people decision-making, undermined, decimated our economy so much so, that the real GDP collapsed by \$10 billion within the first year of the PMM taking office. So, do not cry crocodile tears about COVID. You crashed the economy long before COVID.

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

**3.05 p.m.**

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** GDP collapsed by \$10 billion within the first year of the PNM taking office and the country has not recovered to date. When we look at per capita GDP, which grew to \$140,000 during my tenure, that has now collapsed to \$110,200, a loss of 21 per cent of real value GDP—per capita GDP.

And yet the Minister comes here and continues to boast of how well he has managed the economy. Well, bring us the metrics. Bring us the metrics to show how well you have done, because the metrics—the data is clearly showing you have crashed and decimated the economy.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Bring the data. Instead of taking the country forward, the Government's policies have regressed the broad-based distribution of the economy back to the 2006 levels of per capita GDP. The data is obvious. The transformation that the Minister boasted about last year was a polarization of the economy away from a broad-based, multi-sectorial, multidisciplinary structure to one in which only the factored few mega businesses survived.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That was your work, Minister, your Government. When the Minister boasts of the economy growing, take it with a handful of salt and instead ask him how much the economy has contracted since his Government took over the Treasury in 2015. I am proud that my government has the distinction of the highest average national output in our country's history during our tenure.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Let us look at another macroeconomic indicator, foreign exchange, forex. If the Government had continued the UNC's sports education and health tourism, amongst other initiatives, our country would have generated millions in foreign exchange—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—from new sources, not just from the energy sector, from new sources to complement revenues from the energy and small export manufacturing sector. The deliberate, unilateral and spontaneous, and some

say, and really downright malicious decision to close Petrotrin has deprived us of hundreds of millions of US dollars.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Government's laissez-faire attitude to non-energy businesses, even international ones like ArcelorMittal, has seen positive foreign exchange revenue generators leave our shores because of their incompetence or their lack of care. Large foreign revenue earners have left our shores. And I will come to more when we look at the energy sector of all the plants that have closed. The result has been a dramatic collapse in our foreign exchange reserves to the point where the Government is forced to borrow at higher than necessary interest rates—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—to refinance foreign debt. In my government's last full year in office, the official data published by the Central Bank shows that we had approximately US \$11.5 billion in reserves. That was about 13 months of import coverage. Where are we today? Boasting that you have saved the country, saving as we have growth, you have increased the foreign exchange reserves. No way, not true. Under the last full year we were in office, US \$11.5 billion in foreign reserves.

**Mr. Charles:** “Where it gone?”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** About 13 months of import coverage, where has it gone? It is true because they have nothing to show for it. They can point to nothing. They could touch nothing that they have built or done in these years.

The Central Bank puts our net official reserves now at \$6.258 billion, less than eight months import coverage. In fact, it is about 7.8 months import cover. Where we were at that high level of import cover, good cushion of foreign



reserves. As of August 2023 now, 7.8 months import cover.

**Mr. Charles:** “Wey de money gone?”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This is even though Government has received billions in US dollars. This is so even though they have received billions in US dollars from traditional sources, including taxes and royalties from international energy companies and local manufacturers. I ask why the Minister—I remind the Minister, added to that, the royalties and taxes from energy companies, local manufacturers; added to that is another US \$2.5 billion in drawdowns from the HSF; added to that is another US \$644 million received from the IMF via the special drawing rights. More than US \$1.3 billion more received from the oil windfall. Net borrowing of TT \$33.6 billion over the last eight years and millions received in foreign grants during the pandemic. Where has all this money gone?

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Where has all this money gone?

**Mr. Charles:** “Wey de money gone?”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Where has this money gone? On Monday when the Minister had the opportunity to level with the country about the actual state of affairs of our nation’s foreign exchange reserves, the Minister once again opted to misdirect and mislead; misdirect and mislead. Serial deception taking place in this Parliament in these budgets.

I ask the Minister, why are you referencing 2022 figures for foreign exchange? We are in the year 2023. Why are you referencing 2022 figures for foreign exchange holdings? Why is the Minister referring to gross official reserves rather than net official reserves?

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Why? Again, it is to misdirect and mislead.

**Hon. Members:** Trickery.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We need to know net official, not gross. No business runs on gross, except maybe your Government, because you are the only one running on gross or grossly running. The answer is obvious why the Minister is doing this. Having failed miserably to increase the real level of foreign exchange reserve, the Government is now artificially increasing the statistic by adding the foreign exchange held in private accounts in commercial banks, over which they have no control, as well as the savings in the HSF to come up with a new metric. He has made up his own new metric now. Instead of net official, he has a new metric he is calling “external fiscal buffers”.

**Mr. Charles:** What?

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** External fiscal buffers.

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

**Mr. Charles:** “He engineering financial terms”.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I am being reminded, instead of the Minister not just making up numbers, he is also making up words now.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** “External fiscal buffers”. Madam Speaker, thousands of business people, especially small and medium-sized businesses people, small and medium-size businesses, and even average citizens disagree with Minister Imbert when discussing forex availability. When businesses are now facing closure because they cannot get money to pay suppliers, they are in crisis. SMEs constitute over 90 per cent, I am told, of registered businesses in this country. So this is a serious state of affairs.

I was being told by several persons in the professional field, for example, not just people in the retail business, the SMEs, but many of the professionals, doctors,

dentists, Dr. Rishi was explaining it to me, MP Rishi, about the very supplies that they use in their practice, you have to use forex to buy the various chemicals. He will tell us what they are. We do not manufacture those things here. So this would not just affect any retail business, this is going to affect those people running professional businesses and other kinds of businesses alike, and these businesses hire many workers, especially in the retail business. For them, the inability of their employers to get foreign exchange will indeed be a crisis for them. They could end up losing their jobs. The shortage is also a crisis for parents and children who are pursuing education abroad if they cannot get the forex for fees and other things that the children need.

Today I call on the Minister to engage in real and meaningful consultation concerning the nation's foreign exchange distribution. This needs to be a public forum in which the members of the public and the other small businesses are allowed to participate.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** But for this to be an open discussion with a real chance of a successful outcome, as opposed to yet another talk shop, the Minister needs to come clean to the population about who has been getting these billions in foreign exchange over the past eight years—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—who has been getting these billions. It is high time that the Minister stops hiding behind legislation and provides answers to the population. Citizens being denied access to foreign exchange must be told who is getting that foreign exchange, how much are they getting and why are they getting when they themselves cannot get that foreign exchange. I also challenge the Minister to tell the country what new foreign exchange revenue streams you have

piloted and developed over the past eight years—

**Mr. Charles:** None.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—since you have been in office?

**Mr. Charles:** None.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And how much revenue has been generated? My colleague is saying “none”.

**Hon. Member:** None.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** None whatsoever. I use this opportunity to direct the Minister to the UNC national economic transformational plan—it is online, you can find it—which contains many new initiatives for potential foreign exchange earners, which, Minister, you are free to use. But you will not use it, so when we get back into office we will have the plans—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—for economic transformation. We have the plans to deal with the monster that is crime.

**Mr. Charles:** Salvation is near.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And therefore, Minister, your only salvation is to call elections now.

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

**Hon. Member:** [*Interruption*]

**Ms. Ameen:** You study crime and stop studying the UNC’s business.

**Ms. Benjamin:** Stay focused.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I turn now—

**Madam Speaker:** Members, I would like to hear the Leader of the Opposition, and I ask all Members to sort of maintain their composure. I think the Leader of the Opposition is about halfway through given the time. Please maintain yourself.

**Mr. Charles:** She is doing a good job.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Madam, thank you very much. “Do so doh like so, eh”.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I have always heard that expression, Minister of Finance. I turn to another metric, the macroeconomic indicator with respect to foreign direct investment. Foreign direct investment is the significant source of foreign exchange, economic growth and development. Growing FDI is a clear indication of investor confidence in an economy. What is the status of this country regarding foreign direct investment? Now, this is a good stream, revenue stream, to earn foreign exchange.

According to the most recent data published in the World Investment Report 2023, FDI in Trinidad and Tobago was negative at minus \$0.5 billion; minus \$0.5 billion. Instead of investment coming into T&T, investment was leaving T&T. In fact, the data shows clearly that while the Caribbean has had positive FDI, T&T has lost FDI for five of the seven years during which we have data available under this PNM Government. While the Minister fiddles away with investor confidence in this country, other countries in the Caribbean are openly pursuing investors with actual initiatives, proper marketing and deliberate decisions to address investor decision-making.

Under this Government, from September 2016 to December 2022, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago lost US \$1.5 billion in FDI, which had fled the country; \$1.5 billion Trinidad and Tobago lost under this Government. By comparison, under my government, we generated high levels of FDI, with FDI from the energy sector totalling US \$1.459 billion in 2015—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—our last full year in office.

**3.20 p.m.**

In 2013, my Cabinet approved a project development agreement for a new petrochemical plant, the Mitsubishi plant down in the South. That has brought in more FDI, created jobs and it is a functioning product that is marketed. We turn out to the rating agencies and Mr. Imbert has a real penchant, he has a real thing with rating agencies. You remember when he did not like the rating agencies—the reports, he brought in—what it was, Fitch?

**Mr. Charles:** I think is Fitch.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Yeah, he brought in a third agency. But I do not think we ever saw that Fitch report. So when he was not happy with the other two Moody's and Standard & Poor's, brought in this also. So let us hear what these rating agencies are saying.

The Minister spent a lot of time patting himself on his back because of Moody's agency rating for our country. To be clear, Moody's kept the country's credit rating at Ba2, the same level for the year before, that rating is within the non-investment grade category of junk status—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—non-investment grade category or junk status.

**Mr. Charles:** Junk.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Let me remind you—some indisputable facts. Before the Minister became in charge of our treasury, our country's rating by Moody's was A3 under my watch.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That was prime investment grade. Today, the Minister celebrates a collapse to Ba2, junk status rating, as a significant

achievement. Only is this Minister can celebrate achieving a lower score than his predecessor and claim that as an improvement.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Only this Government. You get a low score and you are patting yourself, great, well done—hunky-dory.

**Mr. Charles:** Sanford and Son.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Minister has a long way to go to recover the ground and international credit rating reputation that he has cost our country. This is nothing to celebrate. A stable or positive outlook does not matter when you are five levels lower on the rating.

**Mr. Charles:** Tell them, tell them.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And then even, the outlook itself is speculative and in this case, it is premised on the continued high revenues from oil and gas, following the same great conflict, RussiaUkraine. Premised all on improved oil or gas production, as well as Government adopted specific harsh policies, include further cutting of transferred subsidies, implementation of property tax, high electricity rates, higher water rates, issues with severely compromised standard of living of much in our country.

Back in July, the Minister announced that the new rating would have positively impacted the cost of borrowing by Government however, again, nothing is further from the truth. The recent bond issue of US\$560, the Government was forced to offer higher interest rates than other similar instruments on the market to attract investors and again, Minister announced this as a reason to celebrate—offering higher interest rates because your rating has dropped otherwise.

We move to Value Added Tax.

**Mr. Charles:** That is a disaster, that is an engineer—

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Huh.

**Mr. Charles:** —talking.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** One of the most vexing issues for businesses in our country of any size has been Government's abuse of businesses by illegally withholding tax VAT refunds.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** In May 2023, Minister Imbert admitted to Trinidad and Tobago that the Government owed businessmen almost \$8 billion in VAT—kidnap money basically—\$8 billion refunds at the end of March 2023. Six months have since passed, so logically more businesses would have applied for the refunds since then. The Minister advised a combination of bonds and cash payments will be used to settle a large portion of these arrears and suggested repayment would have started between June and August 2023—some days have come and gone. I know businessmen listening to the Minister's presentation last Monday would have been very disappointed that the Minister avoided any mention of settling the VAT refunds—no mention whatsoever. The hijacking of VAT refunds by the Minister means that critical operating funds of businesses are inaccessible and this directly affects the ability of these businesses to invest in stock, to pay staff, meet debt obligations to financial institutions and it affects the business' credit rating and viability. This multi-billion dollar outstanding and overdue VAT rebate is tantamount to the Government forcing struggling businesses, already burdened by crime, lack of access to forex, and many taxes to pay, to provide tax free loans to the Government. This is in effect a tax free loan to Government because when they keep the VAT refunds and they do not pay it, whenever they pay some point in the future, you do not get any interest on them.



**Mr. Charles:** Interest free loan.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** It is an interest free loan that you are forced to do. We must amend that VAT law as soon as possible.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You cannot tie up people's money in this regard. It cannot be done and therefore the VAT law should be amended as soon as possible. The Finance Minister is sending mixed signals to commercial sectors. He continues to punish legitimate businesses. They abide by the law they put in their money, they paid the VAT—dutifully paying taxes, submitted their VAT returns on time and these are the ones being punished as against those who break the law and they evade VAT—they do not pay it. So this is a serious matter, I think. Every budget we have been talking about it, and it has been a matter of serious concern.

I move along now, having examined the macro indicators. You will see the contrary to the Minister's boast here, that he has grown economy he has done so very well. Nothing is further from the truth because the data does not lie. People will lie but the data does not lie.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** In the last budget presentation, the Minister boasted that Phoenix Park Industrial Estate was in the process of being commissioned and MP will well know about it. This is the same Phoenix Park Estate that the Minister promised since in the 2020 budget—said it would be commissioned in September 2020, come back in '21/'22, come back at '23, maybe '24 and I will still be coming, coming, coming, but never arrived. Four years later, the country still awaits this promise to materialize, so one would have reasonably expected the estate would have been fully occupied by now.

On Monday, the Minister boasted that this Government has already closed 14 investments at the park. The fact is there are 76 lots—78 lots and five factory shells in this park, developed with taxpayers' money. If we believe the Minister, it would mean that after four years, despite repeated assurances that the Government had secured investors for this park, more than three-quarters of it is still unoccupied. I look at the Minister's growth predictions, again, Minister has boasted about growth on how well we are doing, again, the data gives the lie to those idea boasts. The Minister made bold predictions about economy's growth, and Monday true to form openly ignoring the facts in front of him Minister announced an economic growth rate of 2.7 per cent for 2023 and a similar projected growth rate for 2024—2.7 per cent growth. This Minister is a serial offender—

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughs*]

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—a serial offender and I call him out today, because each year he predicts a growth rate and it never materializes, it never comes forward—serial offender in this regard. In 2016, the Minister predicted a growth rate of negative 2.9 per cent. The actual contraction for that year was what? Negative 7.5 per cent—

**Hon. Members:** Ooooh!

**Hon. Member:** Hmm.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—for 2016—'17 now, he predicted a growth rate of negative 1.9 per cent. The actual contraction was negative 4.8 per cent. This is not just once you know, this is twice and going thrice. For 2018, the Minister predicted a positive growth rate of 1.9 per cent and he called it a positive growth rate this time eh of 1.9 per cent—and what happened? The economy fell—

**Mr. Charles:** Nah, ah doh believe that, ah doh believe dat.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—by 0.6 per cent. You cannot believe this Minister.

**Mr. Charles:** Ah doh believe it.

**Hon. Member:** Every year.

**Mr. Charles:** Three times?

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** No it is more than three now, we going on four. In 2020, the Minister, perhaps he was too unsure or afraid to give an estimated annual projection—he did not give, this time in 2020, an annual projection. What did he do? He gave a quarterly projection in that year, and in that year the economy contracted in 2020 by negative 9.1 per cent.

**Mr. Charles:** No, no unbelievable.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Let us move along. How much is this now, four or five or six and counting?

**Mr. Charles:** Five, five.

**Mr. Ratiram:** Multiple.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** In his 2022 budget speech the Minister claimed that because of multiple major energy projects coming online, sounds familiar like this year again—all this major dragon dancing and so on, all this coming online.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Conga line.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** 2022 budget, Minister claimed because of multiple major energy products coming online, the energy sector would grow by 13 per cent in 2023 with overall economic growth of 5 per cent. Here are the hard, cold facts Minister. The energy sector output did not grow—he had said 13 per cent growth you know man—13 per cent—it did not grow.

**Mr. Charles:** That is six.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** It contracted by 0.3 per cent.

**Mr. Charles:** Six.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And in last year's budget speech the Minister revealed his prediction would be high of 5 per cent, revised—he said it would be high, 5 per cent. He revised it downwards to 2 per cent.

**Mr. Charles:** That is seven.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Now, the Minister of Finance told us on Monday that the energy sector may contract by a further 0.6 per cent in 2023. Do we believe him? We cannot believe him. Because every prediction has been wrong—

**Hon. Member:** Wrong.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—every single one.

**Hon. Members:** [*Continuous desk thumping*]

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Cannot believe the Minister, cannot believe him.

**Mr. Charles:** That is an engineer.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Let us move to another macro-economic metric debt, debt. When this Government assumed office in September 2015, the public sector debt to GDP ratio was 44.1 per cent. Remember that number?

**Mr. Charles:** Yeah.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This is when we demitted office—44.1 per cent debt to GDP ratio.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** According to the Minister, the figure now is about 71.1 per cent—

**Hon. Members:** Wow.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—debt to GDP.

**Mr. Charles:** So much?

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You have moved our country into the valley—what is it?

**Mr. Charles:** Of the shadow.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The shadow of the “valley of debt.”

**Mr. Charles:** And we fear no evil.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They do not fear evil, but I do. If they continue to contract the economy like this, we are in serious, serious trouble. From a debt to GDP ratio of 44.1 per cent now to 71.1 per cent. Well, let us talk about what that means. The adjusted general Government debt outstanding in 2015, when we demitted office was TT\$75.4 billion—2015, TT\$75.4 billion. What is it today? As of March 2023, that figure is TT\$129.1 billion—billion dollars.

**3.35 p.m.**

Where is all this money going? All the friends, all the borrowings, all these moneys, all the drawdowns from the HSF, all the loans, where is all this money going? From \$75.4 billion when we demitted office to March of this year, \$129.1 billion. That is a 71 per cent increase in the adjusted general government debt under this Government—that Government. These are official figures. What they show is, as a direct result of the policies of this Government, there has been a substantial increase in debt since they took office. More than this, the Minister’s idle boast of falling debt figures noticeably ignores the \$8 billion VAT refunds.

So, in addition to his debt that I am talking about of \$129.1 billion, you are owing VAT refunds of another \$8 billion, okay? And, there are moneys owing to contractors and suppliers of goods and services with the Government, so you add that to the debt. And I note that the Minister had committed to disburse TT \$1.5 billion Government guaranteed loan. So you have to add that to the debt. Okay?

**Mr. Charles:** You owe everybody.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So amongst other things, the reduced moneys owed to contractors and so on. In fact, given the Minister’s failure to provide

accurate outstanding debt figures, we have had to resort to enquiries under the FOIA Act, Freedom of Information Act, which has revealed Government owes billions to WASA, billions to T&TEC and billions to NIB. You come crying about NIB, you are underfunding and “doh” have money, when billions are being owed by the Government to the NIB every year—every year.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** By withholding VAT moneys owed to contractors, the Government is deliberately skewing the public debt while suffering the business—strangling, it might be, right?—strangling businesses that provide goods and services to the Government.

Let us talk about the deficit. Shall we talk about the deficit now?—another metric we can look to gauge the performance of the Government. Over seven years the Government has run budget deficits totalling \$62 billion, three of the largest deficits in our history, in fiscal '17, '20 and '21. This works out to an average central government operation deficit of \$8.9 billion per year. The Government has announced another year of deficit in fiscal 2023 where the consecutive projected deficit—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Madam Speaker, could we get some—

**Hon. Member:** Peace and quiet.

**Hon. Member:** Quiet.

**Madam Speaker:** Okay.

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Member—Member for Siparia, Member for Siparia, I think the message has been sent. Please proceed.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** It is constant. It is constant.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You will have your turn.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Siparia, one minute. Now, all Members, just remember—just remember that according to the Standing Orders we are supposed to listen, speak silently, and so on. So if a Member is on his or her legs and complains that the talking is distracting, we all have to take stock of that, all right? And, therefore, I would ask all Members to watch their volumes. And, also, remember that this is not a place for us to be carrying on a consistent conversation. If that is the case, then a Member is free, or the Members are free, to go out, continue their conversation and come back. Member for Siparia.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We were talking about the deficit and the Minister has announced another year of deficit with a consecutive projected deficit in 2024. So going from six years of deficit to a tiny surplus in one year, back again to two years of consecutive deficits, but this Minister somehow represents positive fiscal management, but here again, let us share the facts, Madam. The Minister has made much of the minute fiscal surplus relative to the sizes of the deficit budgets he has been running. However, I think the population is fully aware that the surplus was an illusion caused by an increased revenue on the one hand, as world prices of energy products soared due to the war. As I said before, it had nothing to do with this Government and this Minister. It is also the refusal by the Government to meet outstanding debt obligations in the form of VAT and debts to suppliers, as I mentioned before.

Indeed, if these debt obligations had been addressed in 2022 from the energy windfall, as it should have been, there would again have been a substantial deficit

for the year of close to 10 per cent of the GDP and not the minuscule surplus the Minister is pointing. So, again, we do not believe the Minister when it comes to deficit budgets.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Now something interesting has emerged from the Minister's own books. Monday the Minister indicated in his statement, the estimated fiscal deficit as \$5.197 billion. This, when we look at the Estimates of Revenue, one of the Minister's own books, was to be financed by borrowing. Using projected revenue of \$54.012 billion and projected expenditure of \$59.209 billion for fiscal 2024, the Minister projected a deficit of \$5.197. But, Madam Speaker, it is always said, the devil is in the details when you go deeper and read the fine print, because this shows that expenditure and borrowing figures are understated. If these are calculated using the Minister's own book, and I have the reference here from the Estimates of Revenue, where borrowing is labelled under revenue, but you are really borrowing. It is a loan; when we look at that, we see that the Minister intends to borrow about \$13 billion.

**Hon. Members:** Wow.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Not \$5.197 to finance this projected deficit but proposes to borrow about \$13 billion.

Then we look at what is the actual projected expenditure. Remember I said, Minister said it was \$50-something billion. Again, when we go into the book, Estimates of Expenditure, in that book provided by the Minister, the Estimates of total Government expenditure for fiscal '24 is projected at \$71.4 billion; not 50-something, \$71.4 billion, over \$12billion higher than the figure the Minister provided in his budget statement on Monday. This figure now includes what is known as charges on account of the public debt. That means you are paying back



interest on loans. It includes Development Programme expenditure, and so, all expenditure items, \$71.4 billion. That is the true projected expenditure for 2024. So are we going to be seeing an election year in 2024? Is this an election year for next year, 2024, with a \$71 billion expenditure? We will be very happy. Bring it on. We will be ready, bring it on. Bring on the election.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Bring on the election. Bring it on. Bring it on. \$71.4 billion, it means that the difference between government revenue and government expenditure is substantially higher than what the Minister told us in his budget statement. The Government intends to borrow a whopping \$13.244 billion in this fiscal year that we are going into.

Madam Speaker, I turn now to the National Insurance Fund. This is a matter that is a sore point for many people. That is Rodney's pension; MP Rodney's pension. In the presentation on Monday the Minister announced Government's intention to increase the retirement age from 60 to 65; again, this is repeated, repeated, repeated subject. Last year the Minister talked about it—well, several years now, following various actuarial reports which cited the growing deficit between contributions and expenditures. In the statement, the Minister advised that the NIF is facing a combination of sustainability challenges and the risks of reserve depletion. The Minister further said that he was:

“...encouraged by the progress being made in the consultative sessions relating to the increase in the retirement age from 60 to 65...”

Still quoting the Minister:

“This process, including with labour unions...”—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Madam Speaker, do I really have to ask you

again? If you cannot behave yourself, go outside.

**Madam Speaker:** Minister—

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

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Finance, Minister of Finance, there was a little outburst that was really a little loud. Please remember—

**Mr. Imbert:** [*Inaudible*]

**Madam Speaker:** I heard it. So I heard it and I saw it. Okay? So—

**Mr. Imbert:** [*Inaudible*]

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Finance, Minister of Finance—

**Mr. Imbert:** [*Inaudible*]

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Finance, Minister of Finance, Minister of Finance—

**Mr. Imbert:** Yes, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Let us just, please, give to others as we like done to us. All right. So I have seen it and therefore it will not continue. Continue, Member.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you, Madam.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you very much. So basically what the Minister was saying was that he has been engaged in this consultative session relating to the increase in the retirement age from 60 to 65. He said:

“The process, including with the labour unions, is at an advanced stage of conclusion with majority support for increasing the retirement age.”

Minister, I would like you to tell this House and tell the country which union.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Which union? Not just which union, when did you have these consultations? Where did you have these consultations? Because I

found it very curious. I remember in his budget speech last year the Minister said:

“We in the Ministry of Finance have recently completed our consultations on the retirement age, held by Minister Manning...”

I hope you are not throwing Mr. Manning in the bush, you know, or under the bus.

“We...have...completed our consultations on the retirement age, held by Minister Manning with key stakeholders, including trade unions and business organizations.”

So this is in last year’s budget, the Minister is saying he has completed the consultations; last year, and then he comes this year now and he says, well:

“The process, including...is at an advanced stage...  
 ...being made...  
 ...progress being made...”

But last year he said—what?—completed. So which one is the truth? Which one is the truth? Additionally the Minister told us:

In our consultations with the labour union, trade unions firmly opposed any retirement age increase.

So which one is the truth and which one is the untruth?

In our consultations—ours—the unions firmly oppose any retirement age increase.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So, Minister, which one is the truth, which one is the untruth? Did the Minister mislead the country in his statement last year or in this year, and the question would be why?

Moving along again talking about this NIF. The number of contributors in 2015 was 516,926; 2015, that is a full year of office for my government. By 2017 the number had fallen to 479,036. According to the last audited report of the NIB

by 2022, the number of insured contributors has collapsed to 455,448; job loss, job losses under this Government. This means—what does it mean, it means that there are now 61,478 persons left making contributions to the NIF, less than they were before they took over, resulting in lower contribution value than would have occurred had these persons still been employed. What this points to, it points to a factor that Government has not considered in treating with the difficulties in the NIF. The obvious need to increase employment levels and significant job creation will generate a roll-on benefit and an increase in contribution.

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

**3.50 p.m.**

Increase the contributions. Increase the contributions to the fund. How do you do that? You create jobs.

**Mr. Charles:** Tell the engineer that.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** People want to earn a living, you know, they do not just want handouts, and they do not want to be lazy. People want to have a liveable job that they can live and take care of their families but when they do that, it will increase your contributions to the fund. The more people get jobs, the more employed, the more contributions you will get. Has the Minister considered that?

**Mr. Charles:** No.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** He only considers that he wants to—what is the word?—increase the retirement age.

**Mr. Charles:** To 70.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The unions are opposed to increase the retirement age and I am opposed to it. If he wants to go that route, people should do so voluntarily.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They should not, they should not, they should not. And if they go voluntarily, you still have to pay them their retirement benefits, do not punish them.

So here we are again, contributions to the fund reduced. A comparison of the NIB reports revealed that 2,194 employers have stopped contributing to the fund between 2015, when we were there, and 2022; 2,194 employers, why? Why have they stopped contributing, have they gone out of business? What has happened? That is a large number of contributors and again depleting the fund. Why? How can you resolve that? Is it because they do not have forex to run their business? Is it that you are not giving them back their VAT refunds so they cannot run their businesses, and they are forced to shut down? Tell us why 2,194 employers have stopped contributing to the NIF.

**Mr. Charles:** “He cyah answer.”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That suggests a substantial amount of business closure. This also means increased job losses as businesses go out of operation. Has the Government assessed why they have stopped contributing? Has the Government assessed what is the effect and the viability of the NIB? Instead of widening the contribution base, which government policy should have focused on, this Government seems to have deliberately and illogically contracted the contribution base. So, that is another fiasco waiting to happen.

The unions have called for the Government, and the labour movement for Government to bolster the fund as well. But is it also mismanagement and incompetence of those who are running the NIF? Where are they investing the funds from the NIF? Why is it that the funds are being depleted in that manner? So partly because of reduced contributions from employees and employers—

**Mr. Charles:** Poor investment choices.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And it must be poor investment choices and poor management, poor management of the NIB.

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

**Mr. Charles:** Whose Ministry is that?

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I turn now to another macro indicator, inflation. This is one that everybody in the country is crying. Everywhere we went for the consultation, the high cost of living.

What is inflation then? The rate of price increases. Citizens have been confronted by continuously rising prices, particularly of food and transport over the last few years caused directly by the actions and inactions of this Government. Again, Madam, let us share the facts from the Central Bank Data Centre. The most recent data is from July 2023, but it is known that since then prices would have continued to rise over the last two months as well.

Let us again look at the data from 2015 to now—again, our last full year in office—from 2015 to now, transport prices have increased by 27 per cent. The price of food, in general, has escalated by 47 per cent.

**Mr. Charles:** And they gave 4 per cent.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This Minister—and they gave a what, 4 per cent?

**Mr. Charles:** 4 per cent.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** 4 per cent. This Minister raised diesel by 194 per cent.

**Mr. Charles:** Wicked, wicked.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Premium by 36 per cent, super by 158 per cent.

**Hon. Members:** Wow.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Since 2015, and “dey ain’t riot yet”. “Dey ain’t riot yet.” They will riot with their fingers come election day. They will riot.

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

**3.55 p.m.**

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The price of fish has increased by 26 per cent. Milk, cheese and eggs now cost 52 per cent more. Bread and cereal prices have risen by 41 per cent. Cooking oil is now a whopping 67 per cent. Fruit prices are now 52 per cent higher. Vegetable prices have risen by 61 per cent.

**Hon. Member:** Wow.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This is Central Bank data. This is not my data. It is not UNC data. This is Central Bank data.

**Ms. Ameen:** Give the workers 4 per cent hike.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And give the workers 4 per cent and beating their chests. Give the minimum wage—

**Mr. Charles:** \$3.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—\$3.

**Mr. Charles:** “Half ah doubles”.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Citizens seeking medical care now pay 45 per cent more today than in 2015. Increase in housing cost and rent are also in double digits. For every increased inflation, however small, we must remember we have a parallel and cumulative fall in the standard of living of citizens. It means that the real value of every dollar spent, the amount of goods and services a \$1 can buy continues to collapse, and this has had a crippling effect on citizens, especially those least able to afford it, persons on fixed income, pensioners, disability, public assistance and so on. But the Government’s decision to tie wage settlements to 4 per cent means that men and women employed in the fire, police, prison, teachers, defence force, public servants, all must face the fact that their salaries have fallen in value and the fall was substantial. The Minister on Monday projected continued

price hikes in 2024 and 2025.

**Hon. Member:** Things will get worse.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Further price hikes so that the cost of living will increase even further.

I turn now to some of the enabling sectors. I have dealt with the macro, I have dealt with the crime, I want to look at some of the enabling sectors before I take my seat. I will start with the energy sector because Government has clearly indicated their intention to really put all their eggs in the energy basket, because not a single new revenue stream has been identified, not a single new project to bring in revenue has been identified. The energy sector is the main one. There have been minor, little mutterings about the non-energy sector and exports and so on. None of that is going to work because it has not worked before. So let us look at it. I repeat again, there can be no prosperity if there is no energy security.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** None whatsoever. No prosperity if there is no energy security because that is your main revenue earner. During the recent local government campaign, government spokespersons erroneously claimed that the former government, the government I led, decimated the energy sector. Nothing is further from the truth.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** It is this Government who is dismantling the energy sector. They said when they went into office, that Government, that all the contracts between NGC and the companies in Point Lisas had expired when they came into government. And every budget debate, ad nauseam they repeat, all the NGC contracts expired under the UNC ad nauseam. Well, it took some very brave and enterprising persons to prove you are lying. Fishermen and Friends of the



Sea—

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Oh, I withdraw—to prove the untruth of your—

**Hon. Member:** Extortion of fact.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—erroneous statements, the untruth, erroneous statements. Fishermen and Friends of the Sea sent an FIOA request to the NGC and they asked about the status of the contracts for natural gas supply between NGC and plants at Point Lisas as at August 31, 2015. That was a week before that election, August 31, 2015. The NGC replied via a letter dated August 20, 2023, just a couple weeks ago saying there were 20 such commercial arrangements as at August 31, 2015. And of these 20, only two were on a month-to-month basis, meaning that only two had expired. So you hear untruth? That is untruth. They are untruths.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That is untruth. And you will be singing that song every time in every budget statement. That is two out of 20. But every year in this debate we hear about how they found all the contracts expired. I wonder who was the Minister who found that? Who was the Minister of Energy then who found—

**Mr. Charles:** Kevin—

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Two—no. The two when they were saying they were all expired.

**Mr. Charles:** “Ohh. Ohh”.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I do not know if it is the present—the Young Minister who was then Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

**Mr. Charles:** Franklin Khan.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** But it was a PNM Minister—

**Mr. Charles:** Franklin Khan.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—giving wrong information about those contracts. So, again, on the campaign trail in the budget debates, repeat, repeat this erroneous statement.

Another erroneous statement that they peddle all the time is that Petrotrin was a ward on the Treasury.

**Mr. Charles:** “Hmm”.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Again, nothing is further from the truth.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** When they were prosecuting the case for the closure Petrotrin, they went all over the country “bad talking” the company. And that was a state-owned company, eh, but they were “bad talking” Petrotrin all over the country, “bad talking” the workers who are citizens of this land when they were prosecuting their case to close Petrotrin. Up to today I wonder if we will ever find out the true and real reason why they closed down Petrotrin?

**Mr. Charles:** AV Drilling.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The truth will come to light. The Prime Minister then described Petrotrin as a ward of the Treasury. That has also proven to be false, misleading. In another FOIA request, same Fishermen and Friends of the Sea, we were told by the Ministry of Finance, they did the FOIA, Ministry of Finance sent in a letter dated December 06, 2021 and the Minister in the FOIA replied stating for 2016, 2017, 2018, Petrotrin received no government subvention.

**Mr. Charles:** Wow!

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** None. None whatsoever.

**Mr. Charles:** Wow!

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** None. So what ward of the State are you talking

about? There was certainly no subvention made to Petrotrin from 2010 to 2015 under our watch. None. No subvention. So, what this ward of the State came from? Why did we fabricate this kind misnomer? Because why? They wanted to close down Petrotrin for some reason or the other.

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

**Mr. Charles:** They had Deokiesingh and Malcolm Jones.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So, no subvention. Finance Ministry has confirmed in another FIOA request, no subvention. And I know for a fact no subvention was paid during 2010 to 2015. There was a subvention, however, paid when? 2019. Why?

**Mr. Charles:** I wonder.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Why? That was money to shut down and wind up the company.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That was what that money was for. So no subvention paid, 2010 to 2015. None paid as at—I will share it with you now. The only time it was paid was 2019 to shut down the company. What a shame. What a tragedy in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I refer to these two pieces of propaganda because it is important to debunk what has been said by those opposite. These are just only two pieces of propaganda, there are other untruths. We will deal with them in due course. What we do know at this time, in the energy sector things are going downhill, total dismantling of that energy sector. A lot has changed in the energy sector since they came into government and a lot has gone downhill. It is clear against the backdrop or collapse in production, plant closure, migration of skilled

workers that that Government still continues to pat itself on the back and they think they are doing a good job, but they are the only ones who thinks so. Anybody who knows the sector or who works in the sector knows otherwise.

Let us look at the data again. The data does not lie. Persons lie. Data does not tell untruths. I withdraw the word. Yes. It is a little difficult.

**Madam Speaker:** I was not sure before but I am sure now. So please be guided. Withdraw the word and I know you can do better.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The word “lie” is withdrawn. Instead, untruths. Untruths are untruths. And when we look at the data, the data is very clear that between 2015 and 2022 there is a stark picture of a frightening decline in the energy sector marked by the closure since then of the refinery five years ago; then the closure of Atlantic Train 1 in 2020; the now permanent closure of some plants at Point Lisas, including closures of the ArcelorMittal steel complex in 2016, the MHTL M1 Methanol plant in 2017, the Yara ammonia plant in 2019—

**Mr. Charles:** Wow!

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—the Methanex’s Titan methanol plant in 2020. All these plants shut down; shut down, Madam Speaker. All. And by whom? Under this Government, under the watch of the present Government. All these are now part of the growing industrial—what is it? Junk, they call it—junkyard, scrap yard, scrap iron. That is Trinidad and Tobago—

**Mr. Charles:** Sanford and Son.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—standing against the backdrop of a decaying landscape which includes the ghost towns of Fyzabad, ghost town; Galeota, ghost town; Marabella, ghost town, Vistabella—

**Mr. Charles:** Santa Flora.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—ghost town; Claxton Bay, ghost town, Palo

Seco, ghost town; Santa Flora and others. That is the backdrop, these ghost towns where you have created these of junk heaps of scrap iron. Every metric, Madam Speaker, is down in the energy sector, every single one. It is bemusing or amusing that the Minister continues to tell this nation our economic hopes remain pegged to the energy sector, when as a government they have allowed every single metric, every single indice and industry-specific indicator to just decline over the eight years.

In the last eight years, Madam Speaker the country's energy sector has experienced a frightening level of contraction by evidence from drastic reductions of—there has been, since they came into office, 63 per cent reduction in drilling activity—

**Mr. Charles:** Wow. “Hmm”.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—32 per cent in natural gas production, 37 per cent in LNG productions—

**Hon. Members:** “Hmm”.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—28 per cent in oil production, direct jobs in the energy sector have collapsed by 52 per cent—

**Mr. Charles:** Lord have mercy.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—in between 2015 and 2022. In 2015, those jobs were 22,500 and about 10,000 being employed. Rig days have fallen, 63 per cent of rig days between 2015 and 2023. The energy sector is solely hanging on because Russia-Ukraine, the global prices. If we take away those global prices, the Government has eroded the appeal attraction and the competitive nature of the energy sector. This decline in the sector under their Government since 2015 has manifested in the scaling down or departure of energy service companies. I mentioned some that shut down. Here are some others energy companies gone;

gone: Schlumberger, Baker Hughes, Halliburton, amongst others. So it has been capital flight, experience flight, revenue flight, everything happening under this Government. These companies are departing T&T because of a lack of upstream drilling activity.

The decline of Chaguaramas, another part of the country you may not associate with the Petrotrin shut down, decline in the energy sector has impacted Chaguaramas, which is the major logistic hub for offshore oil and gas. Lower drilling since 2015 means less rigs, less seismic vessels, less supply vessels, less need to supply food, water and fuel to the vessels and less demand for hotel rooms.

**4.10 p.m.**

This coupled with the decline in yachtie arrival, has led to the decline in the peninsula as evidenced by the closure of restaurants, the closure of Republic Bank, the closure of Royal Bank, the closure of the Massy Stores, all under the watch of that Government.

**Hon. Member:** Shame! Shame.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** These are markers of decline. The decline of Chaguaramas, located in the constituency of the Prime Minister, started well before COVID, and can be directly correlated to the decline in the energy sector.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The PNM friends in the energy chamber will never tell you these things. They are too busy hugging the multinational oil and gas giants to care about the SMEs amongst the energy service companies, which are owned and operated by hardworking citizens of our country. They have sat silently for eight years as the energy sector declines and places, I said, like Galeota and Marabella turn into tumbleweed and scrap iron heats. The Government and multinationals have also forgotten about local content. The multinationals are back

to their old ways of hiring foreign service companies ahead of those owned by citizens of T&T. In 2025, I give this assurance, when we return to government in 2025 or before, we will come to end and we will make local content inclusion of SMEs a priority.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Natural gas production: I turn now to natural gas production. Every time the Minister reads a budget speech the Minister gives a forecast for natural gas production for the following year. Again, always wrong.

In the 2021 budget speech delivered October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Minister said natural gas production would average about 3.2 billion cubic feet per day in 2021. Keep the numbers, save the number, 3.2 billion cubic feet per day in '21. What was the actual production for that year? It was 2.58 billion. So projected 3.2 and was 2.58. In the 2022 budget on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Minister predicted in '22, natural gas production to be 3.37 billion cubic feet per day. What was the actual figure? 2.69 billion cubic feet. That is twice. In the 2023 budget, Minister said production will increase in '22 to just under 3.0 billion cubic feet per day. The reality is we are well short of that forecast as the average for the year is around 2.5/2.6 billion cubic feet. The Minister is wrong again. Wrong projections over and over again. One wonders if this is a deliberate pattern. Is the Minister trying to paint a bright picture for the rating agencies and the IMF?

**Hon. Member:** Yes. Yes.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Whatever he is doing there is a significant gap between Government's gas outlook for natural gas and the reality on the ground. The reality is the state of natural gas production is very worrisome. Even the Prime Minister has expressed concern. In the *Express* of September 13, 2022 the Prime Minister is reported to have said that he had seen a diagram on the outlook

for natural gas production which showed a marked decline in natural gas production around 2026/'27 and '28.

The Minister went on to speak of far-reaching consequences for Government revenues, and the quality of life of the people of T&T. In contemplating the consequences of the future the Prime Minister must reflect to on the fact that this Government took eight years before they awarded any acreage for exploration. It was this Government that led a failed bid round for shallow water acreage in 2016. It was this Government that reversed and diminished incentives to stimulate exploration and development. So what the Prime Minister saw in that diagram should not surprise him at all. Then we come to the decline in jobs: The decline was further evidenced by the labour force data from CSO. These reports which are done in a quarterly basis showed persons with direct jobs in the petroleum sector in the third quarter of 2015, that is just as we demitted office, at 22,500. Can I repeat that? Jobs in the petroleum sector, third quarter 2015, 22,500. Fast forward to the first quarter of this year 2023, the figure has collapsed to 10,000.

**Hon. Member:** Oh lord, have mercy!

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Meaning about 11,000 persons have lost their jobs. The Central Bank data from reports—Central Bank data room reports these figures on an annualized basis. According to their data, in 2015 there were 20,500 people, jobs, in the petroleum sector, and that figure collapsed to 9,800 in 2020. A decline for 52 per cent.

**Hon. Member:** Shame! Shame!

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** These numbers of retrenched do not include the tens of thousands who were employed through SMEs and contractors who provided goods and services to the energy sector. What accounts for this? Where have these people gone? Attributing this closure of Petrotrin does not come close



to telling the full story. The decline is much bigger than the closure of Petrotrin, as I have shown you with respect to production and all the other factors. This is the sector—why it declined? Unprecedented in the history of the energy sector, and it is the product of policies that the persons who accused the UNC of decimating the energy sector in '10 and '15 today, the data demonstrates that it is this Government. It is that Government on the other side who has dismantled and has decimated the energy sector.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Just a quick comparison: 2015 to 2020, when we look at drilling, rig days have collapsed from 6.3 per cent, 2015 to 2022. Oil production fell by 26 per cent, natural gas production by 30 per cent, LNG production by 37 per cent, ammonia production by 8 per cent, energy sector real GDP fell by 28 per cent, and of course refinery throughput fell by 100 per cent. As for oil production, the PNM has no plan. Oil production is now approximately 56,000 barrels per day and it keeps sliding every year. The changes made by the Government, that Government, to the SPTs, Supplemental Petroleum Tax from the last budget have had absolutely no impact and have not stimulated investment. They boast that Heritage is profitable. Heritage Petroleum did not drop from the sky in November 2018. Heritage Petroleum inherited a functioning, operational oil company, namely the upstream assets of Petrotrin, including Trinmar. That upstream arm of Petrotrin was always profitable. Always.

**Mr. Charles:** Tell them! Tell them.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So there is nothing to boast about when it comes to Heritage Petroleum. When they closed Petrotrin, they sent home many experienced nationals of our country, some with 20 years, 30 years, 40 years'

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC (cont'd)

experience. They replaced them with people who are ex-employees of BP and other foreign multinationals. Did you know that? They replaced our nationals with ex-employees of BP and other foreign nationals. Their premise being, that those persons were somehow magically better than those who worked for Petrotrin. That experiment has failed. While we await the report of the commission of enquiry into the tragedy at Paria we cannot help but wonder whether what happened at Paria in February 2022, was the result of the loss of institutional memory, facilities at the port in Pointe-a-Pierre.

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

**Hon. Member:** Tell them.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** A loss that was incurred when all the experienced persons at the port operations of Petrotrin were sent home. The refinery has now been closed for five years. The Government simply has no plan, just like crime. They have no plan.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The chairman of Petroleum Holdings has thrown his hands in the air and says, “make me an offer”. No one is making an offer. No one is making an offer, and the refinery continues to rot and turn into the biggest scrap iron heap in the Caribbean. When they were prosecuting a case for the closure of the refinery in 2018 they described Petrotrin, I told you, a ward of the Treasury. I have demonstrated that was not true. The closure of the refinery has decimated the economy of south Trinidad and all these fence-line communities. That refinery is there rotting away. And typical arrogance, Prime Minister says, he boasts, we have exited the refinery business.

**Mr. Charles:** Simple.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Simple. End of story. End of story. I turn now to

great promises for the future made by the Minister, Dragon. The Government has made this the central pillar of the energy policy. In fact five years ago, budget speech delivered October 01, 2016, it was listed as the first game changer. While we support any initiative to get natural gas to our ailing plants at Point Lisas, and to the three LNG trains at Point Fortin—there used to be four if you remember, now there are only three LNG trains—the public ought to know the details of what was singed in Caracas last month.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Details by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, and how this is different from what was signed by the Prime Minister in August 2018. The Opposition notes that there has been no change in the position of the US as regards the position of the licence which Venezuelans have objected to. There are many more questions which we hope the Government will answer in this debate. When, for example, is this natural gas from the Dragon field estimated to arrive in Trinidad?

**Mr. Charles:** Good question. Tell us.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** What will this project cost the people of our country?

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I want to repeat. We are not opposed to the project, but there is need for transparency.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Especially where commitments are being made on behalf of T&T. I am not done with the energy sector yet, but there is more to come with the dismantling of this sector. A few weeks ago the Minister of Energy and

Energy Industries signed three deep-water production sharing contracts with the consortium of BP and Shell. They were the only companies that participated in that round. Overall, bids were received on four blocks out of the 17 that were put out. The signing of the contracts was done without the presence of the media. The media was not invited. We wish to remind the Minister that the acreage that he is awarding does not belong to him, it belongs to the people of this country.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Further, no information was put out as to what BP and Shell's minimum work obligation's in these three blocks were. Is that not in keeping with the principles of transparency, which I am sure these companies are required to subscribe to in Europe. So where is the transparency here? Like the Dragon deal, the public does not know what was signed with BP and Shell, and what these companies have committed to. At the signing the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries went on to speak to the importance of the deepwater frontier to the country's future. If exploring the deepwater province is so important, why then did it take the PNM eight years to award three blocks in the period during our time? It took eight years to award three blocks. In the period '11 to '15 our Government, my Government, awarded nine deepwater blocks for a combined 12 hectares of acreage.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This resulted directly in the discoveries off the north coast of Tobago that make up the Calypso project, which is being hailed as a possible saviour of this country, if Woodside can make commercial case for its development.

And let us go on to Niquan. Niquan has brought no value to T&T. As our energy sector struggles for oil and gas, this Government must state why millions of

state assets have been abused and misused in sweetheart deals for Niquan. From the very start we in the Opposition told this Government not to waste valuable billion-dollar assets on a company like Niquan that had no track record or skill to deliver on its mandate. But what did Government do? The Government took the WGTL plant, which burdened Petrotrin with billions of debts, and that was one of their own, Malcom Jones who burdened Petrotrin with the debts. They sold it to Niquan at a peppercorn rate. This Government then took our scarce gas supply, they gave Niquan a guarantee supply. But that was not enough, then ensured that Niquan had a pay-or-take agreement with Petrotrin for all off-take from Niquan to be purchased.

**4.25 p.m.**

Today we ask the Government, where is the millions in tax revenue that the Prime Minister promised NiQuan would deliver? Where are the jobs? Where is the forex? Today NiQuan is owing the State or the Trinidad and Tobago Upstream Downstream Energy Operations Company Limited reportedly over US \$19 million.

**Hon Members:** “Ohhh!”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** \$19 million.

**Hon. Members:** “Hmmm.”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And NiQuan is also owing creditors billions of dollars. So after giving away billions of moneys, taxpayers moneys, assets, all the Prime Minister would tell the public is about “maga dog”. That is all he could tell us. Today we want answers on when the Government would recover the money owed to the State.

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

**Mr. Charles:** Answers.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I turn now to another engagement sector, very important one. Again I say, there can be no prosperity without job security. There can be no prosperity without job security, as I turn to the labour sector. Over the past 97 months and continuing, Government unleashed a reign of terror and brutality against organized labour, the working class, and their representative trade unions as never before. I call on the Government—my colleague, MP Indarsingh, will delve more into the labour sector, but there are some areas I want to set out as policy guidelines. I call on the Government to immediately effect a fair resolution of all collective agreements in the public sector, to initiate the requisite comprehensive actioning of all recommendations and conventions advocated for by the ILO and the incorporation of same into domestic law.

A UNC government commits to ensuring that the following broad policy positions are enacted: The repealing and replacing the dreaded Industrial Relations Act; the repealing and replacing of the outdated Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act; the simplification of a registration process for trade unions; incentivizing the trade union movement to encourage workers to become financial members of trade unions; a greater recognition and space for the role of trade unions in promoting income and wealthy equality in the society through the free collective bargaining process; the resolution of all collective agreements in the public sector; a comprehensive actioning of all recommendations and conventions advocated for ILO and the incorporation of the same into domestic law.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** A review of the Occupational Safety and Health Act and the occupational health and safety agencies. These and other priority areas would form the basis of UNC's focus for the benefit of trade unions and the working class and be subjected to widespread social dialogue with stakeholders

and partners within the country before implementation and execution of same.

I turn now to a very important sector because if you are dead you cannot enjoy anything else. If you are dead, if you are not alive, you cannot enjoy any prosperity, you cannot enjoy anything, good food or otherwise. So I come now to the public health care system.

**Hon. Members:** Nooo.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I make the point again, there can be no prosperity without health care.

**Hon. Members:** Yeah. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** [*Member confers with Mr. Lee*] Public health system. The public health care system is littered with eight years of collapsed promises; abandoned or delayed projects; warped priorities; lack of life saving pharmaceuticals and equipment; critical medical staff shortages and gross mismanagement, all leading to premature and unnecessary deaths of patients. These circumstances, Madam Speaker, have led to patients having to wait for long periods of time for surgery; a Mr. Padase since 2019. Ms. Drupatie Kamal has had a cataract surgery postponed so many times that she is almost blind now. She has been awaiting cataract surgery since 2018. I could give many more names, Madam Speaker, of patients who have been waiting on the waiting list and who continue to suffer because of rank ineptitude and negligence under woeful mismanagement of this Government.

The poor health care includes a lack of medicine; insufficient nursing and senior medical staff; non-hiring of junior medical staff; shortages of surgical supplies; lack of operating theatre time and space for surgeries and labs not functioning because of the lack of reagents. And yet, the Minister comes to this Parliament on Monday, the Minister boasted about state-of-the-art hospitals and

yet these are so severely understaffed patients' lives are perpetually at risk. But let me remind the hon. Minister, all these hospitals you are boasting about, they were begun under the watch of the UNC Partnership Government.

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

**Mr. Charles:** We build it, we build it, we build it.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And we completed the Scarborough Hospital that you could not complete.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Let us talk about the state-of-the-art hospitals that you boasted about, the Minister boasted about on Monday. The new Point Fortin Hospital and the Arima Hospital lack so many doctors, nurses, other staff, that patients would suffer when they go to these hospitals. Let us look at some of the numbers of these hospitals. Arima Hospital, out of 115 on the establishment there are only 95 doctors on the establishment; out of 458 nurses on the establishment, there are only 384 at the Point Fortin Hospital.

**Mr. Charles:** The rest in England.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Let us talk about the Point Fortin Hospital. Point Fortin Hospital, doctors, establishment, 23 out of 29 on the establishment. That is not so bad. Nurses, 113 out of 187 on that establishment. May I ask, is there any Government Minister who has someone in a hospital for about three months now and who is not really needing medical care? I do not know if there is anyone who would own-up. But I have been told that there is someone whose mother does not need medical care but is just being housed at the Arima Hospital for the past three months.

**Hon. Members:** Wow.

**Mr. Charles:** Call name, "nah".



**Hon. Members:** Wow.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I do not know. So that is the state of staffing at these great hospitals, beating their chest and everything, but people know the truth. Families of patients often must do blood tests outside the hospital, return with the results sometimes two to three days later, and the patients have become critically ill and end up dying. Patients sometimes must waste precious hours for ambulances and all of this is in a public health care sector that receives a large chunk of taxpayers' money each year under a government that claims to care.

PAHO and WHO have identified T&T as being at a crisis point when we come to the NCDs. NCDs account for three-quarters of deaths in the country. The Minister's much touted national strategic plan on NCDs is a hopeless failure. In successive budgets Government promised in vain to expedite surgeries; address shortage of medical personnel; collaborate with the private sector; investments for an appropriate health insurance model. But thousands of patients cannot get cataract surgeries, shortages of CDAP medical items. At A&E, there are sometimes 50 or 60 critically ill patients hoarded like animals in a pen. Some patients die in over-crowding emergency departments while awaiting urgent medical care and attention. It is like a national horror story. The Government recently launched a \$133 million car park at the San Fernando Hospital while it is still to construct the much promised \$72 million—what it is doc?—the Cath Lab, the angioplasty and angiogram lab at the hospital.

**Mr. Charles:** Priorities.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That is a project that has been repeated year after year, to set up the Cath Lab in San Fernando, cannot again, promises never materialized, PNM.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Eight years ago the Prime Minister said he was waiting on the Welch Report to open the Couva hospital. After the report we were told a partner was needed to work with the Government. No partner came forward. It appears no one wants to work with this Government.

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

**Mr. Charles:** I wonder why.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Government then recommended an offshore medical school to be facilitated there at the Couva hospital. Eight years later PNM, promises never materialized. There is no offshore medical school. You remember the Minister of Health saying that there were insufficient doctors to open the Couva hospital. Today hundreds of young, qualified doctors are waiting jobs but no employment is being provided by this failed administration. There are almost 1,300 nurses missing from the establishment of the RHAs. Among those who are working, many are given three months or one-year contracts and so are unable to meet the requirements for paying loans, the terms and conditions of employment, and insufficient number of nurses in the system make an extremely demoralizing situation.

In addition, there are insufficient specialized nurses in areas such as accident, emergency, cardiac care, renal failure care, all other specialized areas of medicine. Despite speaking about the St. James Cancer Centre and the Augustus Long Hospital, again promises not materializing, being assigned as a cancer centre, the whole management of chemotherapy across the country is totally inefficient. There is a lack of proper chemotherapeutic drugs, which are first line drugs to be used, so when patients should be continuing to get their chemotherapy cycles every two to three weeks they find out there are no more of the drugs available. What is going on in the health sector?

**Mr. Charles:** Who dead, dead.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** What is going on? Remember they boasted that this is the best health care in the world, but when they fell ill they were flying out of Trinidad and Tobago to go to the United States for treatment. That is the best health care in the world.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** No more. At public hospitals, severely ill patients are seen to be kept in emergency departments, sometimes for days waiting for a bed on a ward. The Couva hospital remains closed for medical care except for COVID patients. This is a modern two billion institution that we built with hundreds of millions of proper medical equipment being left to become what, scrap iron as well, another junk heap. The Government has simply abandoned a state-of-the-art hospital where we can be treating patients as I say, who cannot get a bed in other institutions.

Let us look at the COVID now. The death of thousands of patients rests squarely on the shoulders of that Government—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—and its COVID propaganda team. You remember them?

**Hon. Members:** “Ummm-hmm.” The best in the world. Number one in the world.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** COVID propaganda team. We had called for a commission of enquiry into this whole COVID mismanagement. After persistent calls the committee was set up and it reported negligence in the management of COVID-19 patients. The committee made 19 recommendations in a 103-page report. Not one of those recommendations has ever been implemented. Not one.

**Mr. Charles:** Shame, shame, shame.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We wish to assure the nation that when we get into government we will make sure there is a full and independent commission of enquiry into the mismanagement—

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—and deaths of more than 5,000 COVID patients. We will do it.

I turn to another engagement sector, one that is very close to my heart and this is the education sector.

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** What you said, relaxing?

**Ms. Ameen:** Disaster today.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Disaster today. Decline in national administration is most evident in the all-important education sector. There has been a deterioration of standards; there has been a lack of modernization; there has been a fall in the provision of appropriate and essential resources. So let us reflect briefly, Madam. You know sometimes we have to reflect on where we were and how far away we have come from that position; 2015, Trinidad and Tobago is at the forefront of the world. We were praised by the then UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon for being the first country in the world to achieve universal early childhood education.

**Mr. Charles:** “Oh yes.”

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

**Mr. Charles:** I remember, I remember.

**4.40 p.m.**

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And whilst I take credit for it, I take credit for the

whole government and to then Minister of Education, Tim Gopeesingh.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We were also commended by the IADB in Washington. We were also commended by then US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton for our work in education. That is where we were. We received international global awards for the positioning of T&T in education as a world leader in ICT education.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We became one with strongest leadership teams in Latin America and the Caribbean, the GRULAC group, leading alongside Uruguay. We were ahead of the US President Barack Obama, with the greatest respect to him. He was asking ICT companies in the US to provide about \$1 million each so laptops could be provided for children in underprivileged areas in that country.

Russia introduced laptops one year later. I say again, we were world leaders in ICT in education. Within one year of this PNM Government coming into office, most of the successful policies were reversed. They scrapped the laptop programme.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Prime Minister even went so far as to say that laptops brought no value to education. Imagine that position from a leader in the modern world.

Under his administration computer classrooms became a thing of the past. We had, my administration, at least 50 computers each in most secondary schools along with ICT technicians. The technicians were dismissed and audio visual rooms went into decay. The PNM scrapped the 21<sup>st</sup> Century smart classrooms in

which we had partnered with Samsung. Could you imagine such a policy position now, in a world of artificial intelligence and one in which ICT is taking nations to the moon? The e-learning was scrapped by that administration. They soon had to confront the outrageousness of the decision when the COVID pandemic hit us in 2020, when more than 100,000 students were left without education for almost a year and a half. They had no devices and the IT platform was not functional.

They scrapped the purchase of textbooks for students when our administration had purchased more than two million textbooks. Over our five-year period, two million textbooks.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Every child in every school, in every class, in every subject received a textbook so they could receive their education. That was an example of our emphasis on education and learning. We filled all vacancies for teaching positions. All teachers in primary schools were certified with at least a first degree in education. We had moderators, facilitators, substitute teachers, and we worked with the Teaching Service Commission to ensure that almost all vacancies were filled including the positions of deans of discipline.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That is why today I said about filling these positions in the schools, the deans of discipline in schools and so on.

Not only has the PNM Government systemically destroyed the ICT systems and laptops, you know what they did as well? They scrapped the homework centres. I talked about them here today. A total of 402 schools had homework centres on evenings to benefit thousands.

For a period the school feeding programme became non-functional. To date, it is inefficient, with thousands of deserving students unable to get nutritious

meals. That exists in a country in which poverty and malnutrition is on the rise. When we come to school transport they refused to pay drivers, students suffer. Again a reflection of a lack of appreciation of students and education.

The performance in exams is no better. The pass marks in SEA worsened from year to year. More students failed the CSEC. Over the past eight years Trinidad and Tobago has experienced the worse level of education in our history ever, ever.

**Ms. Ameen:** Such a shame.

**Mr. Charles:** “What dey doing?”

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Last year exams revealed more than 9,000 students, SEA, out of 18,000 failed to get a pass, Madam Speaker. No amount of remedial learning in the summer vacation would have helped any of the students to do better. The Rowley led-government has refused to continue construction of any one of the 71 schools that we left. Some were almost 98 per cent complete. Ramai Trace Hindu, MP Moonilal, he talks about that, Reform Hindu. Several schools almost 98 per cent completed. The PNM Government is victimizing our young children. We completed under my administration 106 schools.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Now our students are made to study in cramped makeshift conditions in mandirs and mosques. That is the legacy of the PNM in education after eight years. That is the legacy after eight years.

I command—I will be glad—excuse me. Yes, Shiva Boys, shut down, in my constituency, was almost complete. Just left abandoned with vines growing all over it.

**Mr. Charles:** Geographic discrimination.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Just left there in abandonment. When we go back

we will continue our construction of schools. But, Madam Speaker, I will tell you this, it will cost so much more money because they have been abandoned for so long. Vandals have gone in and stolen the windows, and the doors, and the toilets and everything else. Such a waste of money with these places.

In typical PNM style, school repairs and maintenance are routinely started almost at the end of the mid-year vacation, each year, again affecting the education of students. Hundreds of vacancies now exist in schools, both government and denominational, worsening levels of performance. We had undertaken public consultations and introduced something called the Continuous Assessment Component. Indeed since I was Minister of Education I remember this CAC, Continuous Assessment Component, to support the SEA. What has happened with that? Tech/Voc skills trade and education, we expanded from 42 schools to 105. What has happened with that? We encouraged more teachers to be trained in Tech/Voc. There have been serious cut backs in GATE for tertiary education. We had an education sector now that has become wrecked by incompetence, mismanagement and a lack of vision, and absence of appreciation of the global dynamics in the sector.

The Government has severely set back our country's human capital. Set back human capital.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** There can be no prosperity I say again, without food security.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Young people—how much time do I have, please? Madam, how much time do I have?

**Madam Speaker:** You finish at 5.38. So you roughly have maybe about 40.



Yeah, a little more than even 40 minutes. Yeah.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** 4-0.

**Madam Speaker:** Yeah, about 45 minutes.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Yes, Ma'am, thank you so much. Great. That gives me sufficient time.

**Ms. Ameen:** Fifty minutes.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Fifty or 40?

**Ms. Ameen:** Fifty.

**Madam Speaker:** 5.38.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Again, I have to watch this way because I have no clock this way.

**Ms. Ameen:** It is 4.38 now.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Okay, you will give me a time check like five minutes before so I can wrap up. Yeah? Thank you.

Agriculture. Young people are not interested in agriculture because they do not want the backbreaking kind of agricultural work that older generations like me—we grew up doing agriculture work, Madam Speaker, believe it or not. We can look at how quickly Guyana is developing on export oriented agricultural economy, the soya bean, rice and corn. We are still experimenting. What is UWI doing? What has happened to the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture? Under my government we started to grow onions and potatoes. What has happened to that project? I say it should be brought back. What has happened to the potential we have for tropical flowers for export? Another revenue earner, foreign exchange. We can export our tropical flowers. We have beautiful tropical flowers. We should lend Government focus on the production of ornamental flowers for export.

The Minister says that more local goods for meals will be used in the school feeding programme. Question: How many farmers are being incentivized to produce more local meats, hams, sausages, eggs, chicken, fish and on fish farms? Government must sign multiyear contracts with farmers to provide goods to the school feeding programme. This is the only way they will be able to access credit and financing from banks to increase production.

Under the PNM food imports went from \$5 billion to \$7.3 billion. Is this because we are eating so much more? This is an indictment I think on the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Government. We need to find out what categories of food have witnessed the highest increases in quantity, or is it really that increased prices have accounted for the change and not qualities and quantities. We are at a stage where our capacity to involve corn and soya to keep chicken production could be severely affected due to war and climate change. Where in this budget have they addressed this, given our very high per capita consumption of chicken? We should focus our farmers on corn and soya bean production to provide feed for chicken and small ruminants. The agriculture Ministry has to have new and innovative thinking. They are regressive in their thinking and stuck in time. The agricultural degree programme at UWI must be revised.

Students receiving GATE and entering the programme must agree to start farms at the end of their first two years on lands provided by the Government and including modern modes of production. At the end of four years they will spend a fifth completing their academic requirements. They will be trained as agri entrepreneurs from the classroom itself. This is making learning not only relevant, but adding jobs and food for the table. This type of programme will find private sector participation. In a similar way community farms can be established and

achieved production within 12 to 18 months. With respect to the question to be asked—must be asked as to whether the technical people in the Ministry share and better yet are able to push such programmes to success.

You know, Madam Speaker, wooden furniture made of high quality teak, pine, mahogany, SIP, are woods that are in high demand. We can get the lumber here or in Guyana and we can do this kind of work and export it again and earn foreign exchange. Currently, we are importing Malaysian rubber wood furniture. With a little vision and retooling of the youth programme, what prevents us from producing high quality furniture for local use?

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** As as we grow exports, youths can earn, when they learn, while they learn. This is not the kind of imaginative Minister that currently exists. So there is the opportunity for entrepreneurship, it is real, but it requires seeding and mentoring.

Ways in which the Government has dismantled the sector:

1. They failed tax and duty concessions. They have elected to introduce a comprehensive programme of tax concessions, subsidies and waivers for agricultural needs like chemicals, vaccines, fishing vessels, equipment, and pest control.

**4.55 p.m.**

2. Inadequate compensation for natural disasters: In November 2022, you remember there was unprecedented flooding affecting farmers significantly due to Government's failure to manage water waste properly. Despite this, almost a year later, Government has not compensated these farmers, discouraging potential entrance to farming.
3. Wholesale market modernization: Promises of improving and

expanding wholesale markets have remained unfulfilled for years.

4. Land acquisition: The failure to conduct a meaningful GIS audit by the land administration division has led to an increase in squatting on agri lands.

5. Land lease delivery: Over 2,000 farmers with expired leases or are awaiting two-acre agriculture plots from Caroni (1975) are still waiting for Government action. Promises to honour this arrangement since 2015 remain unfulfilled.

6. Access roads and drainage: Government has neglected to develop proper access roads or drainage for agriculture land, exacerbating flooding during the rainy season. Farmers had to resort to crude irrigation methods due to irregular water supplies.

7. Technical assistance and extension services: Again, these have failed to address locust infestation, the spread of the Giant African snail, and there is another disease with a Chinese name but I cannot pronounce it the right way, harming crops throughout the country.

8. Financial support for farmers without any land leases/tenure, small farmers cannot access government support or assistance, limiting their ability to recover from crises like theft, flooding.

9. Neglecting rehab of estates is another failure on the part of the Government.

10. Ineffective measures against praedial larceny: This is a repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat cry from farmers. The unit has been virtually dismantled due to inadequate funding and resources, resulting in rampant theft of produce.

So these are some of the problems in the agriculture sector. I cannot say what is in this budget and I hope the Agriculture, Land and Fisheries Minister will come to

speak to us. We do have a shadow Agriculture, Land and Fisheries Minister here who will go deeper into this programme.

On another note, Madam Speaker, the institutional quality that the Minister boasts about, we have here a repeat, repeat, repeat every year. Promises of a gambling commission, promises of a national statistical institute, promises of so many others. Here they are: The T&T Revenue Authority. Madam Speaker, not to be controversial, the Minister has promised this to come on board. I know we raised the issue of it being sub judice, it is in fact sub judice, but I would not go into what is before the court, but it is a promise PNM never materialized. TTRA in every budget has been promised. Minister is now telling us it will come on board by some time later this year. The matter—the court hearing is in November of this year, so it could never come on board before November and, of course, we know how court matters are, they are steps further forward. So I do not see it again as a promise that will materialize.

Procurement legislation, another step in institutional quality that the Minister talks about repeatedly. We have seen the total gutting of the procurement legislation and we know that only recently another exemption notice has been filed in September 2023. So in addition to all the other notices, another one has recently been filed. I believe the Motion has been filed before the Parliament to negative it.

Gambling commission, repeat, repeat repeat. PNM, “promises never materialize”. The statistical institute. You know, it was once said that Stalin loved to have or not to have statistics because he believed that statistics was the best way to control and manipulate the minds of people. And I wonder if the reluctance to have this institute taking place is due in part to that, that if we do not have the statistics, the true statistics, we can be misled. Another thing that has been promised over the years, transfer pricing, still has not happened. The Minister has

come back again to offer us transfer pricing. So these are some of the areas that my colleagues would go deeper into and I want to thank all of you as I close my contribution today. Thank you.

So, Madam Speaker, as I come to the conclusion, what we have before us is a population that has reached the boiling point. People are fed up, nothing works and no one in Government seems to care to fix it. The education sector has fallen apart. School bullying, sexual assaults, crime have now become the normal. Infrastructure has collapsed. Every week, some community must burn tyres just to get some attention. Health care is beyond recovery. Essential machines do not work, essential medication is unavailable. Health care staff are targets for criminals. Private health care is only accessible to the wealthy. Young doctors are terrified of speaking out because they fear victimization.

And then we move on, Madam Speaker, public utilities. My colleague, MP Padarath, as I said, will speak more on that; most inefficient, WASA and T&TEC.

Then we go to the labour sector, workers and unions. Just because they are trying to save themselves from drowning, just because they want to negotiate for better salaries, they are treated as enemies of the State. Why do the hard-working people of this country not deserve to be paid well? Why must they not want to have what everybody else wants? A good car, a good house and so on. It seems as though the attitude by Government is no macaroni pie for these labour people and the union people and workers of the country.

Why must having things be for only the fake elicits and financiers who have captured the Government? And why to all the pain that I have sketched out early o'clock about the crime and the suffering in the country? This is what causes our national anger. Everywhere you look, people have reached rage and frustration, they are fuming mad, they are short-tempered. Many have a constant angry facial

expression. Every day, there are home invasions somewhere, there is murder somewhere, there is vandalism somewhere and now extortion, Madam Speaker, seems to becoming the order of the day. Every day, reports of extortion. Every day, why is this normal? Everyone has run out of patience with this Government and I dare Government to tell us otherwise. I dare Government to challenge me when I say people have become psychologically downtrodden, beaten and abused because of all the social problems they are facing on a daily basis.

This Government appears as an architect of pain. People now believe that to get ahead, they must be in some form of skulduggery and the Government is leading by example. Let them challenge me on this. Government has literally driven working people to the point of fatigue and exhaustion.

The Finance Minister continues to make poor decisions and even poorer projections and expects people to believe him. I do not believe anybody believes him again. I said it before and I say it again, this budget is completely irrelevant. It is irrelevant because even as I speak today, even as we are here today, comfortably ensconced in this Chamber talking highfalutin talk about the economy, some innocent citizen will be robbed and murdered. There is a war on the outside. Criminals are at war with innocent citizens whom the Government have left to fend for themselves. I repeat, there can be no prosperity without safety and security.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** There can be no prosperity without safety and security. Only yesterday, I mentioned to you, TTPS said 13 out of every 100 murders. That means 87 murderers are going free. The Government has chosen to bury its head in the sand while they boast about how to prosper and what I see, as I told you, people suffer. The Government is no longer in charge, the criminals are

in charge. So now is the time I say, Madam Speaker—as we look at newspaper headlines today, you know, from January to about the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, there were over 90, 9-0 newspaper front pages dealing with crime; about 90 front pages, evidence. So I would just hold it up, Madam Speaker.

The Minister told us on Monday that the Government had contained crime. “Contained”—used the word “contained” crime. I do not understand what that means because we have seen the crime worsening year after year after year. When we were last in office, the murder rate was about 420, if my memory serves me right. And we have reached a situation where last year murders crossed over 600, and we are heading into this year, another situation of murders going over 600. And the newspaper today gives us no hope. The *Newsday* today, Friday, October 6<sup>th</sup>:

“Murder rate worsens”

Sixty killed in September.

**Hon. Member:** Wow.

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** More people killed than the days in the month. Sixty people killed, 80 more murders than September last year. So where is the containment, Minister? Where is the containment in these murders? Lack of evidence, they say, hampers investigation. And then in the *Guardian* of today:

“Extortion caught on tape...”

Whole new crime industry is growing in our land.

And then when we go to the *Express* of today, contained within it are more horror stories about crime and about the police now in a situation where the gangs are targeting policemen. So it is getting, as a Trini would say, “wussa” and “wussa” and “wussa”. I do not see any containment in any of this.

Today, Madam Speaker, I just close, I speak for the people who are



paralyzed with fear. Some ask why are civil society, business groups, validators and large swathes of the country so silent and numb about the violent criminality and the Government's persistent, blatant economic and social destruction? It is a deep fear of this Government which terrorizes people. It is because people know that we live under a wannabe dictatorship that will stop at nothing to punish and destroy them for standing up for their livelihoods. Ours is a country fearful of violent crime, fearful of the Government that is supposed to protect us.

Remember, bad governments have always inflicted the worst evils that mankind have ever had to endure. The root causes of poverty is social injustice and the bad government that abets them. So when your government, whom you employ to work for you, has chosen to cruelly and deceptively abandon you to the whims and fancies of criminals and economic parasites, I say to citizens of our country, you must stand your ground. You must get up and stand your ground.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Now is not the time to wither and fade in the background. Now is the time for every right-thinking citizen to stand together, to band together to remove this incompetent and wicked Government.

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

**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Madam Speaker, I thank you for your time and the patience of this House and before I go, I just want to say today, our beloved Clerk of the House, some of us have worked with her for so long. When I entered the Parliament so many moons ago, Mrs. Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel was the Clerk of the House and I am told that she will proceed on preretirement leave and we want to thank her and to wish her all the best.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Youth Development and National Services.

**The Minister of Youth Development and National Service (Hon. Foster Cummings):** Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I am grateful to contribute to the budget debate 2023/2024 as we stand at the forefront of an era and a time of our nation's history.

Firstly, let me commend the Prime Minister for his leadership and for leading this Government and country over the past eight years by taking the necessary decisions in the best interest of our country and our citizens at large.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** I wish to also thank the Minister of Finance and his team for what was certainly a budget that prepares us for what we are about to embark on, and to also express our thanks to the Minister of Planning and Development and the team from that Ministry.

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

**5:10 p.m.**

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Over the past three years, the Government faced and overcame the challenges arising from the COVID pandemic. And despite what may have been expressed from the other side, I think most citizens agree that the Government did exceptionally well in managing our affairs during the COVID pandemic.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Going forward, Madam Speaker, we are charged with a profound sense of duty and responsibility, and I firmly believe that our endeavours in this fiscal year 2023/2024 would play a pivotal role in steering our beloved country Trinidad and Tobago, towards the targets we have set our sights on as part of our Vision 2030 realization. As we embark on this journey, Madam Speaker, we need to underscore the importance of our overall development, and in particular

because of the responsibility I hold in the Government, I would want to pay some attention to the question of youth development. It is a responsibility of all Members of Government. It is a responsibility of all Members of Parliament that we consider and we look at the question of youth development.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

And this Government has taken the forefront by putting forward a national youth policy, a strategic blueprint that champions the empowerment and strategic engagement of our youth as positive actors of our sustainable development. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is clear that there are those who pay no attention to these matters. Our mission is clear, we are not merely allocating funds, but we are investing in the potential of our young people and our population—

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** —arming them with skills, knowledge, and opportunities that they need to be thought bearers of Trinidad and Tobago's progress.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2020 the hon. Prime Minister in his wisdom created for the first time a Ministry specifically targeted towards youth development. And in 2021, I was given the opportunity to lead this relatively new Ministry. To this day, I continue to do so bearing in mind that the young people are the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, from independence to republicanism, and continuing to today, the PNM has always understood the importance of our young people. Coming from Dr. Eric Williams' advice to our young people, continuing with successive leaders of the PNM, as we continue to demonstrate and to say to our young people, you have a crucial role to play in the development of Trinidad and Tobago. Not only those youths that we target, and want to assist in

terms of those who may be referred to as at risk, but also those young people who continue to excel in various fields at various levels, and who continue to make Trinidad and Tobago proud.

This is a call for all our young people to come on board and work with us as we develop Trinidad and Tobago in a positive way. Once again, we have heard over the last few hours, the usual doom and gloom response of the UNC to the budget put forward by the Minister of Finance. Every year it is the same type of response, the same type of scare tactic, with no commitment to the development of this country or the development of the citizens of this country. You could imagine, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how shocked most of us were when we heard the Leader of the Opposition boast about the programmes for young people, most of which or all of which that were put in place by the People's National Movement.

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

**5.15 p.m.**

But it is good to see that somebody is paying attention and that they have finally recognized that instead of when coming into Government, you close down these programmes, that you support the programmes for the young people and for the development. Because it is not just about crime detection on the one hand, it is also about making sure that there are programmes in place for the development of our young people to steer them away from a life of crime, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Imagine us having to listen to a lecture on crime. The UNC claims that they have the experience on crime, but the population does not want that type of experience. The population has tried that experience and they certainly have no interest in it anymore.

In 2010, the UNC ran a similar campaign on crime and tax, and they were ushered into Government. And in 2015, the country very quickly sent

Hon. F. Cummings (cont'd)

them back into Opposition, because they realized that they had no solutions whatsoever, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In 2020, the UNC ran a campaign on crime and taxation again, and the country, understanding their ways of the past, returned the PNM to the governance of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** When you listen to them, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is like the calypso from the late Winston Bailey, Shadow, the cat loves the rat, but the rat does not need that kind of love.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** The PNM, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, do not want the UNC's experience in crime. They want an experienced and responsible Government like the PNM, led by the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not have to remind Trinidad and Tobago about the UNC's experience in crime fighting, or the UNC's attempt at solving the crime problem, which they like to speak about so much. It is well spoken of, the very many Ministers of National Security that they changed during their tenure, the cancellation of the OPVs. But the ones that stand out the most, the ones that stand out the—well, leaving the borders porous and open to the drug trade and the guns, if they think that is the best thing, then we really have to be concerned about them. But the ones that stand out, the one that stands out the most is the state of emergency that the UNC used as their crime-fighting initiative; arresting thousands of urban youths. And the only positive result that ever came from that are the cases

that came afterwards, against the State, for the kind of treatment that was meted out to the young people in this country by the UNC Government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are addressing some of the root causes of crime. We are targeting the youth of the nation, as I said earlier on, to steer them along a road of productivity and a road of progress, to give them the encouragement and the support that they need to become the best that they can be. And so, there is a lot available in this budget that I will demonstrate in a short while how we are going to implement some of these programmes.

The Government places youth at the centre of development, and the work across many Government Ministries is rooted in creating opportunities to contribute to the greater national and the broader national objective. It is an all of Government approach, Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the Ministry of Education, from the Ministry of National Security, from the Ministry of Public Administration, from the Ministry of Agriculture, from the Ministry of Trade and Industry; all working together as one to make sure that we have programmes available for the benefit of the young people. It is free education from nursery to tertiary, including the infrastructural development of schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago, youth facilities, community centres, homework centres in almost every community, investment in developing young entrepreneurship through small business grants, loans, and training, Mr. Deputy Speaker; investment in sports through funding and infrastructural development, a vast array of technical/vocational programmes.

We have spoken about the success of the MiLAT programme; the MYPART programme, which is the Military Led Youth Programme of Apprenticeship and Reorientation Training, both done in partnership with the Ministry of National Security.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the HYPE, the MUST, the NESC, the YTEPP, and many other programmes such as the CCC, the GAPP, NEDCO, youth in agriculture, youth in business, the roping of the youth camps and youth centres, heavy equipment operation, air-condition and refrigeration, YAHP, Shade House, Aquaculture. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is at work and at work for the development of the people.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** This is just a few, and I have so many more that I will come to later in my contribution. But as the country has come to the conclusion a long time ago, that when it comes to making good and decent policy for the development of Trinidad and Tobago, they can certainly count on a PNM Government so to do.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** You know sometimes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think even Members on the other side, in their quiet moments, would admit that this is in fact so.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a servant of the people of this country, I am duty-bound to account to the young people of this country. I am duty-bound to account to my constituents of La Horquetta/Talparo, and I must account overall to all of the citizens of this country, relative to the work at the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. I would say that my task in this contribution will focus on the Ministry's achievements and the current programmes and initiatives that we are currently embarked on.

I will also focus some attention on the plans, with our budgetary allocation of \$192 million for recurrent expenditure and \$200 million for

capital expenditure. That is certainly an investment, and an investment well worth it in the young people of this country. You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we on the side do not just talk the talk, we walk the walk. We put our money where our mouth is.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will focus on three main areas today: youth development, entrepreneurship, and national service. Youth development, because we must all pay attention to securing the future of our country and what we as a Government—I will focus on what we as a Government have put in place to address youth development. Entrepreneurship, because we must do all that we can as a facilitator for budding entrepreneurs as we seek to expand the cadre of business persons within the country who are participating in economic activity; and national service, we have prioritized, because we want to make sure that we have a group of civic-minded citizens who understand what our country is about and how they can contribute to its sustainable development.

I will take some time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to share some of the programmes with you, to put it on the record, but also to make sure that citizens, many of whom tune in to the discourse within this Parliament, are alert and aware to some of the activities and the programmes that we have embarked upon and that we have catered for in this budget as we move in the direction of development of our young people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I can share a few of these programmes: a youth production and life school programme called AMPLIFY. This programme has benefitted 97 young people. One hundred additional persons will be enrolled in 2023. We execute this programme in conjunction with the NES



Training Institute, and the programme is for young persons who wish to work in professional studios, start their professional studios to operate digital multitrack recorders. And the Ministry is committed to sparking entrepreneurship for the young people in the creative industry. We have so many talented young people in this country, and one of the associated programmes, the Youth on the Stage, as you move across the country and you pay attention to the talent from our young people, you just have to be impressed by the level of talent we have available in the creative sector in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

This programme offers formalized training from experienced instructors and allows the youth to network with other youths pursuing similar career paths. The successful participants will receive a certificate of participation from the NESC Technical Institute. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am pleased to indicate that this project will continue into fiscal 2024.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** The National Leadership Training Programme, because we must encourage and train and harness the leadership potential of our youth. So, while they spend all their time trying to scare the population—yes, we must pay attention to the crime situation, but when they open their mouths all they can do is try to whip up fear among the population in the hope that the population will take that on and return them to Government, so they can once again empty the Treasury, as they have done in the past.

Another programme, the National Leadership Training—

**Mr. Ratiram:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(6).

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** For what?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Thank you. Okay. Overruled, proceed. All right.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the Member continues to waste our time, I hope I will get injury time. This programme is a programme that maybe Members, a lot of young people from Couva North can come and attend programmes like this in leadership and training; how do you execute, how do you be responsible and how do you know when to call the right Standing Order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this programme is done in conjunction with the University of the West Indies, and it seeks to prepare youths with leadership skills to combat global challenges. It was developed to have young persons engaged in decision-making for the betterment of society. It also seeks to develop and strengthen the leadership capacity of our youth within the executive arm of youth-led organizations and youth-serving organizations. So we are also promoting training for those young persons who are involved in voluntary organizations, training them and equipping them about how to lead. I know a lot of Members on the other side did not have that opportunity, may not have served in groups in the past. But it is not too late. As long as you are 35 and under it is open to even Members of the Opposition to come and get some leadership training.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Participants in this programme will receive a certificate of participation. And I am pleased to announce, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we will continue during this fiscal. This programme will be continued in fiscal 2024.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Project Trending benefits 320 young business owners.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know that the UNC just does not have these ideas. It takes a PNM Government to come and put these ideas in place.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Because all you can hear them talk about is crime, crime, tax, tax, crime, tax, crime. They will not put forward to the country what will be—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Members, at the lower end of the Chamber, again. Proceed.

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Instead of coming up with plans and programmes, what they can do is mobilize their Members to come in from the Parliament, to disrupt the business of the Parliament and to interfere with Members as they come into the Parliament. That is what they are about.

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

**5.30 p.m.**

**Hon. F. Cummings:** I saw a large number of constituents from Caroni Central parked up outside the Parliament for the budget. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we have Project Trending. What does Project Trending afford to the young people of this country? All of the young people, including those from Moruga, Pointe-a-Pierre, Tabaquite, Chaguanas, Mayaro, Couva North. All of the young people who are involved in business and you want to use social media to expand your reach, you want to do some business online, this programme will certainly assist you, but legal businesses, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:**—legal businesses. We will not allow anything like human trafficking to get into this.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** We are assisting young people who are involved in business and want to promote themselves. And then, we have A.L.L S.E.T. You see, we are saying to the young people: do not be distracted by the noise coming from the Opposition, if you want to learn to operate a backhoe, a truck, a bulldozer, an excavator, come, and we have the programmes here for you. At the NESCC, we will train you to do that.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** And that is what we are saying. We are saying to you there is a programme called Bridging Success. What is that programme about? In the event you left secondary school without your full CSEC passes, you are probably unemployed or you are underemployed as a young person, this Government is saying to you, in conjunction with the UTT, we have developed a programme called Bridging Success. You can come into that programme, and after you successfully complete that programme, you are now able as an adult student to matriculate to university education and improve your circumstances in life. That is what we are doing. I am pleased to say that we have had an allocation from the Minister of Finance to reintroduce and to continue that programme to assist all those young people who wish to enter tertiary education and improve themselves.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** We know that we are importing a lot of hybrid vehicles, we are moving to electric vehicles and so forth. A lot of our mechanics are being trained to repair the traditional vehicles. And so, we have introduced a programme, an automotive servicing programme called Project Drive. So when you have your new hybrid vehicle or your electric vehicle and you need a mechanic in your community, this programme is for that. This is training designed to fulfil the needs of the society at this time in 2023. That is what your

Government is doing. We have an allocation to continue that programme in 2024, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

CRISP to train our young persons in air-condition and refrigeration. This programme is a very interesting programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We are doing it in collaboration with NESC. It will provide 100 young men and women who are interested in getting involved in domestic refrigeration, air-condition, automotive, electrical, HVAC maintenance. I am sure many persons were unaware, but we successfully graduated 100 persons from this programme and we will continue to expand that programme.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, we launched the 40 Under 40 Programme once again, and 26 schools participated in this programme. Does not matter where they are, Government-controlled constituencies, Opposition-controlled constituencies, we are about governing for all of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** We utilize entrepreneurs, established persons, movers and shakers in society, entertainers, sportsmen and fashion designers, many of them. You know, our young people need role models, so many of them who have succeeded, we have asked them to come on board and they go to the schools with us. We will soon come to Pointe-a-Pierre. And they go to the schools with us and they mentor these young children, and they give them hope and encouragement. I understand the Member for Tabaquite would like us to move the programme there; I give the commitment that we are coming to Tabaquite too. That is how the PNM operates. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the 40 Under 40 Programme will continue in this fiscal 2024.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am pleased to announce that what the Government has done, yes, we focus on taking the programmes— marketing these programmes that I have spent some time speaking about through traditional social media, through the electronic media, through the print media, radio, television, et cetera, on social media, so persons get on their phone. But you know, there are some communities where we need to get in the community and demonstrate to the young people the range of government programmes. So we have put together what is called a Youth Career and Education Caravan. Now, what does that caravan do? Where, if we roll into Claxton Bay or Marabella, that caravan will have with it all of the programmes of the Government, everything, all—

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:**—from the Ministry of Planning and Development; the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries; the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service; all of the programmes of the Government that touch on the development of young people. We come in, we set up shop and we invite the young people to come and apply on the same day at the same time. That is your PNM Government at work. Only PNM can do that. Only the PNM can do that.

Instead, if it were a UNC caravan they may stand out there telling you about property tax, and crime, and all those kinds of things. We are giving hope and progress to the young people of this country.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, the youth caravan, the youth Career and Education Caravan has been allocated the sum of \$5 million in this fiscal, and we will take it to every nook and cranny in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** You know, some of the rural areas, I think this area falls into the constituency of the Member for Tabaquite. You see, it is the only the PNM, when the PNM is in government, we do not make decisions based on whether it is a PNM or a UNC Member of Parliament. We are about governing for the whole country. So there is a project in a community called Mayo, which I think falls somewhere inside Tabaquite. And what has happened there is a public-private partnership between the private sector and the Government.

TCL, the Trinidad Cement Limited has donated 40 acres of land, fertile land so that that land is going into a community agricultural project, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The project was launched in March of 2023 and the persons participating would be trained in sustainable agricultural practices and would be developed into an agricultural cooperative. Additionally, this project will create 40 small-scale farming operators and it is for residents of Mayo and environs. They will be encouraged in cultivation of these lands and will be able to improve on the community's food security, provide employment, and promote healthy social interaction in a manner that is formalized and economically sustainable. Nobody from La Horquetta is coming in that programme. That is a programme designed for the community of Mayo and those persons in that environs. Governance PNM-style for all citizens of the country.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know the Member of Tabaquite is tempted to knock that desk about that programme, but of course, alas we will continue to govern for all the citizens of this country.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a programme called RAPP.

Hon. F. Cummings (cont'd)

You know, the Leader of the Opposition spoke about all—called out a history of programmes, and you know, admonished the Government, that we should put more money into this, we should put more money into that. If I calculate all of the funds that we have put into youth development across the range of Ministries, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the sum will exceed TT \$1 billion.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** That has never been done by any government other than a government of the PNM.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** RAPP utilizes a holistic approach to enhance the academic cultural life skills and sporting capacities of young persons nine to 21 years. That programme is a nurturing programme. So what happens is that persons who have retired, a lot of them teachers, they want to give back. They want to mentor other young persons and this programme seeks to encourage that. We currently have five centres: one at Couva; one at Belmont; one at Laventille; one at La Horquetta and one at Valencia. And we intend to look at this programme with a view to the expansion of this programme in this fiscal, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The GAPP Programme, which is a programme that is designed to build a bridge between the youth and the elderly thereby enhancing the human and skill development of young people. The goal of this programme is to provide elderly care and empower young persons to respond to the growing and complex needs of the ageing population, as well as providing the elderly with companionship and geriatric care. We intend to improve and increase the training component of this programme so that we have more young persons available and trained in geriatric care. This programme is tied to the SDG 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, increasing urbanization and industrialization. Via these two programmes, Mr.



Deputy Speaker, our youth will play their part in assisting our citizens who are now in their golden years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the programmes will also support our march to these targets by engaging the elderly in participation in the process of knowledge sharing and engagement with our youth. Under SDG 11.4, it will help to:

“Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage”

You know that that natural transfer of information based on the experience that you have, a lot of our older citizens will share that information and transfer that knowledge to our younger people while they are interacting with them. So you know, it is a sharing—care coming from the young people and a sharing of information coming from the more elderly persons.

And then we come to the question of national service. And may I just indicate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that this is not compulsory national service. This is a full voluntary programme. And very soon we will be coming to the Parliament with legislation to develop or to set up the youth development agency of Trinidad and Tobago, which will be charged with the youth development and national service arrangements of the Government.

We are working diligently to promote national service among our citizens, particularly among our young people. The concept of national service develops civic-minded citizens who would become fully productive members of society, and to make meaningful contributions to national development. In view of this, we have embarked on a number of programmes. I would have announced before publicly, that the Government has intended and has started work on the Mausica national service complex that is the former teacher’s college in Mausica. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, that campus will benefit over 300 cadets when the work is

completed.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** The Ministry initiated upgrade and construction works at that campus and the upgraded facility when completed will create an enabling environment, which promotes and encourages youth participation. It is a residential programme and it would allow for aspiring youth to benefit from a pool of programmes designed to inculcate important values, and aid in the acquisition of essential skills, and support and development to become successful individuals.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the second such complex is located in south Trinidad. I say this to debunk the normal rhetoric that comes from the Opposition, that we concentrate our efforts on the East-West Corridor. Last time I checked, Palo Seco is not on the East-West Corridor. That Beach Camp complex in south Trinidad will accommodate over 500 cadets in south Trinidad, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**5.45 p.m.**

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Programmes such as MiLAT, MYPART, CCC will be run at that campus in south Trinidad, so all of those constituencies from Chaguanas and Moruga, and so forth, will be able to send their young people down there and take part, and those from the east and the west will be able to take part in Mausica. We are determined to provide opportunities for young people. The work at that Beach Camp Facility has started. It is in progress. You know that facility is a former Petrotrin compound and we will be able to run a residential programme there for the benefit of our young people, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The MiLAT: I was so pleased to attend the graduation of MiLAT. When I went to that graduation, I encountered—I was joined by some of my colleagues, I think Minister Hinds was there, Minister Leonce was there, Minister Gonzalez was

there, and we felt so proud to see young men who entered this programme with zero CSEC passes, graduating out of this programme successfully with Is and IIs. One particular gentleman, who was the valedictorian, he is scored four Is and two IIs. He went in there with zero and therefore, this programme is one of the programmes that we will enhance and expand no matter what the UNC says.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** We have in this budget an allocation to expand that programme and therefore, the sister programme to MiLAT, which is MYPART, which is also a residential programme—and these two programmes are run in conjunction with the defence force. This MYPART programme is a programme of apprenticeship and restorative training, and it is a social intervention programme, a residential programme in technical-vocational learning. So the MiLAT deals with the academics and the MYPART deals with the technical-vocational. That is information I am sure all Members of Parliament will be interested in to make sure that you can get your young people into these programmes.

We know over time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that persons exiting the community residences, what you may call an “orphan home” in the past, many of them when they—well, not many of them. When they get to the age of 18, they have to exit from that arrangement and in the past, there was no real arrangement in place to accommodate them, so many of them ended up on the street, became street dwellers, fell victim to the criminal underworld. Many of them may have ended up on drugs and therefore, we have determined to put in place and to strengthen our transitional home arrangements.

You would know about Josephine Shaw, we have just completed the refurbishment of Josephine Shaw transition home at the cost of over \$20 million and we will be able to accommodate our female members of society in need of

transitional services at that location in Port of Spain. And to support the point I was making earlier about services to every part of this country, you would be pleased to know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we have as well and we are currently—whatever I am speaking about here is in action as we speak, is supported by funding from the budget. This is no pie in the sky, this is no promise, this is what is happening today, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** We have started work on the construction of another transition home in Sevilla, Couva and therefore that home will be able to cater for the young ladies in central Trinidad and south Trinidad. And I should have mentioned also at the Palo Seco location, we will be doing a transition home at that location as well. So all in—at the end of this exercise, we will have one in Port of Spain, one in Couva, one in Palo Seco. We will also in Ste. Madeleine—I wonder where that constituency falls? In Ste. Madeleine, we will also expand the transition home in Ste. Madeleine for boys. So we will have the one in Port of Spain, Josephine Shaw for women; the one in Sevilla for women; the one in Ste. Madeleine for young men; and the one in Santa Flora, also for young men; two for women and two for our young men in need of this service.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have completed the refurbishment of the St. Michael's School for Boys and that facility will be able to deliver residential, restorative development programmes for our children in need of supervision, all males, those young persons who are beyond the control of their parents and guardians, charged but not convicted for a criminal offence due to lack of evidence, inadequate home supervision, who have gang affiliations, the absence of secure accommodation as required by law and therefore, this upgraded facility will be staffed by trained teachers and vocational instructors. The programmes

delivered will be accredited and relevant to the child's state of development. We are making arrangements for our CHINS, Children in Need of Supervision. I must tell you as well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that in Arouca, at the old Five Rivers Secondary School, we have put in place a committee to report to the Government on how we can implement a programme for our female CHINS and that is going to be coming on stream during this fiscal year, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I must also inform the Parliament and the national community that we are well advanced with work at the El Dorado former youth camp for girls. It is, at this time, 49 per cent completed and works are being done on the south-east block, the northern block dorms; refurbishment of the buildings and mechanical, electrical and plumbing infrastructure. And we have as well put in place a committee that will, as soon as this complex has been completed, be able to reopen the El Dorado Apprenticeship Centre, formerly the El Dorado Youth Camp, for our young women for residential training.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** In Persto Praesto—I think that is in Freeport, that might be in the constituency of Caroni Central—we are refurbishing the Persto Praesto former youth camp. It is currently 68 per cent completed and the refurbishment and upgrading of the facilities, the dorms, the dining hall are ongoing, in addition to the construction of new dormitory, music room and main stores. This project is scheduled to be completed in 2024 and will accommodate 250 of our young men in a residential training programme.

In Chatham, that is in south Trinidad, we are currently refurbishing that facility. It is 75 per cent completed and the refurbishment works continue, and we will also have that facility available for south Trinidad, Point Fortin, Moruga,

Oropouche, Naparima, Siparia, and all those constituencies and support—and members, young persons, who will require that kind of support, young men, 250—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, your initial speaking time, you just have about a minute, you have an additional 10 minutes, you care to avail yourself?

**Hon. F. Cummings:** Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Proceed.

**Hon. F. Cummings:** I really would need an hour—

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:**—but I will accept the 10 minutes. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will also construct—we are at an advanced stage of procurement for the construction of the Chaguaramas and the Wallerfield youth facilities to allow our young people to access this type of training.

I was pleased to attend the National Youth Awards this year. And coming into this Ministry, it is a programme that I have insisted we must continue each year because it does—and this year our theme was “Celebrating Youth Excellence”. We honoured young men and women from across Trinidad and Tobago in 28:

“...categories...”—including—“...Youthful Resilience, Agriculture, Entrepreneurship, Science, Technology, Engineering... Mathematics”—sport—“and Technical Vocational skills to name a few.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I see these awards as a tool in celebrating and validating and motivating the over 500,000-plus young men and women that we have in this country, as they look on and they see their peers being recognized for excellence. That is what we have to do as leaders in this country. We have to encourage and motivate them and drive them and provide for them the best opportunities that we can. At some point in time, the petty and cheap politics must

be put aside. Imagine you have, for instance, the Leader of the Opposition very, very casually and very happily going around the country laughing and boasting and saying to young people, “Load up de matic and shoot”, and all this kind of vigilantism that has been encouraged out of the house of the Opposition. We are saying to the young people, put down the guns, denounce violence in all its forms.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** And as Dr. Eric Williams said, pick up your book. The future of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, cannot be taken lightly, and it is time that the Opposition exercises more responsible action, and instead of telling people take the law into your own hands, we want “stand the ground legislation”. I mean, look across the world, look to North America, where there has been “stand the ground legislation”. What have we seen as the result of that? You want that in Trinidad and Tobago? We in the PNM say, no way.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** We are encouraging young people in entrepreneurship to open businesses. In this year, we will introduce a grant programme because we are training a lot of people, you know. So as we train them, it is not only for employment, we want to encourage them to get into business. So we are on the cusp of looking at a grant programme that will be administered through NEDCO so that those young persons who are trained can now apply and get support of start-up funds, so that they can go into business. All of the young people who have that mission and that vision at a later stage, as they develop, they will take advantage of the loan opportunities, the business incubator, the Business Accelerator Programme.

The Business Incubator Programme will take them—we have allocated in this fiscal \$3.5 million for a Business Incubator Programme. That programme is a

one-stop shop, it will hold your hand, assist you in how do you register your business, how do you keep your statutory records, how do you make sure and pay your taxes and your NIS, and all of these things, and how do you access new markets and expand your business. That is what the Government is all about and focusing on for our young people, not “load up de matic” and shoot this one and shoot that one. We are not about that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** And then in the time I have left, I will devote to the youth in agriculture programmes because a lot of noise comes from the Opposition when you talk about agriculture. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a government, we have put policies in place to make sure that we increase our farming stock, our farmers, by 1,500 by 2025.

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:** How will we do so? We have put in place a youth in agriculture programme in conjunction with the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries because as you produce more farmers and put them on the field, both in traditional farming and in the new and improved methods of farming, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are going to improve on our food security. We are going to put idle state land to use. In Chatham, in south Trinidad, the first estate is being developed. It will accommodate 182 acres, parcels, homesteads. You are getting the land, the starter home and a start-up grant of \$20,000, Mr. Deputy Speaker, after you complete a two-year training programme at UTT ECIAF and that is what the Government is at work doing. We have already graduated 180 persons from the first cohort, we have taken on another 200 in a part-time programme, we will take on another 200 in a



full-time programme in September of next year, and altogether we will have 1,000 homestead farmers by 2025.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have also launched a Shade House programme, a protective agriculture programme, in conjunction with the University of the West Indies. So the first programme is with UTT, this programme is with the University West Indies, so you are getting training but you are getting certification so that you can expand and move on and matriculate to other programmes but you are also getting involved in food production. The Shade House programme is training 100 persons annually, and we will train over 300 by 2025.

We launched as well the aquaculture programme and the aquaculture programme will train 100 persons per year—100 between 2023 and 2024, another 100 by 2025, a total of 1,500 new farmers in Trinidad and Tobago.

**6.00 p.m.**

Mr. Deputy Speaker, NEDCO: We continue to support NEDCO to improve what is available because the entrepreneurship development is another platform on which we intend to promote youth development. Presently, as I indicated earlier, we are in the progress of looking at a grant to support these small business owners, start-up grant of \$20,000, and in addition, we also have the NEDCO Business Accelerator Programme. And I am pleased to indicate that we did get funding for that programme in this budget and we will continue the NEDCO Business Accelerator Programme which supports loan funding, training, advisory, mentorship, networking, and other support businesses—because that is what our young business people need.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are very serious on this side about making sure that there are opportunities available for our young people. We will as well launch, in addition to the youth business incubator, a youth business park, one in

the north and one in the central, or south/central. And what that park will do is that it is going to encourage light manufacturing and other trade-related activities. We have, in this fiscal, an amount of \$3 million allocated to start the planning of that programme. In addition, we will introduce the youth entrepreneurship hubs. And what do the hubs do? What we do is we identify—business is all about location sometimes—we identify different locations where the Government would refurbish and outfit these facilities and therefore create affordable retail and office spaces for young persons involved in business so that they can ply their trade.

So, to the dynamic youth population of Trinidad and Tobago, I extend an invitation to you because many of you are doing very well. I have not today, because the Minister of Education, I am sure, when she speaks will indicate the amount of graduates coming out of the St. Augustine Campus, and indicate the amount coming out of UTT, indicate the amount coming out of YTEPP, of NESC, of MIC—

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

**Hon. F. Cummings:**—and all of these agencies. Many of the programmes that are being implemented—because it is an all-of-government approach. We will also continue to support junior cooperatives and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we intent to reintroduce the Junior Achievement programme in this fiscal to be managed in conjunction with the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service and the Ministry of Education. We are catering for all our young people, even those who are at primary and secondary school.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is a PNM productive, proactive government at work for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to say to our young people, as I was saying earlier, we ask you to come on board and to work with a progressive government.

Do not be distracted by empty noises that only focus on the negative in this country. There are so many productive and brilliant minds in this country and we ask you come and work with a government that is concerned about your development and keep the UNC in the Opposition Benches in Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the Member for Caroni Central.

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

**Mr. Arnold Ram** (*Caroni Central*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the recognition and the opportunity to contribute this afternoon on this finance Bill for the financial year 2024. Let me at the onset, Mr. Deputy Speaker, recognize the sterling contribution of the Member for Siparia—

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

**Mr. A. Ram:**—and I want to endorse the manner in which the Member dismantled the Minister of Finance’s budget presentation.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** Just a couple of rebuttal points, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in respect of the previous speaker, the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo. It shows that the propaganda and the misinformation continues by this Government. This Government has dismantled every sector of our society, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

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

**Mr. A. Ram:**—and there is a saying in Latin, “res ipsa loquitur”, the facts speak for themselves.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** When you look, Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the decline in the energy sector, the 63 per cent decline in drilling activity; the 32 per cent in the national gas

production; the 37 per cent decline in LNG production and others, which was highlighted by the hon. Member of Parliament for Siparia, those speak for themselves, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

When you look at the uncontrolled murder rate in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that also speak for themselves. When you look at our porous border, we have a nation in crisis, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** So I want to reiterate the point made by the Opposition Leader that there can be no prosperity without safety and security.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** And the previous speaker, the hon. Member spoke about things happening in different parts of the country, I ask the hon. Member, what is happening with respect to Tobago? Has the PNM abandoned Tobago because of the “cut tail”? What is happening in Tobago? I have heard nothing about—

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

**Mr. A. Ram:**—what your Ministries are doing in Tobago. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the MiLAT and MYPART programmes—

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Silence!

**Mr. A. Ram:**—they have been around for a very long time. This Minister of Youth Development and National Service wants us to believe that is something that was introduced by the PNM. This is something that has been around, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for umpteen years.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** And when you talk about un-patriotism, Mr. Deputy Speaker—when you talk about un-patriotism, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you are speaking about

the PNM.

There were two coaches that were being used between 2010 and 2015 as caravans, as job fair caravans. I ask the hon. Minister of Youth Development and National Service, why are they rotting at the Woodford Lodge tech/voc facility?

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** That is how wicked the PNM is, Deputy Speaker. The Member would not speak about that. He spoke about every other thing under the sun, but would not speak about the coaches that are rotting at the Woodford Lodge tech/voc facility, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, as I start my contribution in respect of that which was presented by the hon. Minister of Finance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have a poisoned chalice, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is what the hon. Minister of Finance delivered to the good people of Trinidad and Tobago on Monday.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** While the hon. Minister glowingly spoke of filling the goblet with a measly \$3 increase in minimum wage, promises of Christmas back pay and book grants, what the population has to look forward to and has endured over the last eight years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are increased food prices, soaring inflation, increased youth unemployment, planned increases in utility rates, increase in pension age, and gunmen breaking down your doors via home invasions. That is what the population had to endure over the last eight years, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And on that note, I just want to remind the hon. Minister of Finance that back pay is not a gift.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** Back pay is what you have earned. It is your hard-earned dollars, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is what the Government had owed tens of thousands of workers for years.

Giving someone what they are owed or due to them is not a gift. Whether you give it on Christmas day, whether you give it on their birthday, whether you give it on Valentine's Day, it is not a gift.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** That is owed to the people and the workers, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, what this Government has done is they have tried to kick off their 2025 general election campaign in this honourable House by trying to fool the population. How the saying goes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, "Who have more corn does feed more fowl".

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** Well, for eight years the PNM has suffered the people, and now they come with this seemingly people-friendly budget to fool the population, but the population, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is much smarter that they would like to think.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** But as I said at the start, the hon. Minister's budget is nothing more than a poisoned chalice. The Minister boasted about no new taxes but yet he spoke about the introduction of property tax. I want to know whether the hon. Minister had a senior moment there because he spoke—the hon. Minister spoke about no new taxes but yet spoke glowingly about the introduction of property tax.

During Monday's presentation, the Minister of Finance said his theme for this year's budget is "Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth", but I want to remind the hon. Minister that vision without execution is hallucination.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** Vision without execution is hallucination, and we have grown, on this side, accustomed to the PNM hallucinating about positive growth in the society.

So when you look at the theme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it speaks about diversification. It is his Prime Minister, the hon. Member of Diego Martin West, who indicated that diversification is just a big word that nobody really understands. We remember that clearly. And if the head of the Cabinet, the head of PNM, is saying that diversification is just a big word, that nobody really understands, it shows where their head spaces are, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

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

**Mr. A. Ram:**—that they are not serious about diversifying this economy, about growing this economy, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Minister spoke about modernizing our sporting infrastructure, and his Cabinet colleague, the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development has in the past repeatedly spoken about plans to make Trinidad and Tobago the sporting capital of the world. It sounds nice, when you look at the facts, it is something else.

We all know that according to the law of propaganda, often attributed to Nazi Joseph Goebbels, “Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth”. It is what psychologists referred to as the illusion of truth. So here in fiscal 2024, we are hearing the same propaganda and misinformation from the hon. Minister that we were hearing for years under the PNM administration. Mr. Deputy Speaker, permit me to point to the following projects which the hon. Minister spoke with so much pride: upgrade of community swimming pools in Diego Martin, La Horquetta and Couva. These projects were repeated in PSIP 2021; the PSIP, 2022; PSIP, 2023 budgets, and we are still hearing of them today as if they are some kind of new projects, some type of great initiative achieved in this financial year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or will be achieved in this financial year. These things have been spoken about repeatedly. Remember, PNM, “promises never materialize”, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** Madam Speaker, in advertising there is a term called “fillers”. You know what a filler is? A filler is basically content that exists to prevent an ad from having nothing on it. This is what all that singling out of these projects which have been in existence for so many years, is. They are fillers, as it is clear that this PNM Government has nothing new to offer the citizen and the population, except their poisoned chalice, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** And the list goes on” Upgrade and rehabilitation of the Sevilla Club, repeated in '21, '22 and '23, and we heard the hon. Member before me spoke about it again. Upgrading of corporation recreation grounds, Todd’s Road recreation, Park Street recreation, Morvant and Grand Riviere recreation, Marac, and so forth, repeated in '21, '22 and '23. Upgrade of Mahaica Oval, repeated in '21, '22 and '23. It is like tedious repetition, Mr. Deputy Speaker; it is like that.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** I hope they do not come next year to repeat these same projects after we identified it this year, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That will be something that I would not expect but something that I am sure they may be minded to do.

Upgrade of the Dwight Yorke Stadium, repeated in '21, repeated in '22 and '23, and this year. Look at their PSIP funding, it is repeated there as well, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Upgrade to multipurpose stadium, such as the Hasely Crawford, Mannie Ramjohn, Larry Gomes and Ato Boldon, repeated again, '21, '22 and '23. Refurbishment to Skinner Park, again repeated in all those same years, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just a reference, let us compared these fillers, these repeats, this inability of the PNM to complete simple and beneficial projects



Mr. Ram (cont'd)

on time to the achievement of the People's Partnership government, under the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, between 2010 and 2015. Let us just compare them, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We had over 100 local community recreational grounds across Trinidad and Tobago—

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

**Mr. A. Ram:**—which were rehabilitated and upgraded. Works included relaying of grass outfields, constructions of pavilion and hard courts, installation of permanent lighting courtesy the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, drainage, fencing and other minor improvements. Four major national facilities commissioned. These included the national tennis centre in Tacarigua, the National Cycling Velodrome, in National Aquatic Centre in Balmain, as well as the state-of-the-art multipurpose facility in Sangre Grande.

**6.15 p.m.**

In addition to these mega projects, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the community of Siparia was earmarked to have a modern multipurpose facility at Irwin Park, which would include a cycling track, international standard football pitch, the national standard cricket pitch, 400-metre grass running track, pavilion and bleachers, amongst other things. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the list goes on, with over 1000 community sporting groups benefitting on funding during five years, 2010—2015. But I understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the job of this PNM is to tell untruths to the people about their achievements and to make themselves look good. As Nazi Joseph Goebbels wrote in 1941, the principle that when one lies, one should lie big and stick to it.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member.

**Mr. A. Ram:** It is a quote, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Again you used one word twice there, retract it and—

**Mr. A. Ram:** Okay.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** What you said it was?

**Mr. A. Ram:** A quote.

**Ms. Ameen:** It is a quote.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Well, quote your source. Once you can quote your source—

**Mr. A. Ram:** Goebbels.

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Listen, Members. Once you can quote your source, fine with me.

**Mr. Young:** And pronounce the source properly.

**Mr. A. Ram:** And to keep up with the untruths—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** No, Members—

**Mr. A. Ram:** Even—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hold on. Hold on. I have ruled and I have ruled. Okay? Member, are you quoting your source? Could you quote the source you got it from?

**Mr. A. Ram:** Yes, please. I did.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Alright. Nice.

**Mr. A. Ram:**—and to keep up with the untruths even with the risk of looking ridiculous.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us look at anti-doping. When you compare what was done in 2010—2015 in respect of the anti-doping legislation, which was unanimously passed in both Houses of Parliament, it was intended to add structure and parameters to the anti-doping regime in Trinidad and Tobago as well as to align local regulations to the international movement against doping in sports.

Let us look at what the PNM did this year when they rushed through amendments to the Anti-Doping in Sport Act to facilitate the hosting of the Commonwealth Youth Games. They introduced amendments to The Anti-Doping (Amdt.) Bill, 2023 with enthusiasm to adopt the entire 2021 international anti-doping and WADA guidelines. Now that the games are over with and the enthusiasm has gone the PNM has allocated a measly \$300,000 to implement the amendments, \$300,000, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to implement the code. A code that requires facilities, infrastructure, and personnel to implement and execute.

The allocation for anti-doping is indicative that this Government is not serious about the sporting community of Trinidad and Tobago. And I made the point during that debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Trinidad and Tobago had to depend on other agencies outside of Trinidad and Tobago to provide the testing that is required for athletes and the anti-doping organization which is meant to have our own facilities in Trinidad and Tobago that was to cure this and to ensure that we do not have to wait for handouts from persons outside of Trinidad and Tobago to test our athletes. But yet, a measly \$300,000 has been allocated, which is grossly insufficient to meet the demands of the anti-doping organization that is required in this country.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, the success of the entire regime of anti-doping depends on the establishment of a properly functioning anti-doping organization, at least, this is what that original legislation contemplated. \$300,000 to do that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but millions to fix golf courses for the PNM and friends to tee off while Trinidad and Tobago burns.

One only has to go back to the contribution of then Member, the hon. Donna Cox during the debate in the Act in 2013 to understand that this PNM Government

is hoodwinking the nation. The hon. Member said:

“...perusal of the Bill reveals that the implementation of this process will be costly and must involve proper planning. Might I add, it also reaffirms the importance of the national sports policy, including the establishment of the sports commission, as there must be a holistic, integrated and systematic framework in the development of sport rather than a piecemeal approach.”

In the National Sports Policy, one of the objectives is that Trinidad and Tobago should become the preferred destination for international events and a hub for sports in the Caribbean.”

—the Hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services then said.

**6.20 p.m.**

But no, this is what the PNM does. They allocate \$300,000 to this organization. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the PNM’s disregard for sporting development does not end there.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the point of the Commonwealth Youth Games, I would like the hon. Minister to explain, why under Head 79 of the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* for fiscal 2024, there is an allocation of approximately \$15,332,000 for the hosting of these games. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are allocating \$15 million to host games that have already come and gone. That is unheard of. The games were held, Mr. Deputy Speaker, during the month of August this year. I believe, it was the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup>, I stand to be corrected, but those are the dates that I remember, and we are now allocating an additional \$15 million for the hosting of these Commonwealth games.

**Mr. de Nobriga:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have sat through this. Surely 48(1). Surely the Member at this point remembers that we have a Standing Finance where these questions can be asked.

**Ms. Ameen:** What is your problem?

**Mr. de Nobriga:** I said 48(1).

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Okay, Members.

**Mr. de Nobriga:** I said 48(1) where we refer to the—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Proceed.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will invite—

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

**Mr. A. Ram:**—the Member for Diego Martin Central to join the programme that the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member. Member, I have ruled. Move on accordingly.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Yes. You can join the class too, Diego Martin Central. Your colleague invited you to do so. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker—Mr. Deputy Speaker—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** One second. One second. Chief Whip, I need no assistance. Right? Hold on. You are sitting in a seat there, I need no assistance unless I call upon you. Proceed.

**Mr. A. Ram:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your protection against an irrelevant Standing Order. As I continue, in May 2022—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, there is no need to comment on my ruling. Proceed. Proceed.

**Mr. A. Ram:** In May, 2022, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Chairman of the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago, Douglas Camacho, as quoted in a *Newsday* article stated that:

“...more funding”—was required—“to keep stadiums open.”

Two stadiums specifically mentioned in that article were the Mannie Ramjohn Stadium and the Larry Gomes Stadium, both of which were earmarked for upgrades in 2021 and in 2022 budgets and are yet again repeated in the 2023

budget, and again in this budget of 2024. This shows the blatant disregard for sports by the current administration where even the chairman of the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago is speaking about the lack of investment in our national facilities. Imagine, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that after spending close \$70 million to upgrade the North Eastern Regional Multipurpose complex in Sangre Grande, that it has remained closed after being deemed a safety hazard. And this Government wants to boast about its achievement, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And talking about expenditure, a stadium originally estimated to cost taxpayers \$200 million or thereabout, ended up costing us over \$1 billion. And I am talking about the Brian Lara Cricket Academy. We have spent over \$1 billion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on this relatively brand-new facility but in the Draft Estimates for this year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I see an amount of \$21,832,000 is allocated for upgrade works. Probably this \$21 million is to upgrade the sound system because apart from a few cricket games here and there, the Brian Lara stadium is now largely a party venue and interestingly we have no clue today as to the revenue generated from hosting these parties and where the money goes.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in respect of this \$21 million I ask whether, what is the purpose of this \$21 million? I remember sometime in about 2017/2018 or thereabout, an evening talk-show host was removed from a certain programme, the evening between 6.00 and 7.00 p.m. for asking whether those who were cleaning the seats was Andrew's wife? I do not know who is Andrew but I am asking, what is the purpose of this \$21 million? We have a relatively new stadia in use, what is the purpose of this \$21,832,000? And I hope that I can get an answer from the Member for Tobago West, our colleague could indicate. That is something that we would be interested in, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, since 2016 the Ministry of Sport and Community Development has failed to utilize budgetary

allocations while citizens continue to suffer for proper facilities and programmes.

In 2017, '18, and '21, the Government utilized 45 per cent, 23 per cent and 9.5 per cent of the allocated budget. As a result of this, projects are being regurgitated annually and that can be an explanation. They have underutilized their budgetary allocation. During this period performances at international events in the sporting sector have continued to decrease and I am not surprised by that because we are not investing in sports and community development as we should.

During the 2020 budget debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in her contribution the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development said that her Ministry had commenced the development of a master plan for sport and youth facility projects which would provide the basic framework for the development of facilities through a systematic process based on evaluation and study. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I looked at these Draft Estimates, you know, I am seeing this today again? We are 2023, three years later. In the budget debate of 2020, the hon. Member indicated that we were going to have a master plan for sport and youth facilities. I believe it is \$1 million which is now being allocated for this master plan. Where is the plan today, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government's failure, the PNM's failure to develop sports in tandem with their dereliction of duty in the area of youth development is in tandem with that. In last year's budget contribution the hon. Minister of Youth Development and National Service boasted that his Government is ensuring that our youth population particularly in the age group of 15 to 34 years which accounts for 25 per cent of our population, achieve their full potential and become productive members of society. Well, let us look what the goodly Minister and his PNM Government has achieved.

During his presentation on Monday the hon. Minister of Finance gloated

about unemployment rates. Mr. Deputy Speaker, with year, after year, after year, the PNM Government rehashing programmes and plans for youth development and boasting about a national youth policy and so on, youth unemployment, and this is very important, Mr. Deputy Speaker, youth unemployment rose from 8.4 per cent in 2015 to 12.1 per cent in 2022. And I have gotten that data, if anybody is interested, on the CSO website, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is my source, not in Curepe.

And in 2023 while the national unemployment figure was reported to be at 3.7 per cent in the second quarter of 2023, it is worth noting that the youth unemployment rate is 6.2 per cent in the same second quarter of 2023, higher than the national average. And the youth unemployment for males, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is even higher, standing at a whopping 7.5 per cent. And even this figure is somewhat misleading, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because—and it can be, in fact, much higher because the figures consider age groups of 18 to 24 years group, when the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service classifies youths as 18 to 35. So there is a 10-year period there or a 10-year age group that is not classified, so this figure could actually be higher, Mr. Deputy Speaker, than the quoted figure of 7.5 per cent. And idle hands, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are the devil's workshop. So where are all these unemployed youths going to get gainful employment?

Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, pick up any newspaper, check out any social media news sites and you will see a bulk of crime in Trinidad and Tobago being committed by persons within that age group, gang violence, drug violence, home invasion, robberies, all being committed by persons within that age group and others. And you know why, Mr. Deputy Speaker? It is because this PNM Government in the last eight years has effectively dismantled the youth development sector. They have abandoned the youths of this nation, Mr. Deputy



Speaker—

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

**Mr. A. Ram:**—and that is why we are in this troubled situation. It can hardly be argued that when it comes to integrating the youth population in the work force investment is needed in education in order to train and properly equip young persons. However, during the same period the Government has cut its investment into programmes such as the GATE which had previously enabled our youth population to gain access to tertiary education programmes which would have led to gainful employment.

During 2015 to 2021, Government's actual education expenditure when it came to GATE or post-secondary/tertiary education fell by a whopping \$937,299,772 annually. To put it simply, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are now in this country investing 40 per cent less annually to train and equip our young people to become productive members of this society and to gain employment after reaching maturity, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In the last budget, outside of the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme which only offers 200 spots annually, the Government has yet again failed to present the country with any solutions to problems faced in this sector. While the Government states that its aim is to see the youth population achieve its full potential and become productive members of society, that is not the reality on the ground, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Government is talking about a modern education system but the reality is that many schools across the country are in dire need of repairs. In fact, the Minister of Education not too long in this House recently stated that the repairs to the Gasparillo Secondary School were completed. Only for one week later for the said block to reclose and 18 classes out of use.

And while just like sports and community development, like every other

Mr. Ram (cont'd)

sector, the hon. Minister glowingly spoke about the so-called numerous projects and programmes in the area of youth development, nearly every single programme enumerated by the Minister is a repeat. And the so-called new projects are just repeats of old projects with different names and no innovation, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the following projects are just copies from the previous budgets and I am talking—looking at the area of Ministry of Youth Development and National Service:

- The refurbishment of youth facilities: Los Bajos, California and St. James; again, just like in sport, repeated in PSIP '21, '22, and '23.
- Refurbishment of youth facilities Laventille and Malick, repeated in '22 and '23, and again, repeated in this financial year, Mr. Deputy Speaker.
- Implementation of a National Youth Policy, repeated in PSIP '21, '22, '23, and now in '24.
- Youth Development and Apprenticeship Centres in La Horquetta, Talparo and Chaguaramas, again, '21, '22, '23 PSIP.

PNM, promises never materialize, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** Construction of the Salvation Army Josephine Shaw House repeated PSIP '22 and '23 and in '24. And the Member who spoke before me said that this project was completed. But in this year there is a PSIP allocation for the Josephine Shaw House, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is really, I mean, I am concerned that whether this Government really is practising accounting 101 or mismanagement, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When you look at the refurbishment building for the CHINS project at the St. Michael's School for Boys repeated in

2022, 2023, and again in 2024.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government has been boasting about works which are ongoing or have been completed at training facilities and refurbishment of Youth Development and Apprenticeship Centres. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can tell you, one of those such centres is located in the constituency of Caroni Central and it was highlighted by the previous Member, and it is the Presto Praesto Youth Camp. And I will fill the gap for this Government in respect of the real issues on the ground with respect to the Presto Praesto Youth Camp. It is listed for refurbishment in the sum of approximately \$20 million and which the Finance Minister mentioned in his presentation. Hear the real facts as it relates to the Presto Praesto Youth Camp.

In the period leading up to the demolition works on the compound, this is before the refurbishment work started, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service decommissioned all the cameras on the compound, after which all night watchmen were sent on a period of leave for two weeks. You could imagine what happened there, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Removed all of the cameras, sent home all the night watchmen for two weeks, you have equipment sitting there. What do you think happened, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Equipment costing close \$5 million was stolen from the compound and not a word from the Minister on the state of the investigation or whether there is any investigation into the theft at the Presto Praesto Youth Camp.

The equipment includes tractors, ploughs, rotovators and other machinery using agriculture.

**6.35 p.m.**

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Minister, Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, spoke glowingly about projects and what they were doing, but they did not tell you

Mr. Ram (cont'd)

what they did with the animal husbandry programme at Presto Praesto and Balmain. They removed all the animals which were located at Balmain and Presto Praesto and they sent them to ECIAF. That is what they did. So whilst they talk glowingly and boastingly about programmes that they are implementing, they did not tell you about the ones that they are dismantling, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. A. Ram:** So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is the PNM for you.

Let us look at some of the things which are happening in the constituency of Caroni Central outside of crime which I have spoken about and which the hon. Member for Siparia spoke about. Outside of crime, water is a serious issue. We were promised early in 2020 by the Minister of Public Utilities that he needed three months to increase the supply from one in nine to sometimes one in 15 days. He needed three months. Three months have elapsed, and we are almost three years there.

I live in the constituency of Caroni Central. I used to get water three times a week. Now our supply, one in nine; others, one in 15, and there is no end to the nightmare of the water woes that is happening in the constituency of Caroni Central, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is either the Minister does not want to do anything or is incapable and incompetent as the Minister of Public Utilities. It is either or. It cannot be that three years have elapsed—he has promised that things will be fixed in three months and we are yet to see any significant improvement in our water supply in areas such as Preysal, Siewdass Road, Arena Road, Mission Road, Carlsen Field, and so forth.

Another issue outside of that, and I know I spoke about crime, but this is a serious issue. The hon. Member of Parliament for Siparia indicated in her contribution that citizens had to—there was a shortage of persons at the call centre

in respect of the E99 service. Where there were supposed to be approximately 15, there were approximately three persons on duty. To add salt to the wounds of the people of Caroni Central, the Freeport Police Station number has been down for approximately two months. When you call the number 673-0026, you get a busy tone. It was brought to my attention because somebody told me—a constituent called and said, “Do you know anyone in the Freeport Police Station? Can you tell them to put down their phone? It is not hanged up properly”. So when I called, they said, “No, the number is not working. It has not been working for approximately two months”. Two months and it is still not working, and they are now directing you to call E99. But the hon. Member for Siparia told you what is happening at E99. Instead of 15 operators, there are three operators. So that is some of the things that we clamour for in the rural communities and in the constituency, such as Caroni Central.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is one other pressing issue which I would have liked to address to the hon. Member for St. Ann’s East but apparently she is not in the House, but that has to do with the Preysal Government Primary School. Something I have mentioned before, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a school which housed approximately 400 students, the school is now housed in a community centre, the Preysal Community Centre. We have had quite a number of prominent politicians. We had two former MPs that sat in this House on this side who would have attended the Preysal Government Primary School. A number of national cricketers and athletes over the years attended this very prestigious institution.

The People’s Partnership Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker, commissioned a new school. It is, in my view, approximately 70 per cent completed, could be less. But in my view, let us say, 50 to 70 per cent completed, and it has been left to rot by this Government, abandoned for eight years. It is now a mosquito-infested

location. Residents are complaining that bandits sometimes hide in that facility. They are complaining that it is an eyesore to their neighbourhood and most importantly, the students of the Preysal Government Primary School are left to attend a school at the community centre not fit for purpose, not fit for their accommodation in this community centre.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, those are some of the constituency issues in respect of Caroni Central. And as I repeat and I tell this Government, vision without execution is hallucination. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. Roger Monroe:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to join this debate on the fiscal package for the year 2024, a budget entitled: Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, please allow me to congratulate the hon. Prime Minister Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley for his eight years of sturdy and sober leadership that once again offers Trinidad and Tobago a budget that will positively impact the lives of all our citizens and draw our country closer to international accepted standards. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I must acknowledge my constituents of Toco/Sangre Grande and say thank you for their support and confidence that they have reposed in the People's National Movement Government and myself as their Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande. Mr. Deputy Speaker, my contribution will be incomplete if I do not acknowledge and congratulate our Minister of Finance, the hon. Colm Imbert, for a well put together budget in the best interest of all our citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, once again, the PNM Government of Trinidad and Tobago, in which I am proud of—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, this PNM Government, which I am proud to be a part of has, put before this House and our nation a national budget, taking into consideration all walks of life and ensuring that we offer the best to our people in our present circumstances.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this budget offers so much but I will touch on specific Ministries, such as the Ministries of Works and Transport; Public Utilities; Education; Health; Agriculture, Land and Fisheries; Ministry of Housing and Urban Development; Rural Development and Local Government; Sport and Community Development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me to make a few rebuttals by the last Member who spoke just before me. The Member for Caroni Central would have made mention of a lot of things outside of his constituency. He spoke of the Sangre Grande indoor facility which was constructed, or the start of construction was under the United National Congress. It was incomplete at that point in time and it was unable to be handed over to the people of Sangre Grande and environs due to a faulty floor, improper subsurfaces and other defects that were made known to us in this Government and to the people of Sangre Grande. I want to assure the people of Toco/Sangre Grande and environs that at present this PNM Government has embarked on ongoing repair works to the subsurfaces and the indoor facility of Upper Ojoe Road, Sangre Grande, would be available to you early in this 2024 financial year.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** The Member also touched on the Grande Riviere recreational ground, another topic. He touched on Grande Riviere recreational ground. I want to tell the Member for Caroni Central that on Sunday, October 01, 2023, I, as the

Mr. Monroe (cont'd)

Member of Parliament, attended a village olympics which entailed villages from Matura to Matelot at the Grande Riviere recreational ground where we had a fun-filled day with all our families and friends, and that ground is handed over and in good working condition for the people of Grande Riviere and environs. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remember a video was circulating on social media and I understand clearly now as to why the Member for Caroni Central was chased by a former UNC alderman out of his constituency, because that gentleman does not stay in his business and in his constituency. He is all over the place.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** I would advise the Member to spend some time in his constituency, amongst his people, so that that unfortunate situation will not reoccur.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would start with agriculture. In fiscal 2024, we would see the strengthening of infrastructure, 240 kilometres of agricultural access road. You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I represent a rural constituency who heavily depends on agriculture and fishing as well. This will result in farmers having easier access to their lands, efficient and effective removal of produce from land to market, re-establishment of abandoned estates.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fishing industry is vital in relation to the constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande and upgrades to the fishing industry will lead to higher possibilities for fisherfolk to provide for their families, safer and better working environment, safety and security for fisherfolk and their equipment and vessels at the various fishing facilities. Establishment of a processing facility would create a sure market for farmers and fisherfolk, guaranteed sales of products produced at the best price, employment for locals, easier access for local produced



to reach international markets.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance also mentioned the tax break in the agri-industry. This would lead to cheaper local produce and ensure farmers make a profit from their hard work and investment. The result of this move would be reduction in cost to provide meals for families, more goods and produce at a reduced price, and so much more, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me to congratulate and thank the Minister of Public Utilities, Member of Parliament for Lopinot/Bon Air West, the hon. Marvin Gonzales, for his hard work and contribution to Trinidad and Tobago that he would have—for his hard work to Trinidad and Tobago through the Ministry of Public Utilities. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can boast of the major turnaround that the hon. Minister managed to make in the Ministry of Public Utilities since he became Minister.

Let me share with Trinidad and Tobago some of the major projects that are either completed or ongoing by WASA within the constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande: Under the Community Water Improvement Programme, Church Street, Matura, saw water for the first time; project completed.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Sugars Lane, Baker Trace, saw water for the first time, project completed. St. Albans pipe-laying project to benefit over 300 households or 900-plus residents, ongoing at the moment. Pine Avenue, Valencia, pipe-laying project at advanced stage, at the end of 2023 that would be completed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2024, under the Ministry of Public Utilities, we would see upgrade to the Quare booster in Valencia; North Oropouche Water Treatment Plant; Matura water intake; Tompire Water Treatment Plant, Cumana, and Sans Souci booster station. Mr. Deputy Speaker, all these works would lead to

Mr. Monroe (cont'd)

nothing but benefit to the residents of the north-eastern districts of Trinidad and Tobago. We would see an increase of 20 additional million gallons of water being produced in the north-eastern district, and we would move our supply to 24/7, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**6.50 p.m.**

Mr. Deputy Speaker, national security. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to take this time to thank the Minister of National Security, the hon. Fitzgerald Hinds for his hard work and dedication put in at the Ministry of National Security.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Crime and criminality is one of the most important topics for us in Trinidad and Tobago and this Government at this time. It is with this in mind that this Government recognize the need for the increase and the intake of a thousand new recruits in 2024. This will result, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in greater manpower to help fight crime, it would also maintain a heavier police presence across Trinidad and Tobago, reduce the chances of criminals escaping after committing crimes. It would also create employment opportunities for young men and women who chose to take the policing path between the ages of 18 to 35. Additional vehicles were also mentioned in the value of \$18 million, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This will assist in better response by law enforcement officers; increase patrols throughout Trinidad and Tobago; it would also give citizens a sense of comfort due to frequent patrols and visibility by your police officers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, also to assist and combat our crime issue, four large-scale, non-intrusive inspection scanners for shipping containers at a cost of \$90 million and 16 handheld scanners at \$4.5 million will reduce the entry of illegal firearms and illegal drugs. It would also deter persons from seeing our ports as a safe haven or a transshipment point.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, just recently we would have come to the end of the COVID-19 period in this country. I want to thank and congratulate the Minister of Health, the hon. Terrence Deyalsingh for all his hard work at the Ministry of Health—

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:**—and the services to Trinidad and Tobago. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago can boast of the delivery of health care facilities throughout Trinidad and Tobago, such as: the new Arima General Hospital; Point Fortin General Hospital at \$1.3 billion; Roxborough Hospital, Tobago and the Port of Spain General Hospital upgrade. Numerous enhanced health facilities throughout Trinidad and Tobago, including the Sangre Grande Enhanced Health Centre. I myself would have visited that centre on numerous occasions, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I must boast and thank the Minister and his team at the Eastern Regional Health Authority for the quality care and service given to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and by extension the north eastern region through the enhanced centre. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am proud to announce that very soon over 110,000 persons in the region would benefit from the new Sangre Grande General Hospital at a value of \$1.1 billion.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Completion date set at early 2024. We can boast of this new hospital having 106 beds, a helipad, multistory carpark, et cetera, and it will serve our people well in the north eastern district of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Works and Transport, the hon. Rohan Sinanan must be commended for his efforts and continued infrastructural development throughout Trinidad and Tobago, such as: bridge construction; road upgrade; drainage installation; landslips repair; coastal protection; stabilization

Mr. Monroe (cont'd)

works; highway extension and development, desilting and major river cleaning. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the north eastern district also just recently opened—the phase 1 of the Valencia to Toco single-lane international highway was officially opened—

**Mr. Hosein:** Single lane international highway?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** No, no, no. Please, please, Members.

**Hon. Member:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Right, Members, please. Members, please. Proceed.

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Valencia to Toco Phase 1 Highway was just recently opened, and I must boast and say that we the people of the north eastern region are grateful for such, and look forward to the second phase which will start from Matura all the way to Toco. To the Minister, we say thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We can now benefit from faster alternative routes from Matura to Matelot and upper Sangre Grande, easier access to communities along the Valencia Old Road and it also allows the establishment and enhancement of businesses within the Valencia area along that roadway.

Another project, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we are benefiting from and soon to be opened in the Sangre Grande area is the extension of the Churchill Roosevelt Highway into Sangre Grande from Cumuto. This would provide access between Cumuto and Sangre Grande; reduce travel time into Sangre Grande on evenings, especially for those of us who traverse back and forth on the Eastern Main Road and have to face the evening traffic; increase in economic activities and further develop the north eastern region.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, fiscal package 2024 would facilitate the Sangre Grande traffic circulation improvement plan. This will lead to more alternative routes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, less traffic congestion; ease of accessing business spaces in the

main town of Sangre Grande; motorists and road users would spend less time getting from place to place resulting in one having more time for personal activities. Some of the roads that we would see upgrade from this traffic circulation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is Railway Road Train Line onto Brierley Street, Sangre Grande; Blake Avenue onto Picton Road, Sangre Grande; Gilkes Street onto Paul Street, Sangre Grande, just to name a few.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in fiscal 2023, representation was made by myself to the Secondary Roads Company and I must say that we would have received some development in the constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande. At present we have ongoing road works at Plantation Road, Valencia; Palm Road, Valencia; Oropouche Road, Valencia; and Clarence Trace, Valencia. Projects to be done in fiscal 2024 would be Beck's Trace, Toco; Power Street, Toco; Sugar Hill, Balandra, Salybia Village, just to name a few. I must say that it has been a pleasure having the Secondary Roads Company improving the lives and livelihoods of persons within the constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande and I thank them for that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande has always produced good sports men and women. I want to congratulate and thank the Minister of Sport and Community Development, the hon. Shamfa Cudjoe, for her steadfastness and commitment to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development and to the young men and women, and practitioners in the different sporting disciplines throughout Trinidad and Tobago. At this time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would also want to speak about the new community sporting initiatives for youths and sporting personnel. This, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is going to foster community togetherness and occupy person's time in a positive manner.

On the way is the refurbishment as well from the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, refurbishment works at the Sangre Grande swimming pool and repairs to community centres throughout the constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government understands the importance of education for our people. As the Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande, a rural constituency, I understand the challenges some parents go through to prepare their children or child for a new school year or term. It is that similar understanding that this PNM Government had in mind that led them to proposing a \$1,000 book and uniform grant, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** I think this proposal should be lauded as we all—if we are truthful, we all know the strain and stress that parents go through from time to time, and those who are accustomed to the school and teaching industry would understand that most students who are unable to fulfill what is needed to go out to school on the first week are at a disadvantage. But this \$1,000 book grant and uniform grant, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is going to put our students and our parents, especially—it is going to reduce mental stress on the parents in preparing their child to attend school. For those needy students, it is going to allow the student a better opportunity to attend school from the first day. Students would be better equipped for the school year, having their books or stationery, book bag, school shoes, whatever is missing, to have them out to school. And it is going to move students throughout Trinidad and Tobago, all 65,000 of them who are going to benefit from this grant—it is going to remove them from a position of being disadvantaged because they are not able to attend school on the first day just as their other peers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to thank the hon. Minister of Education, the hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly for her contribution to our education system, on behalf of the students and teachers throughout Trinidad and Tobago. I also want to thank the Minister of Education for the ongoing support within my constituency and the repairs that was done and the upcoming repairs to schools within Toco/Sangre Grande, such as, Matelot Community College, Valencia Secondary, Sangre Grande Secondary, Sans Souci Primary and completed is the Rampanalgas Primary School.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me to express my gratitude and thanks to the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis and her team at the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development—

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:**—for their continued support to citizens throughout Trinidad and Tobago. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development housing once again in fiscal 2024 will provide citizens with homes and a better standard of living. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to touch on a topic that is very beneficial to my constituent in the rural constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande. In this budget, it was proposed that 26 areas will be targeted to build 600 HVIP homes, that is the Housing and Village Improvement Programme Homes, at a cost of \$100 million.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, this will lead to the less fortunate persons to access a home that makes themselves and their family comfortable and protected from the elements. The standard of living of these persons within the community that they live will then increase, where children are involved, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they will be raised in a better environment. The beneficiaries of these homes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will think of themselves in a better light, and we will be working

as a government to help reduce homelessness for persons who are at the lower end and cannot afford to build themselves a home.

It is also going to create job opportunities, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for small and local contractors who would perform the duty of building these homes.

**7.05 p.m.**

I also want to just touch on the regularization of squatting communities and developmental works that are happening within the constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande, and it is once again because of the People's National Movement Government who cares about the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the north eastern region. Areas, Mr. Deputy Speaker, such as the NorthEastern Settlement, Bois Bande site A is completed at this moment; Pine Settlement site B is completed; and currently ongoing is Jacob Coat, Sangre Grande, site C, which is 90 per cent completed with roads, drains, installation of lights and water,; and site C2 is 65 per cent completed. I was there on a site visit yesterday, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I was reliably informed that that project will be complete just before Christmas. So persons will be entering their homes on pitched roads, having water in their pipes, and their water from the rains will flow in the drain.

Also, we have ongoing works in Bulls Lane, KP Lands, Valencia, and Mora Land, Vega de Oropouche. So thank you very much to the Minister and to the Land Settlement Agency, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I do not mention the many grants that citizens of Trinidad and Tobago can avail themselves to at the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. Home improvement grants/home construction grants from \$20,000 to \$50,000 whether it be for improvement or for home construction. It assists persons in the construction of



new homes or it assists persons in the repairs of their existing homes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I must say that my constituents in Toco/Sangre Grande have been fortunate enough under the guidance of their Member of Parliament, yours truly—

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:**—to access these grants that are available to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. PNM governance for your money, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened to the Members who spoke before me and their narrative that they are trying to push about the increase of the minimum wage from \$17.50 to \$20.50, and they are projecting it to be insulting or maybe as something bad for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago especially those who are the lower income earners. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to say here today that it was well received by the population and the Minister of Finance and the Government should be commended for such an increase and a timely increase.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** I can report here today, that in conversations that I have had with lower income earners, those who are on minimum wage, they were happy to receive such, and they indicated to me that that increase is going to do a few things when it comes to their personal life. Those lower income earners will have more funds to provide for their families at this time and their selves, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker, those persons in that lower income bracket would be better compensated for their services as well, and it is going to stimulate spending and boost the overall economy.

Madam Speaker, I just want to reiterate and touch on some points in case

anyone missed it because I know the Opposition tends to come here and make everything seem dark and gloomy. But I just want to remind the population that 762 home improvement grants at the value of \$12 million were distributed last fiscal and it is intended for \$100 million to be proposed to provide 600 HVIP homes. I am here declaring that these homes, Madam Speaker, have tremendously improved the lives of citizens. I am witness to most persons who would have benefitted from those households. I have seen how it has transformed their lives and I want to say that these are some things that are yet to come in this fiscal package.

Another thing is 500 to 600 housing units would be constructed in 2024, increasing the housing stock and allowing young persons and professionals, and those who qualify, the chance to access government housing; \$7.5 million for five communities to establish micro-enterprise gardens, greenhouses and green markets. Those communities are going to benefit and it is the common persons within the community who are going to benefit from such.

Agriculture: \$400 million in agricultural incentives, \$150 for infrastructural development, and we must not forget of the many farmers who have been benefiting from the agricultural incentive grants. Madam Speaker, \$7.6 million to expand adult literacy training. That is going to benefit persons at the CEPEP, the URP, and others. No one would be left behind under this PNM Government, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Ministry of Works and Transport: Over 500 projects to be undertaken in fiscal 2024 throughout Trinidad and Tobago, road repairs and all the other irritants that we face on a daily basis.

Madam Speaker, allow me to thank and congratulate the Minister of Energy

and Energy Industries, the hon. Stuart Young.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Madam Speaker, I want to thank the hon. Minister for his hard work and commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Madam Speaker, it is this Minister's negotiation skills and interventions that ensure the ongoing inward flow of revenue into Trinidad and Tobago from our oil and gas to ensure budgets like these are prepared by the hon. Minister of Finance for our people of Trinidad and Tobago.

So to the hon. Minister Stuart Young, I thank you and congratulate you my brother.

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

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Grande? Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, as I prepare to close, I want to openly congratulate the Minister of Planning and Development for her input, and the members at that Ministry, for their input into this year's budget, and thank them for their service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Let me make it abundantly clear that I, as the Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande, stand behind this Government and my leader the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, and we would stand in the gap for all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago regardless of your social status, and we would ensure that Trinidad and Tobago is seen at the international level and at all levels as a country that is doing its best, with a Government as well who is doing its best for all its people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. R. Monroe:** Madam Speaker, as I close, let me assure all my constituents and my beloved people from Valencia, Sangre Grande, and all villages from Mathura to Matelot, let me assure you that I would stand and continue to stand in the gap and bring your representation from far north east Trinidad, all the way to Port of Spain, to ensure that the development of Toco/Sangre Grande continues and that we would be at the same level as any other constituency in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I thank you.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla

**Dr. Rai Ragbir** (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I rise to take part in this my fourth budget debate as a Member of this honourable House.

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

**Dr. R. Ragbir:** I must congratulate the Leader of the Opposition in her response, fantastic response, on this Budget Statement 2024, as well as my Opposition colleagues who spoke previously for their outstanding contributions.

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

**Dr. R. Ragbir:** So before I start I just want to do some rebuttals for my colleagues from Toco/Sangre Grande. The first one is the endorsed sporting facility. It has taken eight years and I am very hopeful that the people of Sangre Grande can actually get an endorsed sporting facility because it seems that, again, this Government is always about rural neglect. Secondly, you mentioned about agricultural access roads and I pray and hope that this comes to fruition because in my tenure so far we have little or no access road for the farmers to get to their crops, to take out their produce, and that has been a challenge throughout the constituency. Thirdly, you must remember during the floods we have water, water

everywhere, but none in their taps. I await to see the north Oropouche investment plan for water, how it will work and transfer into water in the taps for the people for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

You mentioned as well 111,000 persons who would benefit from the new Sangre Grande hospital which the Minister of Finance said would open in the first quarter. Please do your policies and procedures for the hospital and ensure there is proper and adequate medical staff to be sourced, because as mentioned by the Opposition Leader from Siparia, we have little staff to go around.

I was hoping my colleague again would speak about the disaster in the constituency, both in Toco/Sangre Grande, because you are fully well aware that the Disaster Management Unit is under-resourced and many times many people are marooned, and although you did not mention it, that is a sore point in that area of the peninsular.

And finally, we have heavy trucks, trucks that do quarrying and logging, some legal, some illegal, and it is time that there is a weighing station in Sangre Grande. Because without that whatever roads that you are building with taxpayers' dollars, those roads are being destroyed.

And I start; budget after budget, year after year, Madam Speaker, this Government comes to this House promising to fix our roads, increase capacity in our health system, improve our water supply. Proverbs Chap. 29:2 tells us:

“When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked...rule, the people...”—groan.

And I assure you there are a lot of groaning, groaning across the nation when the Minister's voluminous four hour presentation, groaning, groaning, groaning. Today, all anyone can talk about, Madam Speaker, is the fact that in 2023 it is turning out to be just as violent and bloody as 2022.

People are talking about their inability to get jobs. They are talking about how terrible the roads are. People are talking about their empty water taps. People are talking about the high price of food and gas. People are talking about what a burden the new property tax will bring and the proposed increase in electricity rates and water rates. This PNM Government has failed in its duty to keep us safe. They have failed to provide the necessary goods and services that we depend on as taxpaying citizens, and I have heard nothing in the Minister's presentation to give me hope that anything will change for the better. But as the psalmist said:

“... weeping may...”—last for the—“...night, but...”—joy cometh—“...in the morning.”

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

**Dr. R. Ragbir:** And come 2025 the sun will rise over this land when a new UNC Government assumes office—

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

**Dr. R. Ragbir:**—and we will bring back transparency, accountability, and people-centred governance to this nation.

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

**7.20 p.m.**

Madam Speaker, I will start with: health, budget review. In examining this budget, the Minister of Finance, I note that despite the \$600 million increase in allocation to the Ministry of Health, there is a \$267.4 million decrease in recurrent expenditure allocations to the regional health authorities, specifically to the North West Regional, Central and South-West Regional Health Authorities. And they have slashed the operating cost of the Couva hospital by almost 50 per cent compared to last year, from \$66 million in 2023 to \$34 million in 2024, and I ask why. Why are you decreasing funds to those critical frontline agencies? Our

hospitals and health centres are routinely under-resourced and the staff are overburdened. The global COVID-19 pandemic just finished and our staff are burnt out. Clearly health care for the average citizen is not a priority for this administration.

Special-needs sensitization: Recently, the unfortunate experience of a family, a special-needs child travelling on board a Caribbean Airlines flight from Tobago captured the attention of the nation. The father of a three-year-old autistic girl recounted how an interaction between a flight attendant and the child triggered an incident on board a flight. If anything, Madam Speaker, this highlights the critical need for a sensitization and public education programme on engaging what special-needs individuals, especially in state-run agencies and departments.

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

**Dr. R. Ragbir:** More resources are needed to make diagnosis, therapy and education of persons with special needs more accessible and affordable, and I was most disappointed to note that such necessary interventions were not a priority on this Government's policy agenda.

Mental health care: We all recall the situation involving allegations made against a private mental health treatment facility that was raided by the police in 2019, but the case was recently dismissed due to lack of evidence. That case triggered critical conversations about the care and treatment of people suffering from mental illnesses. Persons with mental health diagnosis must be accorded the rights and privilege due to them as citizens of this country. Certain mental illnesses are difficult to manage as a patient can manifest violent behaviour that may cause them to become a threat to themselves and others.

However, care and treatment of such individuals must never be an affront to their dignity as human beings. Their illnesses are not their fault and they must

always be treated by the most qualified medical professionals and housed at approved facilities that are properly equipped to effectively treat their conditions while maintaining their dignity as human beings. Again, I am disappointed that the Minister did not prioritize care facilities, specifically designed for persons coping with serious mental illnesses. I would like to see more support for families of individuals with mental illnesses. We need to prioritize our most vulnerable citizens who are in need of specialized medical care. Blame game and broken promises, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance had used the COVID-19 pandemic to be the reason why the economy and even the health sector has been in shambles. However, now that we have come out of the pandemic, the question to ask is: what will this PNM Government blame for the state of the economy and even the health sector now. For it is that the PNM led by the Rowley Government that has brought us to this situation and even prior to 2020.

In 2016, the Government, which in this same PNM Government, indicated that they would review the existing hospital strategy through a scientific evidence-driven hospital construction and refurbishment plan and where necessary, we will refurbish and modernize our existing ageing plant and will construct new health facilities where they are required. I will expand on this further down. The Government through the Minister of Finance indicated they will expedite surgeries and expand and improve the chronic disease assistance programme, formerly called CDAP. Also, they will continue with medical aid programmes for patients in need and will review and audit the Children's Life Fund—yes, the Children's Life Fund, a brain child of the Member for Siparia. Fantastic job.

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

**Dr. R. Ragbir:** So as to restore its mandate of saving the lives of children.



Further to this, Madam Speaker, in 2017 and 2018, this same Government through the same Minister of Health promised to ensure sustainable funding for the health care system by collaborating with private sector investors through public-private partnership and I must ask this question: Was this really achieved? In 2019, the Government boasts of upgrades taking place at the St. James Medical Complex, the St Ann's hospital, the Port of Spain and San Fernando hospitals as well as Caura and Sangre Grande. The 540-bed Central Block at Port of Spain General Hospital will be commissioned in 2024, but the Minister of Finance comes this year and says we are on track to complete the construction and commissioning of the new 540-bed Central Block at Port of Spain General Hospital in March 2025. So what is really going on here? I would leave that information to my colleague who will go more into the hospital system.

Now, Sangre Grande Hospital. I listened to the Minister mention the Government putting in 106-bed Sangre Grande Hospital at the cost of \$1.1 billion which is nearing completion, as I said, what my colleague said about Toco/Sangre Grande. The hospital will have a full range of services and I pray and hope that it will be commissioned early.

In the 2019 budget speech, Minister of Finance Colm Imbert stated that the new Sangre Grande Hospital will be scheduled to be in construction in 2020 on an expedited basis, utilizing the model for the Point Fortin hospital. So in the 2020 budget speech, the Minister of Finance again came, and they said they secured funding for the hospital. This hospital is needed but let us hope that it comes on track in 2024.

Now, in the 2022 budget speech, the Minister of Finance again stated that the Sangre Grande Hospital is coming at full pace. The sum of \$65 million will be provided to complete the construction of the new Sangre Grande Hospital. Madam

Dr. Ragbir (cont'd)

Speaker, I want to tell the Minister of Finance and by extension the Minister of Health that constituents from Toco/Manzanilla complain on a daily basis on a lack of beds, on a lack of doctors, a lack of medication and a lack of nurses. So it is true that once you make these promises about this new hospital, please let it happen.

Medical staff: Now, what I indicated, Madam Speaker, there has been a lack of doctors, nurses and hospital staff. Before we continue, we need to know about our nurses. Our nurses are the pillars upon which effective, efficient and safe health care is delivered to patients.

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

**Dr. R. Ragbir:** They are leaving continuously, Madam Speaker, in droves being coerced by international recruiting agencies. They are looking for better salaries, remuneration, further education and training. They feel unsafe with all this crime that is taking place and they want a better life for their families. Before, when these recruiting agencies came, they waited for these nurses to train, for experience, three to four years afterwards. Madam Speaker, as soon as they graduate, they come to take them, so very soon our general nurses and specialized nurses will be in rarity. Now the same thing is happening to our junior doctors. You are giving them one-month, two-month, three-month contracts that are happening for a year. That is no tenure of employment. So very soon, the more hospitals we have, the less staff we will have, so you will have one nurse or two nurses managing 40, 50 patients. That is reckless clinical management.

But having said that, we mentioned a lot about hospitals, but I tell you, in terms of non-communicable diseases, the way to go for health care, according to the World Health Organization, is primary health care. It is most inclusive, cost effective and efficient approach to enhance people's lives physically, mentally and

socially. So now that we have put that together, there is a term we use, non-communicable disease. The reason why I say this is because from the budget, the Minister says there is little to none on the chronic disease programme. Madam Speaker, I must remind the Minister that the CDAP programme is highly used by persons suffering from NCDs and I tell you, many people who never use—as a physician never use the CDAP programme, a lot of the middle-class people, people who have lost their jobs, they are using it, and you would be surprised what they are asking for.

Madam Speaker, a healthy nation is a wealthy nation and great emphasis should have been placed on NCDs, particularly among the teen population moving to early adulthood. As a practitioner, it is difficult to change the mind set for older persons but we have to start at the younger ones and this is where the Ministry of Health comes now in focusing and fostering health education and health promotion. It is critical that a comprehensive education campaign be initiated so that at an earlier age, persons are educated and warned about the dangers of non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease. Heart disease is the number one killer that we have in this country, like the rest of the world. Stroke, diabetes, cancer, asthma, chronic obstructed pulmonary disease.

Madam Speaker, the expectation is that having the knowledge today will be beneficial in the future in avoiding the cases of such ailments so that large chunks of the budget will not be spent in finding a cure, purchasing medication but we could use in prevention.

Incidentally, Madam Speaker, we have seen now from all the research that is coming out worldwide that young persons are having fatal MI, fatal heart attacks. From the age of 25 to 44, we are seeing a 30 per cent increase; 45 to 64, a 25 per cent increase; and over 65, 20 per cent increase of fatal heart attacks and these

people do not have non-communicable diseases. Younger people under 50 are dying. They are getting cancers. So the thing is it has to do with the chemicals in our food, it has to do with stress and other mitigating factors.

According to the World Health Organization, of non-communicable diseases, NCDs kill 41 million people each year, equivalent to 71 per cent of deaths globally. Each year, 15 million die from NCDs between the age of 30 and 69, and over 85 per cent of these premature deaths occur in low and middle-income countries. Cardiovascular disease, Madam Speaker, accounts for most NCDs or 17.9 million people annually; followed by cancers, 9 million; respiratory diseases, 3.9 million; and diabetes, 1.6 million. I am thankful to be alive and the onus for every one of us here and everyone hearing, take care of your health.

These four groups of diseases account for over 80 per cent of all premature non-communicable diseases deaths: tobacco use, physical inactivity, the harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diets all increase the risk of dying from NCDs.

Just at the point with unhealthy diets, you find now, that there is something called ultra-processed foods, UPF, and unfortunately 58 per cent of calories that adults ingest comes from the ultra-processed foods, UPF, and 67 per cent of the calories in children comes from the same. So these are more likely to trigger off cardiac diseases, diabetes, hypertension, cancer and obesity. And these are like fizzy drinks, the soft drinks, snacks, cakes, biscuits, potato chips, pack soups and pasta, sausages, chicken nuggets. We are killing our children because that is what we give our children to eat, and adults are consuming it as well.

So health is not a bottomless pit.

**7:35 p.m.**

So that means you are going to build more and more hospitals, and that is why I say, the tenet of management of health care is to keep focusing on primary health

care.

As I continue, Madam Speaker, people of all age groups, regions and countries are affected by NCDs. Children, adults and the elderly are all vulnerable to the risk factors contributing to NCDs, whether from unhealthy diets—as I just indicated—physical inactivity, exposure to tobacco smoke or harmful use of alcohol. You know, just to mention that with the online learning we had during the COVID pandemic—so those young people growing up now, we have found there has been an increased use of smoking, and alcohol use and abuse. And, of course, the psychosocial stress that has gone with that.

Madam Speaker, NCDs threaten progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes a target of reducing premature deaths from the NCDs by one-third in 2030. Madam Speaker, poverty is closely linked with NCDs. The rapid rise in NCDs is predicted to impede poverty reduction initiatives in low-income countries, particularly by increasing household cost associated with health care. Vulnerable and socially disadvantaged people get sicker and die sooner than people of higher social status, especially when they are at greater risk of being exposed to harmful products, such as tobacco or unhealthy dietary practices and have limited access to health services.

Now, Madam Speaker, today is a very significant day. Today is the 6<sup>th</sup> of October, 2023. Today is world Cerebral Palsy Day. And under the People's Partnership, during the 2010—2015 tenure, many of the parents and guardians of children who had cerebral palsy, they got a grant of \$800 to assist, especially with the rearing of these children and the medical services. And many of these children had to still continue on as adults on formula, on milk basically. So I am asking, I am pleading with the Government, if this could be restarted, please. And my question to ask the other side is: What is the status of the National Enrichment

Centre, which is for disabilities, at Carlsen Field?

So, at the same time, there is another programme called the EPP, which is the External Patient Programme. This is specialized testing and procedures for those persons who cannot afford things such as angiograms, dialysis, cataract surgery, SEMS, open-heart surgery, joint replacement, vitreoretinal surgeries, et cetera. The only problem with this, these are expensive procedures and some of them are complicated, Madam Speaker, and the people who really need it, unfortunately, they are oversubscribed, they have to wait a while. And more often than not, they die and it is a reality of what happens. I wish we could do more but you know what? Let us hope in 2024 more could be done as we question the Minister of Health to see what could be done. And I know my colleague will talk about the cath lab for San Fernando Hospital.

As I continue, Madam Speaker, it is important to control NCDs to focus on reducing the risk factors. Low-cost solutions exist for governments and other stakeholders to reduce the common modifiable risk factors. Monitoring progress and trends of NCDs and their risks is important for guiding policy and priority. To lessen the impact of NCDs on the individuals in society, a comprehensive approach is needed requiring all sectors, including health, finance, transport, education, agriculture, planning and others to collaborate to reduce the risk associated with NCDs and promote intervention to prevent and control them.

Investing in better management of NCDs is critical. Management of NCDs includes detecting, screening, treating these diseases and providing access to palliative care for people in need. High-impact essential NCD interventions can be divided through a primary health care approach—just to repeat myself—to strengthen the detection and treatment.

**7.40 p.m.**

Madam Speaker, I raise these issues as highlighted by the World Health Organization to demonstrate that coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic there are lessons that must be learnt. And that is what the Opposition Leader, Member for Siparia, was talking about: what did you learn from the COVID-19 pandemic? And the next question to ask is “what if there is another pandemic, what do we have in place for such?” And that is very important. The idea, Madam Speaker, is to be proactive in the delivery of healthcare.

This country, with all its brilliant human resources, cannot afford to adopt a reactive approach to its healthcare system. We must always be one step ahead. As medical professionals we have to be one step ahead because life always hangs in a balance. We know about today, but we do not know, none of us know about tomorrow. I can tell you that I practice in an area where NCDs are at the highest, that is in central Trinidad. We have the highest amount of diabetes, amputations, hypertension, cardiac disease, and fatal MI in one area. And I would plead with the Government, please look at developing a hospital in central Trinidad, and especially focusing in primary health care. I am sure my colleague from Chaguanas West would love to hear that. I am today calling on this Government, when they build the hospital—there is land that was earmarked by the Partnership Government in Chaguanas for such; something like eight to 10 acres of land.

As I continue, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance, in his last budget, had indicated that cancer screening escalated from 24,495 in 2015 to 54,163 in 2020; an increase of 121 per cent. However, in this Budget Statement there is little to no mention about cancer care in this country. And I display my pink ribbon on my jacket, we are to be reminded for our ladies that it is breast cancer awareness month. And if a woman lives long enough, one in eight women will develop breast cancer at some point in time. Where we go back to? Primary healthcare

again.

Madam Speaker, from the mouth of the Minister of Finance, it took a pandemic to make this Government invest in hospitals, to be taken urgently. Therefore, Madam Speaker, I say it again; by his own admission, had it not been for the pandemic we would not have seen the commissioning of Arima Hospital, the Point Fortin Hospital, and the Couva Hospital and Multi-Training Facility.

As I continue, Madam Speaker, I want to remind the Parliament and the Minister of Finance that in the 2021 budget, the statement, to my dismay, the Minister of Finance freezing up of employment of persons for one year. I am asking if this still continues, or this has to be rectified in a way so that we could have proper staffing at our health facilities.

And I have a question for the Member for St. Joseph, in terms of the Chemistry Food and Drug Division: Are they testing pharmaceuticals? The reason I am asking that, there is so much counterfeit medication in the pharmacies, in their private pharmacies, Madam Speaker. So people are realizing they are using the same medication, but the hypertension and diabetes is not being controlled. So, the afforded testing needs to be done.

Now I will focus on agriculture, move away from health. Madam Speaker, any discussion boosting the agricultural sector in Trinidad and Tobago must take into account the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla. An area that is predominantly rich in agriculture. It is blessed with land, labour, capital and human resources. The constituency holds tremendous potential for the area, as well as the national community. And we could remember all too well with the market boxes. Most of it came from Nariva Swamp, where we have over 400 farmers. So, an allocation of 1.442 billion in the sector is simply not adequate for agriculture. My colleague from Couva North will continue on agriculture. Madam



Speaker, agriculture is our new oil and gas and should be seen as a revenue generator for our country.

Madam Speaker, only a couple weeks ago, I had the privilege of seeing firsthand the operations at Marper Farms. Now, it was mentioned in the budget. Marper Farms is a propagation unit and before, what happened, they employed a lot of young people from the community in propagation and budding. Now, that has ceased. And having youth and bringing that, according to what has been said, what we need to do is to bring them back into the system. They will become young entrepreneurs in farming.

But here is the problem with Marper Farms. They have all these exotic foods, dwarf coconut trees, avocados, bananas, all the mango trees you could think about, exotic. But the problem is, you would not believe, Marper Farm has no running water and they have agricultural officers there. The place has limited funding. So, right now they cannot even fix their own tractors. They have no working ACs. The road to go to Marper Farm, the access road, is deplorable with lots of cave-ins. So, if you are really serious, Madam Speaker, about agriculture, we need to spend the money where it needs to be spent.

Madam Speaker, under the People's Partnership what we did, as I said, about budding and grafting, we need to do that. Because if we are serious about the farming, hear what we are going to do. We are going to get people from all areas to learn about budding and grafting and make that area—ship them. Use Marper Farms and they can actually learn a skill.

Madam Speaker, the Minister came hot and sweaty this year with rehabilitating 240 kilometres of access roads. Madam Speaker, whatever happened to the access road repair programme that was supposed to commence in 2022? Remember the promises, it will cover 80 kilometres and provide relief for over 400

farmers, cost 75 million. These areas include Matelot, Toco, Manzanilla, Sangre Grande and other areas. Where did the \$75 million go, Madam Speaker? How many times are we going to hear the PNM say they are going to deal with road repairs for agriculture? Madam Speaker, just the other day I visited one area within the Manzanilla district and the road was a total mess. You could not go with a car at all. You had to go with an SUV, a 4x4. And imagine the farmers, they complain that they do not have any access roads.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance mentioned in the previous budget, the productive Plum Mitan area, which is in the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla and 11 million was committed for the replacement in 2022, for the decade-old pumps, as well as access road repair. This has not borne fruit, and this is 23/24 budget. Madam Speaker, these pumps need repair. Right now, the Nariva Swamp is supposed to have at least 400 farmers. When I visited there, what I was told by the farmers, there are only 34 farmers. With the extensive dry spell, there is little water in the irrigation channels. So what does that mean?

We talk about the market boxes. Many farmers have abandoned production. The reason being, when they were decimated by the floods on November 2022, they have not received any compensation, and they cannot afford to do farming. On top of that, with the extensive dry season, they have no water. Whoever is remaining, God bless those farmers for the heat that they work in. Everything is more expensive, their transportation, the chemicals. So, if we are, again, very serious about agriculture, we have to do what we have to do to help farmers.

Now, what I met was—with one of the rice farmers—is a new project by the Ministry of Agriculture. It is called revitalization and modernization of the rice industry. So, Mr. Farmer, he was doing 300 acres in the Nariva Swamp, and I think 150 acres to be done in Caroni. This is phase one of 1,200 acres. My

question is, when I asked the farmer who is processing the rice. All that he told me was that the rice will be taken by National Flour Mills and it may be used for dog rice, because they are not sure what will happen. But we wait for it to be seen. At least we are doing something with rice.

Madam Speaker, while we speak of agriculture, we must also extend the conversation to livestock rearing, as well as fishing, as the constituency is bounded on the eastern seaboard by miles of sea, rich in fish and other seafood waiting to be commercially and profitably exploited as we have many cascadu, tilapia, conch and major fishing villages as well. The best conch you will get is from Biche. We must remember, it was the PNM Administration which literally abandoned this sector in the last five years of governance and is now suddenly realizing the value and significance of the sector.

We must throw our minds back to the closure of Caroni (1975) Limited and all its attendant agricultural products: citrus, buffalo rearing, Caroni Green; all which met their demise under the watch of this Government. Stories of farmers having their crops stolen at night. We need a praedial larceny department in that area. Madam Speaker, I stood here last year and spoke about this. I would not to go back to this again. To date, Madam Speaker, none of this has borne fruit in the sense that the farmers say: "Listen, hear what, you going to steal my crops, I not going to plant anymore." So, we are doing everything to detach the farmers from actually doing a livelihood, an honest livelihood.

I want to turn to flooding. Flooding, whether it is due to heavy rainfall or rising river levels, pose a significant threat to our farmers and food security. When farmers are inundated with water, crops are not only destroyed but the fertile topsoil is often eroded away, making it difficult to cultivate for a future crop. This not only leads to immediate financial losses for hard-working farmers, but also

disrupts the food supply chain, resulting in increased prices and food shortage for consumers. Furthermore, livestock can be at risk during floods and damage to infrastructure, like irrigation systems and storage facilities, can further compound the losses.

Madam Speaker, it is crucial that we invest in better flood management and mitigation strategies to protect our agricultural sector; support our farmers in ensuring food security for our nation, not food insecurity, food security. Where are the measures to protect these hard-working farmers and the havoc that these floods wreak on their livelihood and produce?

I wish to draw attention to critical issues plaguing our agricultural sector; its lack of secure land tenure for our farmers. My colleague from Couva North will go more into that. It fosters a climate of uncertainty when it in turn affects our food production when our farmers turn away and some of them are older, they retire, and when the young ones decide this is not what they want to do. So, who is going to grow our food? Our farmers face tremendous challenges due to poor roads, inadequate irrigation systems, and outdated storage facilities. These deficiencies not only increase the cost of production, but also result in substantial post-harvest losses.

Madam Speaker, I have been having consultations with the CEO of NAMDEVCO, and what I was told is it that in Trinidad and Tobago, like many other countries, there is something called food loss and food waste. Agricultural food loss is from the harvest to retail, and from when the consumer have it to retail, or when you use it, or do not use it, it is food waste. And we waste lot of food. And because of that, those same food that is wasted is thrown in the garbage and gone to the landfill. And guess what happens? That is greenhouse gases. So, we want food, and many people are starving and they need food, but they cannot get

food, because it is easy to dump it in the garbage. Because we buy fast food and food has been cooked at home. And it is something we need to look at. And it is something that we need to look into, what Trinidad and Tobago and First World countries are doing, Madam Speaker. It is time we look at food banks and food cooperatives and ways that we can actually help; do soup kitchens and save that food. It is a sin to throw away good food.

Our storage facilities are often outdated and inadequate, leading to significant losses of perishable goods and reducing our capacity to take advantage of favourable market conditions. To promote the growth of our agricultural sector and ensuring food security, it is imperative that we prioritize investments in modernizing and expanding our agricultural infrastructure. By doing so, Madam Speaker, we empower our farmers, enhance their livelihoods, and strengthen our nation's agricultural resilience in the face of future challenges.

**7.55 p.m.**

The glaring absence of packinghouses for agriculture is a pressing concern that demands immediate attention. I am deeply troubled by this issue. Packinghouses are vital components of the agricultural supply chain, yet they are sorely lacking in our country, undermining the efficiency and competitiveness of our farming sector. It is high time we prioritize the establishment of well-equipped and accessible packinghouses across our agricultural regions.

Madam Speaker, I wonder if this Government recognizes the invaluable contributions that my agriculture-dependent constituency makes to this economy. If so, why are the youth of Cumuto/Manzanilla not assisted by the initiative to become successful entrepreneurs? Did you know that the farmers right now in my constituency, 35 as I said, started with 400? So when the rains come we hope there is going to be more but they are still waiting for their money.

Local government. Madam Speaker, many roads are and have been dilapidated for years under this administration. Some main roads, some secondary roads. Many roads that lead into rural communities give access to tax-paying citizens, to their homes, are left unattended for years without any form of rehabilitation by this administration. Madam Speaker, the allocation to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, which is \$1.887 billion, is very insufficient. Madam Speaker, I am in constant contact with the chairman of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation as my constituency falls within this region. I feel for the Chairman as many of the roads that are in need of repairs fall within the jurisdiction of the corporation, and due to the lack of funding from the central government, they lack the resources to repair roads that fall under their purview. Therefore, I call on this Government to release the necessary funds for the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation. Clearly, Madam Speaker, this is what you call spite and vindictiveness.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance stated a new state company to deal with Secondary Road Rehabilitation Improvement Company Limited. Madam Speaker, I listened to the Minister call out areas that would benefit from this programme. Not an area in Cumuto/Manzanilla was mentioned. So I want to know, will any of this money be spent in Cumuto/Manzanilla? I will continue my work here in Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Again, Madam Speaker, the constituency has been neglected by the Rowley-led PNM Government since they took office in 2015, and this shows the continued neglect for rural communities. I have listened to the cries of the people of the constituency and I feel for them. That is why I say that I am here, I am here to support you, I am here to listen to your cries.

Madam Speaker, it is difficult to comprehend that the Minister of Works and

Transport has roots in the area and would have a greater appreciation for the woes being suffered by residents of this area, with a view to bringing equal relief to residents. But rural neglect has no place in a Government that starves the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation for funding only because it is controlled and administered by the UNC.

Madam Speaker, roads such as Caigual Road, St. Marie Emmanuel Road, Guatapajara Road, Cunapo, Southern Main Road, Plum Mitan Main Road, and Salmady Road are in serious need of repairs, and every day I am bombarded with calls and visits from constituents. The neglect is seen in huge gaping potholes straddling many roads, some spanning the entire roadway, particularly where water lines have been laid. And many of these water lines during landslips have been ruptured.

Penalties for overweight trucks need to be done because whatever road we get repaired, when these trucks pass they destroy the edges of the road and that is it, no more road repair for a very long while, and the people suffer damage to their vehicles and whatnot.

Madam Speaker, it seems the Minister has forgotten to mention it has not been the current state of our nation's road. The constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla's roads are totally affected by this and I would expect that it is enforced since last year but nothing. I want to let the Government know, just recently the residents of North Oropouche staged a massive protest due to conditions of the roads, because there is a bridge that was done, a road was done, but right now it is up in arms.

Madam Speaker, I hear the Minister talking about connectivity to the provider to the nation. Cumuto/Manzanilla needs Internet. During the COVID-19, many of our children could not access internet service.

**Madam Speaker:** Honourable Member, your ordinary time is now expired. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to complete your contribution if you wish.

**Dr. R. Ragbir:** I wish, thank you very much.

**Madam Speaker:** Please proceed.

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

**Dr. R. Ragbir:** Madam Speaker, rural neglect continues with education in my constituency. In the last budget, I raised concerns about the non-opening of Sangre Chiquito Presbyterian School which has been closed for close to three years. Just to educate everyone in this honourable House, that school is 130 years old, and these children are housed at Grosvenor Presbyterian School. First was the Biche High School, now well, Sangre Chiquito Presbyterian School. I understand there are issues with the ECCE at Coalmine, and I am praying and hoping that in 2024 that is dealt with because that is a very poor community and many of the parents have no way to send their children—they cannot afford to send their children to a preschool.

Madam Speaker, I also want to make a plea to the Minister of Education. Humbly I am asking, as I asked in the other budget presentations, the Islamic community is hoping that they will get a school in that area of Trinidad. I think we are represented by all denominations in Cumuto/Manzanilla, but to my Muslim brothers and sisters I will continue the fight and continue making the representation.

I turn to the proposed school supplies and book grants up to \$1,000 to assist in meeting the cost of attendance at primary/secondary schools. The only way you can get that it is a means test, but I think the whole of Cumuto/Manzanilla would actually qualify for such and I just hope that they will get the book grants.

Madam Speaker, I want to shout out to the Minister of Public Utilities in



terms of the electric lights, the street lights. Many of the areas where farmers have to access there are no lights. So there are two things that will happen. They have no lights to get to their farms and they have no lights to take their produce out, and because of that, they meet up a lot of bandits. So I am asking if those areas, the agricultural areas, we could have street lights.

I am also asking the Minister of Public Utilities, we have a filling bay for water trucking in Turure by National Quarries. I am asking if there can be another one at another destination because the water trucks take a long time to get filled, and by the time they reach their destination with a large geography between Fishing Pond and Biche, “half de water gone from de truck.”

Madam Speaker, property tax is another matter which has been raised in my constituency. They are wondering with rural communities where people do not pay—where there are not a lot of people, how are they going to get some equity in terms of road infrastructure? Madam Speaker, the Government has come up with scare tactics to get the people to submit to them. I “doh” know. The constituents of Cumuto/Manzanilla say “no” to property tax. However, what is important is that they need to be heard and nobody has come to them yet.

Madam Speaker, constituents of Cumuto/Manzanilla have been clamouring for a better transport system. The PTSC buses are needed more than ever. People do not have money for transport. So in many instances, they keep their children home, they do not send them to school. So they work in the garden because some of their parents are gardeners or they work for people with gardens. So, right now, many of the areas do not have buses, the reason being, there are too many landslips. So these people are basically cut off. The elderly of the constituency that also need the bus service, and I remember during the People’s Partnership Government with the Ministry of the People there was the use of the ELDAMO

buses for the elderly and even persons with special needs. This needs to be revisited in many areas of Cumuto/Manzanilla.

I turn to community centres. Madam Speaker, in the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla there are 10 community centres. Three of these centres are in deplorable shape such as Sangre Chiquito, La Tosca, and Nestor. I want to invite the Minister of Sport and Community Development to visit these centres and hope that something could be done in the near future.

Cumuto/Manzanilla is excellent for ecotourism. We have the Nariva Swamp, we have the Bat Cave, we have the Biche Forest, the growing stone, and we have many other areas. We all remember fondly in November we had the major floods 2022, and what happened to the Manzanilla breakaway. Now, what we had in April of this year, 2023, is when we all saw the Porsche Cayenne floating in flooded waters. There was no disaster management, there was no OPDPM. All it was, was God sending a high-up truck to rescue three human lives, they were American citizens, and thankfully they were rescued with myself and my staff. I want to say it is time the Disaster Management Unit be upgraded in Sangre Grande.

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

**Dr. R. Ragbir:** And because the ODPM is so far and many of areas in the eastern peninsula, from Matelot coming right down, they may be isolated, marooned, people cannot access services. You may want to consider now having a satellite area for ODPM—just a suggestion.

And before I close, as we look at opening the new Sangre Grande hospital, I am making a plea for Biche Health Centre, which is 25 minutes from Rio Claro Health Centre and 40 minutes to Sangre Grande Hospital, if they could have extended hours, and also an ambulance bay like they have up in Toco/Sangre

Grande.

It was under the Partnership our health centres opened for 24 hours, but time for us to look at extended hours. So if we focus on primary health care, Madam Speaker, we could prevent the budget from escalating so high, so that they end up in the hospital being blind, need dialysis, need heart surgery.

So Madam Speaker, I conclude by saying and agreeing with the Leader of the Opposition that this budget offers no hope to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And I say it to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, especially the people of Cumuto/Manzanilla, stand firm, stand fast, the UNC will return and good governance shall return. Madam Speaker, with these few words, I thank you. God bless.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Laventille East/Morvant.

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

**The Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Adrian Leonce):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I just want to say that first of all, I will like to congratulate my Prime Minister, the hon. Keith Christopher Rowley—

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:**—and Minister of Finance for bringing such a positive and powerful budget in 2023/2024.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Now, you know when you have a good budget when no one on the Opposition can point to any one fiscal measure and say anything negative about it.

**Mr. de Nobriga:** Yes, very correct.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** So as my Finance Minister would have said, “This budget is for building capacity for diversification and growth.”

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Now, Madam Speaker, there are so many positive things that I know the Opposition wants to stand up and speak about. For example, I know all 41 Members got so excited when my hon. Minister of Finance said they are going to put \$1,000 for students, for 65,000 students. Because I know, I know, Madam Speaker, that every August we all—well the good MPs—all have a back-to-school drive and that assistance, that assistance, Madam Speaker, is greatly appreciated and I am sure all of us—

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:**—could thump our desks for that venture. Not so?

Madam Speaker, another thing is, I heard someone talk about the minimum wage being increased. They made it sound like it was not enough, but I know, Madam Speaker, that all 41 Members appreciate that raise. You know why? Because that raise equates to almost like a food card, and I know all 41 Members line up to get the food cards to distribute to their constituents who are very appreciative of the food card.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** So Madam Speaker, 190,000 persons benefitting from this increase is something that all 41 Members can thump their desks for. Not so?

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

**8.10 p.m.**

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Yes, anyway, Madam Speaker, I must also congratulate the contributions of my other two colleagues, Minister Foster Cummings, and my hon.

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

Member for Toco/Sangre Grande, Mr. Roger Monroe for their sterling contributions.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Although, when Mr. Monroe spoke, I almost thought well, I did not have anything to talk about on housing anymore—[*Laughter*]

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, so I just want to remind everyone that in here we refer to each other, either by our constituencies, or by our portfolios. I know it might be difficult for us to remember when we come out from a long hiatus, but it is a developing trend so, please be minded everyone.

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Anyway, let me get to my Ministry where I work, and I am very proud to work alongside the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis.

**Hon. Member:** Oh, yes. [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Sorry. I am sorry, Madam Speaker. Minister, Member of Parliament for Arouca/Maloney. [*Laughter*]

See, Madam Speaker, “ah learning, ah learning quick”.

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Picking up. So in our Ministry, we have the East Port of Spain Development Company Limited, and this company is specifically designed and developed for the east Port of Spain area comprising of about 19 communities. Now, in these communities we experience several challenges, socio-economic challenges and infrastructure challenges, because a number of these communities are unplanned developments and there is high density in them. So, the PNM administration would have come up with this beautiful plan to develop a company specifically designed to develop this space. And the East Port of Spain Company

has been doing significant work, very powerful and significant work. And I congratulated them recently because when in April the procurement legislation came into Act, the East Port of Spain Development Company made it their business to reach out to all small contractors and help them to be registered with the OPR. I know a number of small contractors have been having difficulties, and East Port of Spain Development Company made it their business to ensure that all persons interested in registering had somewhere to go to get assistance. So, I must congratulate them for that initiative. We are looking out for the vulnerable. Additionally, in east Port of Spain there are a number of initiatives—let me just call out a few where we were very successful in the past fiscal and where we plan to continue.

A significant number of persons require training, maybe they may be unemployed or underemployed, so personal development is important. So the East Port of Spain has designed a significant amount of training programmes for different—for persons within the communities so that they can improve on their skills and be able to give back to the community. Some of some of these programmes would include urban agriculture programmes, which basically is an agriculture programme designed specifically for the urban spaces. Imagine food being a challenge and the East Port of Spain coming up with a plan specifically designed to create food and food security within the urban spaces. So, that is one of the trainings and that is one of the programmes that is ongoing and will continue in the next fiscal.

They have successfully been able to train about 556 persons, and right now we have enrolled 641 individuals for training. The East Port of Spain also have different programmes, whether it be Spanish, they have the Construction Skills sector Programme, a number of which would have been mentioned by the hon.

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

Foster Cummings—sorry, the hon. Minister of Youth Development and National Service, Member of Parliament for La Horquetta/Talparo. And synergies would have been formed within the East Port of Spain and the MYDNS to ensure that young persons within the communities are well trained. To ensure that all the programmes that the Ministry would have been providing, they have the opportunity not just to have it to register with the MYDNS but to actually bring these programmes local within the east Port of Spain area and that is very powerful and that is very positive within our space.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** So, we have several projects that will deal with sport, that will deal with culture, that will lead to personal development, that will deal with education. A few of them, we have the Point Pleasant recreational ground where there is a paving of a carpark, box drain installation, play park equipment. We have the Highlanders Phase II pan side, where there is development to promote culture. and I remember as I said that there is a specific drive in this budget where fiscal measures are placed for pan groups and pan fraternities in terms of their development and expansion, so that is something we are very happy about.

The East Port of Spain also designed and developed several other pan groups and pan spaces. Right now, they are working on the Royal Stars Pan Symphony. They would have been a small pan side that would have started recently in Morvant, and they are doing quite well. So where a number of these small pan groups do not have any homes, the East Port of Spain is stepping in to give them a home. This is part of the social development through culture.

East Port of Spain has also done construction of box drains and steps, footpaths in Chinapoo and different areas in Morvant. We have a programme called the Latrine Eradication Programme where persons who do not have the

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

proper sanitation facilities, East Port of Spain will go do their surveys and will build the proper facilities for them. A number of persons within the community have benefited from it and they are very happy. In this budget a special allocation has been made so that this programme continues and is expanded. So, the people of east Port of Spain are very happy for that particular programme.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** So, we have a lot of technical development programmes also. We have partnered with NESC to do heavy equipment operators and some of the graduates from these programmes have actually invested in heavy equipment and are now providing services using their equipment so—

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:**—we are seeing where this training, this skill development is actually building that sustainability within the community where persons are being developed and they are able to provide the services within the community. So, that is as—yes—that is the building of the entrepreneurship—

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:**—within our community.

**Hon. Member:** It is part of the group, it is part of the training.

**Hon. A. Leonce:** It is powerful. So, in fiscal 2023/fiscal 2024, we want to continue vocational training programmes, we want to continue sporting oriented initiatives, we want to continue agricultural-based initiatives, we want to continue refurbishment and upgrading of community centres. We have in the fiscal the upgrade of the Central Market also, a place where persons from all over the country come to get the best produce. We are, as I said before, continuing the Latrine Eradication Programme and the community water-based management and sustainability programme. Now, this programme is—as I said, a number of the



units have been built in unplanned development, so the drainage would not have been planned, so a number of these designs and implementation is being done now through this particular programme. A number of persons we would give water tanks and guttering to avoid the slopes in the hills to be saturated when rain falls, just to give the land a bit more soil stability—some more slope stability, so that when rain falls we do not have significant disasters.

So the East Port of Spain has and continues to play a critical role within the east Port of Spain area, within the development of entrepreneurs, within development of training, you know, really looking to see what are the issues, whether it be infrastructure, or social issues, and really planning and developing and designing programmes to bridge these gaps. So, this is the role that the east Port of Spain has been bringing and when you think about east Port of Spain, I remember one developer, not from Trinidad, he came and he said to me, “east Port of Spain is the best real estate it has Trinidad and Tobago”.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** He said the road network is amazing, second to none, you can almost reach anywhere from one area of east Port of Spain to any other area of east Port of Spain because of the diverse road network there is. He also spoke about the beautiful views that the east Port of Spain enjoy up on the hills. And I would say the work of the East Port of Spain is developing this beautiful space in this island of Trinidad to become a sustainable space, with good infrastructure and well-developed sustainable and resilient homes, where we can all enjoy not just in terms of infrastructure, but in terms of the socio-economic status within east Port of Spain.

So East Port of Spain has been under the Ministry of Housing, it is, and continues to do magnificent work and we will continue to support them, and we enjoy the fiscal measures that have been placed to continue our work.

We also have, Madam Speaker, the Port of Spain Shopping Complex, where the Government provides space for young entrepreneurs that cannot afford premium rental space. So persons who have a skill, who have something to service, some service to provide or develop a product but they cannot afford to be able to rent the high rental spaces in Port of Spain, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has provided these spaces where they can develop their trade. They can use their profit to reinvest in their business without having to worry about paying high rents.

**8.25 p.m.**

Additionally, these persons, these entrepreneurs within their development, there is a programme. It is not just about the Government providing spaces, the Government develops training and development. And again, we partner with the different government agencies, you know, some of which would have been mentioned under with MYDNS with NEDCO, where they are specific training programmes for entrepreneurs, in terms of their business, how they manage their business, their accounts, how they look after developing increasing profits. And this is really to take someone who has an interest in providing some service or has a skill that they can sustain themselves, and take them from being dependent to independent, where they themselves can go out, probably build a structure themselves, a building, or even rent in the non-subsidized spaces within and around Port of Spain. So that has been working very well.

We have the New City Mall, we have the Eastside Plaza, and we are developing 43 Independence Square. You all know it as the “Drag Brothers”. We

are going to be building a five-storey building. The Minister of Finance would have also mentioned that. This building would again provide these subsidized rental spaces really to encourage persons to be able to come in the City of Port of Spain and provide these products. It will also have within the building training facilities and all necessary to move someone from just having the interest and the skill to being a proper and independent and sustainable entrepreneur. So the Port of Spain Shopping Complex Limited is a very powerful company that has been taking the lead on this. All of these things are products, or I should say, proof that we are considering the most vulnerable and there are programmes, there are systems in place for persons who do not have the financial wherewithal to still be able to come out, survive and make a contribution in our national community. So for that we must congratulate again the Port of Spain Shopping Complex.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Now, a number of persons within these spaces actually represent us on an international level because I know some persons, they started off—let us say, for example, the leather craft, and now they do export. I also know some persons who cut hair. They are barbers and they go out, they represent in different competitions and they do very well. And as you know, Madam Speaker, I am very sensitive to that as I too love to cut hair with “meh” Rasta.

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Yes. Yes. Yes.

**Mr. Manning:** “Doh get vex Fitz upset, you know”.

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Minister of National Security, “whenever he ready”, he could always come and I can—

**Mr. Hinds:** No, Madam Speaker—[*Inaudible*]

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Mr. Hinds:** I must disagree with my friend.

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Madam Speaker:** Is there a point of order? Is there a point of order?

**Mr. Hinds:** No, Madam Speaker. I just disagree with my friend.

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** So, Madam Speaker, I just look at the work that the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development is doing, and only now being part of it, I recognize the importance of the role of that Ministry and the role of the Government for the most vulnerable in society. And, you know, it gives me a sense of pride to be part of this Government to be able to assist and provide this kind of service to persons within and around the East Port of Spain community.

We also have a department called the Housing Programme Facilitation and Implementation Unit, HPFIU. Now, this particular programme, the HPFIU, we do subsidies—no, we do Home Improvement Grants. And as the hon. Member for Toco/Sangre Grande would have indicated, we would have distributed 762 grants. Now, these grants are grants that really impact the lives of the most vulnerable—

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:**—and you recognize this when persons come to collect their grants and there is a great sense of emotion that fills the room when these people collect their grants. Sometimes they want to express their gratitude so much, they do not even want to leave, they hug you up. And as I said, being part of this Ministry and experiencing these emotions, it really gives you a sense of purpose.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** It gives you a sense of pride. And there are some people that are disabled and the grant will allow them to create better access to their homes. You

know, there are some people that need small repairs to their homes, maybe to just put an additional room, and these persons will not be able to do this if the Government does not step in and provide them with some form of assistance. And this grant is so powerful, and I am so happy that the Minister of Finance would have continued this, and we are expanding it so that more persons can benefit from this grant.

So, I must again congratulate this group, and they work so hard. These people work so hard in ensuring that the most vulnerable get what they want. I have listened to the staff at the Ministry and they get all emotional if the process is not executed fast enough, because when they meet with people and they go out on the field and they see the need for it, sometimes it is emotional. So this programme is a powerful programme where all 41 constituencies benefits—

**Ms. Ameen:** What?

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Yes, all 41, and I am sorry I do not have the list.

**Ms. Ameen:** Through the PNM office?

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Through the PNM office. The PNM office is the Government office.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** And we, the PNM, do not look for who you vote for or what you want. We just identify the most vulnerable and we help all.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** So, Madam Speaker, this is part of what the Ministry does and I am very happy that we are able to do this and do it well.

We also have under the Ministry, the Programme Monitoring, Coordinating and Evaluation Unit, the PMCEU. And this programme—there is a part of this programme where we focus on urban regeneration. There are multiple projects

that we have established. We have the refurbishment of the Eastside Plaza, which I just spoke about, where a considerable amount of money is being invested to rebuild, rebrand and expand, improve the efficiencies of the Eastside Plaza and the programme that it is designed to do.

We also have the Connected Arima where we would look at a city, we look at Arima and see what is required to move Arima from where it is to being a smart city and—

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:**—this is something that is going to benefit all. Because once this programme is completed and we effect the smart city in Arima, we will then go to other spaces, other hubs, other major hubs in the country and develop this, making our country even better connected.

We also have a project, which is very close to me, the Morvant institute of technology. This programme is a programme developed and designed to capture young persons who may have fallen through the cracks, and to nurture them and provide a space for them where they can become even better than the regular person going through the regular educational system.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** The building is going to be a building that is a smart building, a green building, so even the building itself is going to be teaching the youngsters about conservation of energy, about renewable energy.

**Mr. Hinds:** A green building?

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Yes, it is going to be a green building.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** And what we are trying do is to create spaces. There are also going to be a lot of smart classrooms and there is going to be a computer lab with

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

different programmes to help persons in graphic designing, and all of these new age- type careers that young persons are going to be geared towards. So it takes the youngster from being an at-risk youth to now being a provider or a person of interest for positive input within our society.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** So that is part of the urban regeneration.

We also have, in that same unit, the housing subsidies. Just like the HIG grants, we have the housing subsidies where persons who are going to do some repairs to their homes, the housing subsidies, they match it up to \$25,000 to allow that assistance that is required. Because it is subsidies, we allow a higher income bracket, but it is still at a cap where we try to identify the most vulnerable. Additionally, there is a subsidy for home construction. Persons who are going to build their new home—they have their land and they want to build their new home, we also do a match up to \$50,000 so that they can get the necessary assistance in building their homes. That has been a very successful programme. We have reached 100 per cent of our target market and we have renewed it, so this year we are going again. So that is very successful.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** I am really happy about it.

There are some developments that this programme supports also within spaces where site development is required. So in Sangre Grande, we have the Bois Bande, which the Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande would have already spoken about, and then we also have all other developments in Diego Martin. What we do, we look at communities where the infrastructure is not the best and they would be susceptible to disasters, to having floods and stuff if we have high rainfall. So we go in there and we develop proper drainage, roads, and

develop a water system that can provide for all the residents. And that has been going well and the persons within the communities are very happy within our programmes.

Just going forward now, Madam Speaker, I would like to talk about some of the things the Land Settlement Agency is doing, another agency under our Ministry. Now, the Land Settlement Agency is an agency that has been developed specifically to assist squatting communities.

**8.40 p.m.**

Now we would have identified—the Cabinet would have identified 251 squatting communities and made a decision that we are going to go into these squatting communities, identify some of the challenges that they have, and solve them.

So, the Government would have gone in, identified these communities, looked at their infrastructure, looked at their housing complement, looked at everything that will make this community a resilient community, that will make this community a holistic community and provide different things where—even though it was unplanned if there was some form of planning they will benefit from it. So they will put in playgrounds, they will create, where possible, some green spaces for them, we will make sure there is proper drainage, proper road infrastructure, and these things are done within the spaces in the Land Settlement Agency.

Now, to me the most amazing part of the Land Settlement Agency is taking these persons within these squatting communities and doing a survey of where these persons would have settled, developing their infrastructure and then getting the value of their spaces and allowing these people to actually own the land, that to me, is the most powerful thing of the LSA.

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



Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Because what it says is that the Government recognizes that there is a development here, right, and we recognize that the true wealth is in the land and we want to share the wealth of the land with all persons of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** And we recognize these 251 sites as sites that we need to improve because if the communities are not resilient and we have high rainfall, it will flood. So why not develop the space, allow these people to be able to get their property, and get the deeds?

So the process is, we would survey the property, in some places, we give them the value of the land just to pay one third of it, one third of the value of the land, not the house, and they have 30 years to pay for it. So sometimes it is like \$100 or something like that and at the end of paying it off, they are then given the lease. So they have the sublease before, but the thing about it is, they are now able to give their children, their children's children. But, not just that, imagine having a property that you automatically get two-thirds profit on your value. So you are actually putting wealth in these people's families.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** It is very powerful “yuh know” and I feel very proud whenever we are able to do the distributions of these leases and we have so many going around the country, so many squatting sites. We also have sites where persons would have been waiting to see how they can acquire leases since 1986 and we have been making a push to do the surveys and really giving these people a chance to own their own property.

**8.45 p.m.**

Some of these sites—I hope “ah doh” get into trouble with this—but some of

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

these sites, I think, these people would, because of where they are and how long they would have been there, once they do the surveys, I have heard persons paying up to 12 cents a square foot, you know. Some \$5, some \$12. Yeah. I might get into trouble with that. But the point of it is, when we finish this, really and truly it is almost a gift to you from the Government.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** And that is powerful for me, and that makes me proud to be a part of this Ministry.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Another programme is the Government Aided Self-Help Housing Programme. Now this programme is another programme that the Government would go out, would develop lands, and would assess persons, the most vulnerable persons, and give them the opportunity to get these lands for one-third of the market value, again, having that full 30-year period to pay for it. And, I mean, when you really think about it, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development provides so many programmes outside of the typical—the HDC. The HDC is not the only way to access housing, to access sustainable and resilient homes. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development provides so many programmes to, one, if you have a structure, we improve your structure. If you are vulnerable, we provide land for you and we also provide designs to help you with what you have to build.

Additionally, we have the mortgage company that provides you you with subsidized mortgages. So you are getting subsidized mortgages. You are getting subsidized housing and you are getting subsidized land. You are getting grants. I mean, the Ministry really has provided an umbrella for persons who are seeking housing to have various avenues to access these things and the Ministry has been

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

doing quite remarkable work and I am very happy and proud to be part of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Now, we—there are so many things under the Ministry that I want to talk about but I have to leave some stuff for my Minister to—

**Hon. Member:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Yeah. Yeah. I would not do like the hon. Member for Toco/Sangre Grande and take everything.

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** But the long—but, Madam Speaker, with respect to the Ministry, if you really analyze the different programmes, it is really the most vulnerable that are cared for under this Ministry and it is one of the Ministries that, I believe, the nation really depends on for hope. Right? And just being part of the Ministry and seeing the kind of work that the Ministry does, this is great. And I know that the People's National Movement will continue being the provider of these services for this Ministry—

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** —and we will continue providing for all 41 constituencies.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** It is such a joy to really hear the stories of persons when they—what their situation would have been before and when the Ministry would have intervened and how they would have benefitted and moved forward. I have seen some persons who would have gotten small assistance and I was amazed with the kind of work that they were able to produce with their homes with this assistance.

So, Madam Speaker, I just want to talk a little bit about some of the things that I really think we need to highlight that also support our drive for meeting the

most vulnerable persons. The Minister of Finance would have spoken about putting \$5 million for financial literacy. And under East Port of Spain we would have engaged ALTA in really trying to get persons who would not have come out of the school system with proper numeracy and literacy skills, and they really interface with persons in a way to make them comfortable. And when I heard the Minister of Finance mention that the Ministry of Digital Transformation is partnering with ALTA to really expand the programme and they are going to invest \$5 million in it, I thought of how many more persons within the communities would benefit from this and get over the hurdle of that literacy challenge so that they can develop, bettering their skills, bettering their business. So, I was really happy about that and I wanted to highlight that.

The other thing I wanted to highlight was the Student Enhancement Empowerment Programme, the STEEP, where an investment of \$3.75 million would be done to expand the enrolment which was just 27 before to 500. And we are looking to see how persons within these constituencies and these communities can benefit from this increased investment within the STEEP.

Additionally, one of the things, as I said, in the Port of Spain shopping complex and the companies where we provide the rental spaces, there is the community art and craft at an additional \$19.5 million, the Minister would have spoken about that he is going to help to promote arts and crafts in community centres. And these are programmes where these agencies could partner and get additional funding to expand their reach for persons. So that is very powerful, you know—

**Madam Speaker:** Member—

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Sorry.

**Madam Speaker:** Your original—

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Sorry.

**Madam Speaker:** Your original speaking time is now spent. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to wrap up your contribution, if you so wish.

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Okay. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Well, I am going to stop speaking about the Ministry now and I am just going to talk about my constituency that I am so very proud about. So, Laventille East/Morvant being the best constituency in this Chamber here—

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Yeah. You know, it is just the best, we have significant plans and development and we appreciate the budget in that a lot of the things that were said, we are going to be able to use it to help in some of the areas that we are going to work on. Now, there are two main areas that we tried to focus on. We try to deal with economic growth and we also try to build on sport and culture.

Now, I heard with respect to sports and culture the Minister would have announced an additional \$39 million geared to just helping sporting groups that they have in the communities to help them buy equipment, to help them with their sporting events, you know, to help in specialized training. When I saw that I got really excited because we have a number—sport is a big thing within my community. We have a number of very strong sporting groups that are doing very well and we recently established a group which is the Laventille East/Morvant sporting group where all sporting groups come together. We make sure they are registered with the community development. We explain the different ways to access government funding. And with this new budget announcement, there is more excitement for us in terms of the initiatives that we have. Right? As you know, the best sportsmen came out of Laventille East/Morvant, facts, and we want to continue doing it.

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

One of the things that you will see coming out very soon from our community is the best swimmers in the world and we have to thank this beautiful, loving, caring Government for building such a powerful piece of equipment in my beautiful community of Morvant.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Madam Speaker, if I tell you how happy I am to have that facility there and how happy the elders are to have those facilities there. They do aqua aerobics. They do burn outs. Up to today someone sent me a video, they had some fighting with Maloney but—

**Hon. Member:** You lost.

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Yes. We lost but we won the first time. No. But, Madam Speaker, I have seen so much development. Because of that pool the Morvant Swim Academy was born and I saw the Morvant Swim Academy—

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Yes. Yeah. The Morvant Swim Academy took youngsters who would have never gone into a pool, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** No. They did not. And I saw them go into a competition in flying fish and coming first, second and third. That brought tears to my eyes because I was thinking, you know, how powerful is this to have, to be put in a community where persons would have never even had the opportunity to swim although we had two Olympians, people who would have represented Trinidad and Tobago coming out of Morvant but they—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Sharntelle McLean and they. They would have had to go outside of the community to train. Now, we have that within the community. That

Hon. A. Leonce (cont'd)

is such a powerful thing.

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:** But we have powerful basketball groups, the Morvant Oil Birds. Yes, Brian. We have powerful running teams, the Morvant Jets. We have the swim academy. We have the Caledonia AIA. We have the Morvant Elements. We have Shaka football league. So, we have so many sporting groups that will benefit from the fiscal measures that the hon. Minister of Finance—

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

**Hon. A. Leonce:**—would have presented. Right? We also have a number of strong cultural groups within the community. We have Mr. Derrick Charles from Never Dirty who has represented Trinidad and Tobago internationally with his drumming. We also have small pan sides which I spoke about, one earlier, the Royal Stars and we also have the B Minor Steel Orchestra. So sport and culture is an area that we focus on and we want to continue.

So let me just talk quickly about the economic programmes. We are developing—Laventille East/Morvant is developing the cooperative. It is a service cooperative and, to me, it is a win/win because what they have been doing, they have been developing and they are doing a lot of training. People doing training in woodworking. People doing training in garment manufacture. People doing training in urban agriculture and they all join in the cooperative service, so that when the service is required within the community, the cooperative, which is a body of the community, provides the service for the community and we earn the money in the community. So it is almost as though you are building skills, you are building economic strengths. These people could go out and tender on other projects. And you are also providing the necessary services within the community, making the community more sustainable.

So, Madam Speaker, I see you are watching the time. There are so many other little things that I want to talk about with it. But, Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity—

**Madam Speaker:** You have a few minutes.

**Hon. A. Leonce:** I still have a few minutes.

**Madam Speaker:** Yes.

**Hon. A. Leonce:** Okay. Okay. Okay. So think about the cooperative. Imagine the cooperative doing a training programme for geriatric care with the MYDNS, and going to the same MYDNS that provides geriatric care services. So they would be responsible for doing the training for persons who are interested in geriatric care.

**9.00 p.m.**

And right within the community where we need the geriatric care done, they can have these same persons from the community provide it. So this is what I am speaking about by doing developments within the community and really having persons, you know, build sustainability within the community.

We also are developing the Laventille East/Morvant business chamber where a number of the contractors would be joining and we would be doing a lot of things like training. We would be doing a lot of things like training and development. What I found powerful with the group, we have about 84 contractors already within the community that have joined. What I find very powerful about it, when one contractor gets a job, the other contractors assist in areas where the contractor might be deficient. So, for example, one person might have the equipment and another person has a number of the skilled persons. So when one



person does it they join together and they are more effective, reducing the risk of failure. So I think the Laventille East/Morvant business chamber is going to be a powerful group that we can help within Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I thank you for allowing me to give this contribution, and I will miss Ms. Jacqui Sampson. She will be missed. Thank you.

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

**Ms. Michelle Benjamin** (*Moruga/Tableland*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, firstly I would like to commend the Opposition Leader for her brilliant contribution on the response to this budget. Madam Speaker, she would have delivered her budget, delivered recommendations that the people needed to hear.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, to rebut to the Member that spoke just now, I would appreciate if all the Members and Ministers coming to the podium would not just come and itemize the successes of their Ministry and speak of areas that are not part and parcel of the constituencies of the 41 elected Members of this House. Madam Speaker, what we just heard are a lot of deliveries from the Member, but I would have appreciated if the Member would have stated, when it comes with regard to Self-Help or the Home Improvement Grant, how much each respective constituency would have received. Give a true account for taxpayers' money.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Because I sat and listened for over 45 minutes of projects, and

up to now you have no true assessment of where these projects were executed, only Port of Spain, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I stand before this honourable House proudly representing the constituency of Moruga/Tableland. Madam Speaker, and it is a privilege to serve the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:**—something I hold dear to my heart. However, Madam Speaker, my heart cries for this nation, because the last eight years, since September 2015, it has had to endure consequences of decisions of a government that is visionless. A government that has failed to energize the hope of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. A government, simply put, that is ineffective. This ineffectiveness is seen almost immediately, Madam Speaker, from the reading of that budget presentation on Monday. Promises and regurgitation were what we heard for four hours.

Madam Speaker the theme used in this budget stressed on diversification. But this budget is far from that. In fact the blind could see that there has only been a regurgitation, a retardation of Trinidad and Tobago's economy. And as for, again, the word "diversification", the only thing diverse about the PNM Government is how diverse they have gotten in their excuses of non-performance.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Clearly the PNM Government does not understand, Madam Speaker, when they say the word "diversification", because the industries that would lead us to a diverse economy have been deprived of the much needed

resources. Madam Speaker, and it is only when the Partnership government was in office from 2010 to 2015, we saw some semblance of diversification.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** This leads me to my first substantive contribution, that is the PNM Government has failed the tourism industry.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, tourism and culture have far being treated as a bastard child underneath this Government for the last eight years. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister has acknowledged in his presentation the importance of tourism and the cultural sectors, stating that, and I quote:

“These sectors are key drivers of our diversification and transformation agenda and for advancing non-energy sector growth.”

The hon. Minister then went on to use the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 as the reason for the decline of the tourism sector, and so to provide us in this honourable House with statistics which he claims show a revitalization of the tourism sector. However, the hon. Minister failed or neglected to highlight that the tourism sector in Trinidad and Tobago has been on a decline since the PNM Government took office.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, Trinidad and Tobago in the last two decades saw the highest revenue from tourism in the year 2014. Who was in government in the year 2014? Madam Speaker, the Partnership government, with a revenue of US \$875 million, which

represented a staggering 3.2 per cent of the country's gross domestic product.

Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has not been able to reach such benchmarks since as the statistics from 2016 show that revenue from tourism has been on a rapid decline, with revenue for tourism dropping as much as \$708 million in 2016 to \$541 million in 2018. And reaching as low as \$481 million in 2019, according to the UN tourism website. Madam Speaker, these numbers tell a story, a story of the PNM Government's performance which with respect to the tourism sector prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, was on the decline. The narrative is in the numbers and the narrative affirms the Opposition's contention that the PNM Government is visionless and really has no clue as to what is needed to diversify our economy.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister has indicated that the PNM Government is ensuring that our tourism product becomes increasingly attractive so that destination Trinidad and Tobago remains broadly competitive.

Madam Speaker, can the hon. Minister advise who are the comparators in the competitive index that he is referencing to? The averment by the hon. Minister is simply not the truth of what this nation is experiencing with respect to tourism. Madam Speaker, the same statistics of the United Nations World Tourism Organization reveals that while Trinidad and Tobago records tourist arrivals in the hundreds of thousands each year during the period 2016 to 2019, our competitors such as Barbados and Jamaica were recording tourist numbers in the millions, and with effect, revenues in the billions; US dollars, Madam Speaker. Trinidad and

Tobago underneath the PNM administration has not been competitive in the tourism industry. The reason for this, Madam Speaker, I would say is because the PNM Government is in fact failing to manage the sector properly. Madam Speaker, the PNM Government if fact failed in managing and maintaining our cultural and historical assets as attractions for domestic or even international tourism.

Madam Speaker, our infrastructure is failing all over the country: Deplorable roads. In an article supported by *Loop News* on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2023, titled, “Strategic shift needed for T&T’s tourism product”, which captured the findings of the University of the West Indies St. Augustine campus paper titled, “Post-independence challenges for Caribbean tourism development: a solution-driven approach through Agenda 2030”. Madam Speaker, this article cites Trinidad and Tobago’s tourism:

“...as a second-class industry for meaningful employment, profitable investment and a last resort for the pursuit of higher education.”

The article:

“...indicated that one of the significant challenges for...Trinidad and Tobago tourism sector emerging out of the research is the inclusion of effective policies that steers the destination towards becoming a smart destination...”

Madam Speaker, the article goes on to itemize what is needed for us to become that tourism destination.

Madam Speaker, each year as our tourism product declines, we await with

bated breath some sort of direction from this Government, but with every budget it never comes. For the PNM Government to produce research together with policies that are geared towards raising sustainability awareness within our tourism sector, Madam Speaker, but what does this PNM Government give us? Excuses, more excuses and regurgitation. Madam Speaker, I endorse the UWI St. Augustine paper, as we must engage in research agendas that aid those within the tourism value chain to understand the socioeconomic consequences of sustainable action or inaction. There exists the need to reflect real research in the national economic assessment and annual budgets, not just cut and paste and regurgitation every year. But this is not the case with this PNM Government as they have brought less and less to the table each year.

Madam Speaker, when we look at our sister isle, let us take a closer look at our beautiful twin island state of Tobago. Records show that Tobago has had a low tourism multiplier effect. The world, myself, and everyone is asking, how? How could an island that is so beautiful, blessed with a plethora of scenic beaches, diverse ecology, rich culture, underperform in the tourism industry market? How could an island, Madam Speaker, with the reefs and historical sites struggle to generate revenue? Madam Speaker, what a shame. But that shame the PNM Government must bear.

**9.15 p.m.**

But this is what happens when you are led by a government that prefers to stifle its people because of political differences; a government that goes on a witch hunt when the people decide to lend their support in a different direction; a

government who prefers to see its citizens go without employment and resources because they lost their votes. Such societal ills, Madam Speaker, we on this side of the Bench will never tolerate. Our vision for this nation is not airy-fairy or vaille-que-vaille, it is concrete and specifically tailored for each island.

As it relates to Tobago, the UNC's political agenda, this party, has already outlined, and you would have heard my political leader through the consultation, "Let Tobago say what Tobago want". And she would have outlined what was proposed, Madam Speaker. The UNC has done its due diligence and has answered some of the questions and we leave the rest to Tobago to project.

Madam Speaker, I am more than happy to share our plans and I hope for the sake of our Tobagonians, the hon. Minister copies several of the things that I am about to say and that was said by my honourable political leader. I implore the hon. Minister to move away from his outdated thinking and recognize the niche markets that Tobago has the potential to provide.

Madam Speaker, under the UNC-led administration, Tobago would see an establishment of a state-of-the-art cruise ship marina complex.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, Tobago would see a fully functioning and operational, efficient sea bridge and equally reliable air bridge. As seen, Madam Speaker, this is needed. As seen in an article reported by *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian* on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, 2023:

"Hoteliers: Transport to Tobago still a major problem"

That was then and that is still today, Madam Speaker, as our newspaper articles have not changed.

The deficiencies of Tobago's transport system have left patrons to rebook, stranded, Madam Speaker, and this should not be. Caribbean Airlines, despite

rebranding, seems to cannot get it right for the patrons or their employees. Can the hon. Minister advise what are the plans to inspire the staff of CAL organization to not have a repeat of the sick-out that affected our tourism locally and internationally?

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, 2023, the *Newsday* reported in an article entitled:

“Tobago hoteliers group: Disconnect between CAL and travellers”

—which captured the sentiments of the Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association. Madam Speaker, that was then—citing that:

“...there is a disconnect in the service being provided by...CAL and the demand of consumers.”

The President of the Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association stated that the:

“...Tobago’s tourism product to grow and be sustainable, airlift between...”—  
Trinidad and Tobago—“...must be more reliable.”

Madam Speaker, this is not the state still today, eight years after this PNM Government.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister has not addressed how we have gotten here nor has he answered the call of the citizens to make it right.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, Tobago ought to be a duty-free port as stated by my political leader in her contribution. The UNC government will create Tobago based on the THA-owned state enterprise and the strategic operation on the island. We will leave it for the Tobagonians to decide. There should be plans to increase and improve training, Madam Speaker, of hoteliers, staff, but this is not the discussion that is being had. We need a better tourism product, we need more investment into our tourism industry.

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



**Ms. M. Benjamin:** For tourism to aid in reigniting economic activity, Madam Speaker, budget 2023 to 2024 should at least lay out the foundation for the Government and its agencies, implementation of tangible strategic goals, not the same old repeated hotels, not the same old repeated measures, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, when the UNC left office in 2015, we were on the road to proper medical tourism, we were on the road to proper sports tourism. Madam Speaker, these things are nowhere in sight today. UNC continues to provide solutions to the tourism problem and reiterates that the hon. Minister should focus on location, educate and culturally unique communities. We are supposed to be linking these communities. How could you invest in tourism and not fix your local infrastructure? How could you speak local tourism and have a deplorable road network?

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** How could you speak local tourism, Madam Speaker, and our air bridge, our sea bridge is in need of improvement?

Madam Speaker, we need to invest in our tourism product. I would have listened to the Minister and not for once did he address, in his presentation on the tourism industry, did he deal with one of the main causes that is affecting our tourism product. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister has spoken on tourism and cultural product but he has been silent about the elephant in the room. The elephant is the correlation of the increase of crime on our tourism product. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister's presentation was silent on the issue as the PNM Government has failed horribly in its provision to adequately secure its own citizens or the protection of its tourists. The crime situation in Trinidad and Tobago has become an international embarrassment, with the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom issuing travel advisories to advise their citizens—

**Mr. Deyalsingh:** [*Interruption*]

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker—encouraging their citizens not to come to our twin-island state.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 2023, the US Department of State, Bureau Consular Affairs, issued a Level 3 travel advisory informing citizens to strongly:

“Reconsider travel to Trinidad and Tobago due to crime.”

The:

“U.S. government personnel are”—even—“prohibited from travelling to...”—certain—“...areas in...”—downtown Port of Spain.

The advisory further indicated that:

“After dark, U.S. government personnel are prohibited from travelling...”—  
 Madam Speaker, to places like—“...Fort George overlook, and all”—our—  
 “beaches”.

This surely turns away the US dollar, something the country is in need of and has an ongoing shortage.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, 2023, the Government of Canada issued a statement to its citizens to:

“Exercise a high degree of caution in Trinidad and Tobago due to the violent crime.”

And further advised against travelling to our nation:

“...during...”—our—“...annual Carnival celebrations...”—and—  
 “...Christmas...and Tobago jazz festival.”

Likewise, on the 4th of August, 2023, the UK Government warned of the:

“...high”—and increasing—“levels of violent crime in Trinidad and Tobago...”

Madam Speaker, these indications are not misplaced as we continue to see

reports in our local news of tourist being robbed and killed. Madam Speaker, the proliferation of crime continues to stymie Trinidad and Tobago's ability to scale its tourist product in the diversification of our economy. It underscores the significant challenges that high crime poses to the development and sustainability of the tourism sector. High crime deters prospective tourists, resulting in a decline in visitor arrivals. Consequently, this leads to diminished revenues, Madam Speaker, something that this country is experiencing.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, when you look at the cultural product of Trinidad and Tobago, outside of our Carnival that was given \$147 million last year and according to the books would have received an allocation of \$114 million this year, there is no significant investment in our cultural product. Madam Speaker, our cultural product is dying. What we would have seen executed this year for Carnival, the "Mother of all Carnival", turned out to be somewhat the "mother of all failures", as we had most stakeholders, if not all, complaining during the Carnival season.

Madam Speaker, this Government gave mostly all the stakeholders their subventions extremely late, if not the week before Carnival, a day, three days before. Madam Speaker, we saw shows being cancelled during the Carnival season and this Government says that it cares about our culture product.

Madam Speaker, I would like to move to issues affecting my constituency in Moruga/Tableland. What we see happening, Madam Speaker, in Moruga/Tableland—and I would start with the water issues. The water issues in Moruga/Tableland is something that is not only in my constituency, but it is something that is affecting the nation at large at the moment. Madam Speaker, allow me to vent the disappointment that is expressed by my constituents on a

daily, weekly, monthly basis. I have areas in my constituency that go sometimes three months without water with our current water supply. Madam Speaker, in 2023, I have areas that still do not have WASA lines, and these are areas like: Corosan, Lasavan, Madam Speaker, and my constituents deserve better.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, at the moment, notice the failing WASA infrastructure. If water comes today, it is never received in areas like Marac—and we would have seen during this local government campaign, boosters were installed, Madam Speaker, and I called it “political water”, but no water to date in the lines in Marac, John Joe. Madam Speaker, what I have transpiring in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland is victimization of certain areas.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** We have the George Village area that goes without water for three months; Robert Village, three months. I hope that the Minister is taking notes to address these concerns.

Madam Speaker, in the Minister of Finance’s presentation, he would have raised different things within the constituency of Moruga/Tableland, one of these being the Moruga agro-processing plant. And this takes me to the agriculture sector in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland, where we were first promised a Moruga farm school that never materialized.

**9.30 p.m.**

Madam Speaker, and then we have the Moruga agro-processing plant that was commissioned in 2020, and to date although on the books—and I would read:

The Moruga agro processing plant dated the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 2020, at the launch of the Agro-Processing and Light Industrial Park it was stated by the then Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries—Madam Speaker—that this

facility cost taxpayers \$90 million and it was undertaken by both the Teck and UDeCOTT in collaboration.

Taken from the *Review of the Economy* book in 2021, it was stated that:

The agro-processing plant comprised—“...of eleven (11) lots, with purpose-built shells (outfitted with offices, washrooms...cold storage...) constructed on five (5) lots with the remaining six (6) lots being developed for leasing.”

It is also stated that 339 new jobs were quoted at an investment of TT \$12.3 million for the processing of peppers, fish and fruits.

Madam Speaker, taken from the *Review of the Economy 2022*, it is also noted that:

“...August 2022, five (5) companies have accepted Letters of Offer for...”—the—“...factory shells and two land lots (60 per cent occupancy)...with a total estimated investment of \$15.8 million which will provide 128 new jobs.”

Taken from *Review of the Economy* book, 2023, it states that:

“The Moruga Agro-Processing and Light Industrial Park consists of twelve (12) developed lots, six (6) of which comprise of purpose-built factory shells...”—which are—“...available for leasing, while the six (6) lots at the developed sites for leasing.”

It is referenced that:

“...three (3) factory shells and four (4)...lots are available at the Park.”

Madam Speaker, and this brings me to the inconsistencies of these documentations, the *Review of the Economy*, are far-reaching, wherein in 2021 it states 11 lots altogether, five being proposed to build shells, six developed lots for leasing, while 2023 states 12 developed lots, six comprised of proposed build factory shells and six developed sites for leasing. I was contacted, Madam

Speaker, two days ago concerning this same agro-processing plant. Madam Speaker, when this site was commissioned and even when it was going through the construction phase there were security firms at the site.

Madam Speaker, when I was contacted two days ago, I was informed that the contractual security arrangement had come to an end and e TecK left the facility unmanned. Madam Speaker, this is \$90 million of taxpayers' money, something that was referenced in this budget statement by this Minister of Finance stating that there is activity on the site. Madam Speaker, on visiting that site there were two employees, no security service. What is going on with taxpayers' money?

Madam Speaker, I would like to ask: Is there any activity going on at that site? Yes, we know the books state that there are three companies. Yes, we know that when you go up on e TecK website there are three companies, three names, Madam Speaker, but my question: Are these companies local? Local in the sense when this facility was commissioned it was promised to the constituents of Moruga/Tableland. Madam Speaker, employment into the tune of 339 jobs were promised to the constituents of Moruga/Tableland. In this budget statement the Minister said 128. Madam Speaker, I would like the Minister to give this House a true assessment and the state of that facility.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, I now go to the roads of Moruga/Tableland. Again, Madam Speaker, like the agro-processing facility, the roads in Moruga/Tableland—or should I say, the Moruga road starting from Petit Cafe go straight into Marac—was allocated \$178 million in 2017. Madam Speaker, this project was awarded, sod turning took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October, 2017, and to date that project is still ongoing. That project was scheduled to be completed in

2019. Madam Speaker, to date that project is no way close to completion. And the roads, the Moruga road I should say, Madam Speaker, is in a deplorable state.

The Minister also stated that the project outlined would entail paving from Petit Cafe to Marac. That has not happened. Madam Speaker, several landslips would have been addressed, but due to poor accountable these landslips are being addressed two and three times on the same spot. Further, the Minister also stated that this project will take place and be completed, as I stated, by 2019. Madam Speaker, it is time for the Minister to give an update to the citizens, to the constituents of Moruga/Tableland, on the status of this project.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, also if there are cost overruns, \$178 million is a lot of money.

Madam Speaker, I would have stood here in the last budget debate and list all the roads in Moruga/Tableland. I would have list the roads from Barrackpore being Rochard Douglas, Penal Rock Road, La Ruffin, Marac, La Lune, and I am painstakingly listing these roads again. Madam Speaker, because I will report back here to this House, that only two of these roads have been addressed. Madam Speaker, Samuel Cooper Sixth Company, Third Company, Hindustan, Frederick, Pooran Road, Cumuto Road, Lengua Road, Poui Road, Worrel Road, Mantcool Road. Madam Speaker, Diamond.

In Diamond Road, Madam Speaker, 12 persons would have lost their homes and this Government has not done anything for those citizens. Realize Road, Madam Speaker, over five homes would have given way to cave lands. Cunjal Road, Madam Speaker—Cunjal Road north. Madam Speaker, I am sad to report the neglect that is happening in the constituency of Moruga/Tableland.

I will now go to the agricultural sector in Moruga/Tableland. Madam

Speaker, when I say agriculture, my colleagues before me would have state the high price of chemical that is affecting my farmers. Madam Speaker, my farmers that were promised the agro-processing plant, that still to date do not have a market to sell their produce or have a facility to do agro-processing. When you look at what is taking place with the La Ruffin fishing facility that was built by the Partnership government—but because it was built by the Partnership government, outfitted with a gas station, this Government refuses to commission the gas station. And that refusal is seeing my fisherfolk travelling from Princes Town which is over 21 kilometres to get gas. Madam Speaker, given the state of my roadway this is just an accident, God forbid waiting to happen.

Madam Speaker, when you look at what is taking place in the agricultural sector in Moruga/Tableland, we have the neglect of the Tableland pineapple farmers, when all they ask is for access roads, when all they ask for is the outfitting of the praedial larceny unit. When a farmer invests all that they have and to go back into the fields another day and to see that your produce has been reaped, how are poor farmers to survive in this country?

Madam Speaker, I will take you to the state of the schools in Moruga/Tableland. We have schools that are operating. In some instances the school term would have just started in September. I had schools opening with not the full complement of teachers and this is Fifth Company Anglican. Madam Speaker, I have schools that have not been addressed through the repair programme and this is Sixth Company Anglican, and apart from Sixth Company Anglican, I have Nipal Presbyterian, even Moruga Composite. Madam Speaker, all my schools are in need of some sort of refurbishment. What took place during the August vacation?

Madam Speaker, I would have listened to the speaker before me speak about



Ms. Benjamin (cont'd)

the \$1000 that was given or allocated in the upcoming fiscal. Parents would have brought books already. When you speak about compassion—Madam Speaker, I have been hosting a book drive from since I was a councillor and it is something I do every year now that I am the Member of Parliament. So from then to this, Madam Speaker—

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:**—I could tell you the true cost of having to outfit parents with their book list. Madam Speaker, not just their book list, but the school uniforms, the shoes. Madam Speaker, I know the true cost of sending a child back to school, and I know the painstaking look when a parent cannot provide. So I will say, “too little too late”.

I had over 200 parents that I had to find resources to assist, but next year is another year and then we will hear excuses, and then my phone and my office would be filled with parents that would be turned down because of they not meeting the means test, or should I say the PNM means test. Madam Speaker, because in this country one will learn there are two different type of means test. We would have just heard the Member that spoke before me address with regard to saying that the PNM office and sometimes that is a true assessment, because I as a Member of Parliament would write on behalf of my constituents for more than three-quarter, if not all, the grants that he would have itemized—forgive me, Madam Speaker, that the Member would have itemized for Laventille/East Morvant, and I could report here that if I get an acknowledgment letter, I get plenty.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, so I am taken aback by this Government now coming in their eighth budget to say that they care about the small man. Madam

Speaker, they do not care about the man.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** They have brought the economy of Trinidad and Tobago to its knees, to now come and to throw crumbs. But too little too late, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I would have reached out to a lot of persons during my preparation here today. Madam Speaker, I would have reached out to stakeholders both in the cultural industry, tourism industry. From my constituents I would post Facebook posts, I would have attend meetings, and the cry is the same all over.

Madam Speaker, I want to talk about the youth of Moruga/Tableland. I would have heard the Minister of Youth Development and National Services. I would have heard the Member for Toco/Sangre Grande reiterating all that was stated on Monday by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Youth Development and National Services, but, Madam Speaker, I would say that Member should hang his head in shame.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, how could you sit and endorse this budget?

**9.45 p.m.**

Anyone sitting as an elected Member of this House and endorses this budget, Madam Speaker, I will say that they are out of touch with the working class—

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:**—that they are out of touch with the single mothers, that they are out of touch, Madam Speaker, with the everyday citizen. Madam Speaker, because if you could endorse this budget, you are not going to your constituency office and having office days. The UNC Government, as my political leader stated, and yes, we are the government, Madam Speaker. We are the government in waiting. We are the government that is with the people and among the people.

Madam Speaker, the youths of Moruga/Tableland, I have overqualified persons. I have a degree-holding constituent that is working URP \$60 a day, and I would have listened to the Minister of Youth Development and National Service and I would have listened to my colleague that would have spoken before me saying that there are opportunities in this economy for young persons. I would have listened to persons speaking about graduates leaving school and the success rate. Yes, we have graduates leaving school. Madam Speaker, I have hundreds of graduates leaving school in Moruga/Tableland but no jobs. And all the programmes that are itemized here today, there are checks and balances.

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Moruga/Tableland, your original speaking time is now spent. You have 10 more minutes to complete your contribution if you wish to avail yourself of it.

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Madam Speaker:** Please proceed.

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, there are checks and balances that the ordinary citizen does not qualify for when it comes to some of these grants, as I stated, listed by these Ministries or the Members of this House and that is so sad, because when a mother or a parent invests in a child to go to school, they expect fair play when it is time for a job. We do not expect that a PNM party card has to be attached to your résumé.

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

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(5) please.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, so Member, I would just ask you to withdraw that and find another way to say what you would like to say.

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, I oblige and I withdraw, Madam Speaker,

but it should not have to be that you have to be affiliated with the other side, Madam Speaker, in order to get a job.

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

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(5), please.

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** That is the same thing. She said the same thing.

**Hon. Members:** [*Continuous crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** I recognize that it is kind of late and maybe people like the Member for Princes Town and the Member for St Augustine, maybe they are having some side challenges. Okay. But let us hope we could move ahead without those challenges. Member, please withdraw that, if you cannot find a way to say it, then forget it and continue.

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, I withdraw. But, Madam Speaker, what I want to say getting a job should be based on your résumé and should be based on how you perform in school.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** It should not have any other requirement with regard to getting a job. A young person is supposed to be able to put on their Sunday best or a suit and walk in any one of our Ministries—

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:**—public offices and qualify for a job or undergo the relevant interview, Madam Speaker, but that is not the case. That is not the case. Madam Speaker, and I am reiterating--—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption and crosstalk*]

**Madam Speaker:** Members, Members, Members, if you all are no longer interested in the contribution, you could take a walk. All right. Continue.

Ms. Benjamin (cont'd)

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, I am glad that what I am saying is getting the other side excited.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, the truth somehow has a way—although they will come to this House and gallivant and embarrass and “taylaylay” and make announcements—

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, while they do that in here, Madam Speaker, they cannot do that no longer out there.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** They are the minority government now, we are in the majority.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** So we could go outside and gallivant and “taylaylay” but they have to do that in here. They have to do that in here. So, Madam Speaker, let them have their day. Just now Trinidad and Tobago will have their way.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, and in my closing, I look forward for a day and I look forward for that day soon that the sun would rise and cast its rays over Trinidad and Tobago and correct all the wrongs that were done by this administration. It would boost our economy. The cultural industry that was starved for funding, it would get that which it is starved, because from the moment that this Government merged tourism and culture, I want to say in my closing, that they killed both tourism and they killed the cultural industry from Best Village. Madam Speaker, they said in this budget statement that they are improving spaces—spaces and a member of the performing arts cannot even host a show. Do

Ms. Benjamin (cont'd)

you know the cost of hosting a show? Do you know the cost of costumes?

My cultural performers, my cultural stakeholders are the working poor. They have crippled the cultural industry. They have crippled our Carnival. We were once, Madam Speaker, the country of the greatest show on the face of the earth. We have fallen from grace because of those on that side.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** But soon a day will come when we would regain our seat as the country that hosts the greatest show on the face of the earth. Soon we would have infrastructure to promote both local and international tourism.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, and they could take to this podium and insult any one of us on this side. We know that is all they can do because the day of reckoning soon comes.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Soon Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Member for Siparia will sit in that seat and reign.

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

**Ms. M. Benjamin:** Madam Speaker, they laugh but they know deep down in their heart that that day is coming soon and I thank you and I want to thank the constituents of Moruga/Tableland. I hear your cries. I know that we do not have water in our pipes, I know our roads are the worst in the country. I know that we would have been given a Ministry of Works and Transport and they get one of the biggest allocations and we would have by the time next month, the Minister saying that he no longer has the funding. So that Ministry eats the allocation but it never comes to Moruga/Tableland. I know that my schools are in a deplorable state, I know that my youths are without jobs but I want to tell them hold on, hold on, that

too will soon come to an end and everything will be okay.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

### **ADJOURNMENT**

**The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Monday, the 9<sup>th</sup> of October at 10.00 a.m.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 9.55 p.m.*