Madam Speaker: Might I just remind all Members to ensure that their devices are on silent. Even God operates in silence.

Hon. Members: [Laughter]

**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023**

[Fourth Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 06, 2023]

That the Bill be now read a second time.

*Question again proposed.*

Madam Speaker: The Members who have already contributed to this debate are: hon. Colm Imbert, MP; hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, MP; hon. Foster Cummings MP; Mr. Arnold Ram, MP; Mr. Roger Monroe, MP; Dr. Rai Rabgir, MP; hon. Adrian Leonce, MP; Ms. Michelle Benjamin, MP; hon. Stuart Young, MP; Mr. David Lee, MP; hon. Fitzgerald Hinds, MP; Mr. Rodney Charles, MP; hon. Terrence Deysalnigh, MP; Dr. Lackram Boodoe, MP; Mr. Esmond Forde, MP; Dr. Rishad Seecheran, MP; hon. Stephen Mc Clashie, MP; Mr. Ravi Ratiram, MP; hon. Brian Manning, MP; Mr. Davendranath Tancoo, MP; hon. Symon de Nobriga, MP.

Minister of Rural Development and Local Government.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al Rawi): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and good morning hon. colleagues all.
Madam Speaker, I rise to give my contribution to this debate and I propose to do something which is not the norm. I propose to give a value for money statement of the money that was allocated to the Ministry for the last financial year to put it into context, to indicate the number of jobs created, the impact to society, and, Madam Speaker, coming out of that, I propose to give an analysis of how that system can be bettered. Then, Madam Speaker, I propose to go into the aspects of local government reform which are being operationalized as we speak, what the next steps of that look like; and then, Madam Speaker, to give an analysis in relation to some of the hindrances and room for improvement in terms of systemic reform that can be applied; and then, of course, Madam Speaker, to speak to my constituency that of San Fernando West.

Madam Speaker, I propose that my first order of business must be to thank the people of San Fernando West for allowing me to sit in this Chamber and to represent them as we pursue the ambitions of us all collectively. Secondly, Madam Speaker, I wish to thank the hon. Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Rowley, for his confidence in all of us as members of this Government to discharge our various aspects of work and performance.

Madam Speaker, the Appropriation Bill, which we will come to after this debate, proposes the release of some $68,384,229,740. Of that, approximately $17 billion does not form part of moneys that the population will see or understand because that goes to things like the sinking fund and repayment of debts, et cetera, that are off books as we put it. Really and truly, we are talking about in this budget an account of what we did last year together with an account of what we are doing to do this year. So in terms of the numerical accountability, it is incumbent upon us to say what we received last year, how was that spent, what impact did it have upon people.
This year’s budget proposes the release of $50,745,215,991, and the Ministry which I head is due to receive $2,573,534,000. That, Madam Speaker, does not include the IDF moneys of $76,508,000. In actuality, Madam Speaker, what we are therefore looking at as a release to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government is the sum of $2,650,042,000. Let me repeat that, $2.65 billion. For that, Madam Speaker, we are looking at recurrent expenses. Recurrent expenses are spread across personnel expenditure, goods and services, minor equipment purchases, transfers and subsidies, and transfers to statutory boards, and that Recurrent Expenditure is this year estimated to be $2,215,271,000. So that is $2.215 billion.

Last year we had estimated that Recurrent Expenditure would be $2.291 billion. The Revised Estimate is actually $2.85 billion. So we are down about $6 million from what we estimated we would spend, to what we actually spent in Recurrent Expenditure. So putting it very simply, Madam Speaker, last year we estimated $2.29 billion, we estimated that we would have spent $2.285 billion. This year we estimate $2.215 billion. Now, Madam Speaker, let me make it clear upfront in anticipation of the Standing Finance Committee, that we must take conscious reflection upon the management tool that the Minister of Finance has left us with for every year, and that is the use of a mid-year budget. This budget, therefore, is intended to be a calculation of what we expect to spend in six months of our operations.

We have the assurance of the Minister of Finance that we will be coming back for a mid-year budget, and, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance has done so because he has plainly stated that with the state of oil and gas, and the revenues of the country being such as it is, it is a prudent tool to use the Constitution to have two appropriation Bills and not one.

UNREVISED
Madam Speaker, last year the money that we spent to develop Trinidad and Tobago is something referred to as the Development Programme. Part of that money comes from the Consolidated Fund and part comes from the IDF, and that is the Development Fund. Last year, we estimated that we would spend $427,480,000. It turns out, Madam Speaker, that we will only have spent $284,335,000. This year, the Estimate for the six-month period that we have now before us, albeit it is presumed to be a one-year financial cycle, is $358,263,000. That money is going to come from the Consolidated Fund.

Madam Speaker, last year from the IDF we were extracting an estimate of $71 million. We actually spent $25 million of the $71 million. This year we estimate that we are going to spend $76 million from the IDF. So in terms of accountability to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the first part is our recurrent expenditure. This year we intend to spend $2.215 billion on recurrent expenditure, that is, the personnel expenditure meaning salaries, goods and services, minor equipment, transfers and subsidies, and transfers and subsidies to our state enterprises. Our personnel expenditure is roughly $102 million. Our transfers are $1.5 billion. That goes to the 14 regional corporations. Madam Speaker, goods and services, we expect to be at about $48 million to $50 million. So, Madam Speaker, that is the recurrent expenditure. On what we are going to spend to make an economic difference in Trinidad and Tobago, we intend to spend, Madam Speaker, the sum of $434,771,000, nearly half a billion dollars. So that is the statement of what we intend to do.

Madam Speaker, let us get to accountability. Every Ministry in spending a dollar appropriated from the taxpayers' pocket, Madam Speaker, whether it is from the Consolidated Fund or the IDF and combined, every Ministry produces results. This Ministry, Madam Speaker, in terms of accountability, is comprised of the
head office, 14 municipal corporations, it is also inclusive of the Rural Development Company, the CEPEP company, and, Madam Speaker, I carve out, even though it is at head office, the municipal police. So we are looking at roughly 17 entities.

Madam Speaker, I can confirm that the number of people that we employ across those 17 entities is exactly, this year, 21,423 people. So, Madam Speaker, we spent our recurrent expenditure from the last financial year on 21,423 people. There were 1,924 monthly paid persons at head office; at daily paid, 3,707; casual workers, 1,806; contracted workers, 336 at head office; CEPEP across 335 contractors, 10,050 people were employed; CEPEP head office, 105 people; RDC, Rural Development Company, head office, 35 people; forestry head office, 30 people; forestry across 80 contractors, 2,400 people; municipal police, 770 people, bearing in mind that we have an additional numbers taking us to 930 people which are not included in these numbers because they include recruits; municipal trainees now coming on deck, 260. That is a total of $21,423.

Madam Speaker, I can report that of the money that we spent in the development programme, Madam Speaker, that is the $284,335,000 that we spent, we have in fact created jobs, and the number of jobs that we created is 6,996 jobs. Total number of contracts that we awarded out of the development programme is 536 contracts. The number of contracts ongoing is 377. The number of jobs created, 6,996. The number of citizens benefitted directly by those jobs being created is 745,426. Madam Speaker, you are probably wondering where on earth is all of this information coming from. Madam Speaker, in the gazetted responsibilities given to me on March 16th, 2022, I was charged with the responsibility of reforming the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government.

UNREVISED
10.15 a.m.

Immediately, we set about upon a digitization programme because, Madam Speaker, a lot of people in Trinidad are fed with bad news, and are told that there are no opportunities.

Many people because of the way information is presented, do not understand the impact of jobs being created by dollars spent, but, Madam Speaker, to allow us to track with the precision that I have just laid on this table, and I have much deeper statistical information because nothing that I am called upon to manage would ever be managed without statistics, be it in the Attorney General’s office, Legal Affairs and now in Rural Development. You will note that a hallmark of what I like to put on the table is statistical information. Cost of prisoner per head, number of people incarcerated for marijuana, number of people in motor vehicle and road traffic, because you cannot better a system if you cannot measure it.

So, Madam Speaker, we introduced something called the executive reporting framework. We realized that Rural Development and Local Government, anywhere between 30,000 people and 23,000 people directly employed carrying out the services of bettering your lives from the movement of garbage, the delivery of water, the creation of roads, the creation of footpaths, sanitation. The very concept of how we live is managed by Rural Development and Local Government.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Planning, the creation of plans, the approval of plans, Madam Speaker, enforcement of the law, litter wardens, municipal police, breaches of planning permission which cause flooding. If we cannot measure it, we are not doing our job.

So, Madam Speaker, in introducing this executive reporting framework, we are in the position now with statistical information line by line, solidly, from every
aspect of what we run from the period of March to September 2023, and prior to that, we are back-filling the information. So the new process by which we operate involves us making sure that every single cent that is spent is uploaded, the contractor is identified, the number of persons employed by the contractor is identified, the impact of it.

Madam Speaker, my friend from Couva South and I had to deal with the issue of the Carolina Bridge, it collapsed. A temporary work was put into place, there was a cut-off. That bridge cost over $2 million. That $2 million had contractors, had employees but the people who lived and traversed there were impacted. This is the kind of value for money arrangement that we are putting in place.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** A landslip along our roadways, the movement and mobilization, the number of people affected by disaster relief. We are going to put these figures on the table because we are accounting to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

So, Madam Speaker, in this review, aided now by the executive reporting framework, let me deal with the general principles of what was going wrong. The system of procurement in our country in state organizations that are not state enterprises, involve spending money only when the project is done. There are no interim payments, advanced payments are not there. In the private sector and in companies like UDeCOTT, in companies that run on a private sector model, you have interim payment certificates. The whole-of-government cycle demonstrates that we get money for development every year, and if you look to the statistical information, you will see that some corporations are at zero per cent performance in terms of what they have actually spent. It is not because the work is not going
on, it is at zero per cent but the work is not completed so it cannot be paid for, so it shows at zero per cent.

Now, Madam Speaker, there is an effect to that. It means for one financial year, not a cent from the Government’s pocket went to the hand of the contractor because the work was not completed because the scope of the work was longer than the financial year. That means that citizens are denied the opportunity to receive money to have it circulated in the society. So, Madam Speaker, when I indicated what our expenditure was, we wanted to spend, Madam Speaker, we were estimated to spend in terms of the Development Programme, listen to the number, $427 million-odd. We actually spent $284 million. Why did we spend less? Let us deal with that. Number one, flowing upon what I just explained, the works are in progress but cannot be paid for until they are completed.

But, Madam Speaker, permit me to deal upfront now with the major issue of accountability which the citizens of this country demanded, and that was the implementation of the public procurement law. On April 26, 2023, the public procurement law was fully operationalized. The Minister of Finance and the hon. Prime Minister and many of us indicated that it will be turned on and that the issues surrounding public procurement will be worked out. But, Madam Speaker, I can tell you that a significant portion of the money that we were bound to spend, Madam Speaker, in our Development Programme, and that is precisely the sum of $128,764,712, was not spent because we operationalized the public procurement law.

And that happened, Madam Speaker, because we went into a period of limbo. The public procurement registry, that is the depository, despite the public statements made by the previous head of the OPR, that it was fully ready for proclamation, there were only 3,000 people in the depository. That is not a matter
controlled by the Minister of Finance. The head of the OPR made a statement that they were fully ready, the Government relied upon the statement, we proclaimed the law on April 26th but Madam Speaker, the GDP of Trinidad and Tobago is over $150 billion. A public body under section 3 of the public procurement Act is anybody that spends public money. If you are an NGO receiving a dollar from the Government by way of a grant, you are a public body. If you are a state enterprise, if you are a Ministry, if you are a statutory authority, you are a public body. Now, how on God’s earth can $154 billion be spent among 3,000 people? That is what the country was faced with.

And, Madam Speaker, in the while that it has taken for the public procurement law to kick in, the transitional provisions came in, the OPR took months to say what the transitional arrangements were to say, because the public procurement law now has criminal sanctions. If you break the procurement rules, there is a jail consequence, there is a fine consequence. It took months for them to say continue with your existing contracts provided they meet the following criterion and everything else, make sure it confines with the requirements of the law and it meets the requirements of law.

So, Madam Speaker, April, May, June, July, August, financial year September, for the six-month period when the public procurement law came on, I can tell you the balance of allocations not spent under the Development Programme is $128,764,712. Of that, Madam Speaker, I can tell you $39,517,489 was requested from the Ministry of Finance but not provided because of the requirements of meeting public procurement rules and vouching the record. So, Madam Speaker, I am saying now, we have purchased with our eyes wide open with no complaints because we learn and move the system along, we have purchased a delay of roughly $128 million out of $427 million. In other words,
Madam Speaker, 30 per cent of our money in the Development Programme was not spent as a result of the public procurement law and Madam Speaker, 9.2 per cent of that was requested but not released by the Ministry of Finance because of again, the public procurement, left hand and right hand matching system.

Madam Speaker, in that regard, I can tell you that the Port of Spain City Corporation—and let me go into the details of how they performed, the 14 corporations. The Port of Spain City Corporation was supposed to have an allocation of $32 million, they expended $23 million. The Arima Borough Corporation was supposed to have $27.9 million, they spent $10.52 million. The San Fernando City Corporation was supposed to receive $30 million, they spent $26 million. The Point Fortin Borough Corporation was supposed to receive $28 million, they spent $23 million. Chaguanaes Borough Corporation was supposed to receive $24.6 million, they spent $16.7 million. Diego Martin Regional Corporation was supposed to receive $24.1 million, they spent $19.9 million. San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation was supposed to spend $31.2 million, they spent $21.5 million.

Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation was supposed to spend $28.3 million, they spent $24 million. The Sangre Grande Regional Corporation was supposed to spend $29.2 million, they spent $19.9 million—sorry, $19 million. Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo was supposed to spend $28.2 million, they spent $21.4 million. The Mayaro Regional Corporation was supposed to spend $21.2 million, they spent $13.4 million. The Siparia Regional Corporation was supposed to spend $25 million, they spent $14.3 million. The Penal/Debe Regional Corporation was supposed to spend $23,950,000, they spent $20.2 million. Princes Town Regional Corporation was supposed to spend $49 million, they spent $23.7 million. So of a total of $427,480,000, we spent $298,715,288. In other words
then, we spent 70 per cent of the money on average.

Now, Madam Speaker, what did we not spend money on versus what did we spend money on, what did we purchase with that money? In terms of a very summary approach, I can tell you that the municipal corporations spent in terms of a total of $128 million-odd as to one aspect of their money, across 1,154 contracts in the Development Programme, that caused a job opportunity of $6,996 as I explained. Madam Speaker, under drainage and irrigation, we created 2,759 jobs; under local roads and bridges, we created 2,954 jobs; under recreational facilities, we created 357 jobs; under cemeteries and crematoria, we created 131 jobs; markets and abattoirs, 57 jobs; at head office, we created 238 jobs including a further aspect of 138 jobs in change agents.

Madam Speaker, at the municipal police, in total with intake, we had 990 jobs. In the disaster preparedness, we dealt with 7,689 reports. We dealt with 5,159 victims and Madam Speaker, we trained 4,500 CERT officers as volunteers.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** At the RDC company, we created 179 jobs impacting 2,384 people; we built 7,295 metres of roads; we dealt six metres of crossings; we dealt with 1,136 metres of reinforced box concrete drains; we dealt with 80 metres of river clearing; we dealt with 1,350 metres of curb and slippers; we dealt with 28 metres of verge development, 18 culverts and 11 retaining walls.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Now, Madam Speaker, this is a very dry contribution because we are accounting for the money we spent. But let me start to speak in generalized terms now, stepping away from the data because the *Hansard* is important. The *Hansard* forms a record of what you intend to do.
10:30 a.m.

If I had my way, I would put up a presentation in this Parliament. With your leave, I would give you a PowerPoint presentation showing all of the money; all of the work performed; what the variations look like; how much water we delivered in each month; how many rodents we dealt with in each month; how many markets and abattoirs we dealt with; how many cemeteries, burgesses, et cetera. Because, Madam Speaker, the money has been working for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Now, Madam Speaker, it is very important when we look at details of expenditure. Look at Recurrent Expenditure: our head office had, Madam Speaker, $744 million-odd in recurrent revised allocations. Our expenditure was $669 million or 90 per cent. Madam Speaker, what does that expenditure involve? I can tell you, in terms of people that live off of the Government quite properly because they are working there and providing services, our Personnel Expenditure was $76 million at head office. That is 990 municipal police, 934 public servants. A total of 1,924 people were paid with that money. Contract Employment was $31 million, that is 355 contracted employees, chief officers, litter prevention wardens, public health officers, disaster management staff. Short-term Employment, $8.849 million, that is 100 short-term employees, not including the 140 change agents. Of our money at $700 million-odd, CEPEP received $476,000,987, that is for 10,500 employees in terms of contracted labour force, contractor’s fees and work. And of the Forestry Division, that is 2,400 persons contracted under the 80 contracts that are there, we spent $79,999,000 there, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, in other words, our position has been that every cent
allocated to us has been explained, every metre of road that we developed has been dealt with and, Madam Speaker, what the data shows us are certain trends that are very important for us to understand. You see, Madam Speaker, it costs us to remove garbage, roughly, $16,000 per household across the country. Now, how do I get to that figure, it sounds extremely high. The actual figure per Head is about $3 per Head. But, Madam Speaker, because we run a blended system of owning our compactors in some corporations, or renting them entirely in other corporations, the data now tells us that we have a few things to do. We have to run a blended system of ownership and rental. So, let us get to the general ideas—if I may ask, Madam Speaker, what time does full time end?

Madam Speaker: So your full time—your ordinary time, let me put it this way—your original time is 10:48:32. You will be entitled to an additional 10 minutes if you wish to avail yourself, which would carry you to 10:58:32.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you. Madam Speaker, may I indicate that I wish to use all of my time at this point? Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Sure, you may.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Much obliged. So, Madam Speaker, if I look now to the takeaways as to what we need to do, if I look at what the data produces for us, if I look to the structures—let us get to generalized positons now, Madam Speaker. In the generalized positons, Madam Speaker, what I can say is that there is a need to reformulate the manner in which we spend money. The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has introduced a term called “burn rate”. Burn rate is how fast we can spend money to cause an economic explosion on the ground. For instance, we, the head office, via RDC decided to spend $2.1 million at the Chaguanas Market, not the Chaguanas Borough Corporation.
10.35 a.m.

When we indicated that we were going to do that, if you go to the Chaguanas Market right now, you would see a frontage, new lighting, new stores. And when you interview the people there, with cooling systems, et cetera, added now, they cannot believe that a decision to spend $2.1 million could cause such impact. I was very pleased to see my dear friend, the Mayor of Chaguanas, running up and down taking credit for the project. It is fine, because the Government has a job to facilitate development.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: But, Madam Speaker, what that testifies to, Madam Speaker, is that without fear or favour, malice or ill-will, despite the exhortations of those opposite, the Government spends money across Trinidad in the regional corporations.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And Speaker the heat map, meaning where the money is spent, is now available. Now, Madam Speaker, I want to remind, this country hears constantly from the Leader of the Opposition: Oh, their friends that their family. In fact, Madam Speaker, I was quite surprised to hear the Leader of the Opposition single out the Member for San Fernando East and myself saying, and I am going to paraphrase, in her opening salvo that we, sons of politicians—in the case of MP for San Fernando East, the famous Patrick Manning; and in my case, my grandfather Lionel Seukeran and my mother, Dianne Seukeran. The Leader of the Opposition said that we are disqualified from speaking on TV6 in commentary on the budget, because we supposedly come from privileged families. So, Madam Speaker, one shot the take away principle from the Leader of the Opposition is, anybody who comes from a family that is engaged in public service, if you make the mistake to
have a parent in Parliament, "you cyar serve".

Now, Madam Speaker, what kind of example to the people of Trinidad and Tobago is the self-proclaimed mother of the nation, the MP for Siparia, telling people? You, MP for San Fernando East and MP for San Fernando West, because your parents and grandparents decided to serve this country—and in my case she omitted my grandmother who served as well, Madam Speaker—we are disqualified from public service because our parents gave public service? What kind of insanity and equality is that, Madam Speaker? So Madam Speaker, warning to everybody: Do not dare have children. Do not encourage them to engage in public service. Do not encourage them to be patriotic to their society. Because according to the "Gospel of Siparia", you are disqualified.

Now, Madam Speaker, I am raising that in the context of value for money and contribution. Because I was making the point that the expenditure that we have committed to, six months of the last financial year, and in every year go forward, is now under the scrutiny of the public procurement law, Madam Speaker. And what does of the public procurement law facilitate? Madam Speaker, there are reports on the outside coming in that for the first time small and medium contractors feel that they are included in the system. Because Madam Speaker, you now have the right to challenge the award of contracts. You have a right to the information. You have standstill periods. You have challenge proceedings. But, Madam Speaker, it makes a huge difference for us to know.

Now, typologies, Madam Speaker. We hear about discrimination from Members of the Opposition. I have taken the opportunity to divide the performance ratios of expenditure between south, central, east and west. I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that the distribution shows, of the 1,555 contracts done between south, central, east and west, across a PSIP total of $371 million that we
spent, Madam Speaker, that the number of contracts are evenly distributed; that the expenditure shows that pattern. Madam Speaker, it is there for the checking. I can say, Madam Speaker, that the 6,669 people employed is demonstrable and that there is a real economic impact.

But, Madam Speaker, we are now, in this expenditure, not only under the public procurement law, but, Madam Speaker, we are now also in the middle of local government reform, and a lot of people are asking what are the next steps. Madam Speaker, permit me to speak to that. The local government reform is a system where we say: Let us empower a new system of governance, resembling the THA model. We passed the law for that. We partially proclaimed the law, and in partially proclaiming the law, Madam Speaker, we were told by the Privy Council that the law applies to future councils and not to incumbents. What does that mean?

They said when you proclaim the law that, unless the law specifically says it is going to apply to the people who are in office; that the Privy Council says it applies to future councils. So, Madam Speaker, the next steps of local government reform have to be scrubbed, in light of the Privy Council decision. Because any decision, relative to further proclamation, has to be the subject of careful consideration by the office of the Attorney General, by the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. And then, Madam Speaker, the next steps on full-time councillors and other positions happen.

However, Madam Speaker, what I can tell you now is that every regional corporation has been called to identify what physical requirements they require. That is, the number of office buildings that they require for the location of their full-time councillors, their executive members. Every corporation has analyzed to see what number of human resource input, what is the numerical number of human resources.
resource input that is required; that is how many people you need to hire to make the organizational chart work. Every corporation has been analyzed to see where money, that is to be transferred from one Head to the other, will happen.

And I am very pleased that the Minister of Finance has populated a vote under every corporation as a starter to the property tax number. Because local government reform is built upon the premise that the residential property taxes are going to be directly collected by the regional corporations. The Property Tax Act was amended at section 10 of the Property Tax Act. And it says that the regional corporations would collect property taxes, they will put it into something called the corporation fund and the corporation fund would be expended by them.

In a corporation such as Princes Town, a small corporation geographically but the same number of residents as most corporations, you expect anywhere about $30 million in property taxes to be collected. In the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, all the way from the north coast to the Eastern Main Road, to the highway lower down, you have approximately $60 million to be collected in property taxes. These property taxes are very modest numbers; approximately $3 a day, if you are not exempt; a maximum of $10 a day for a mega mansion. But, Madam Speaker, when you look to the fact that a corporation like Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation will request $100 million to run itself, and only receive $35 million to $40 million, clearly gaining $65 billion in property taxes, bridges the gap to allow us to carry out the works, Madam Speaker, to make the corporations run. And, therefore, Madam Speaker, when the Minister of Finance says, as he has, that we have crossed the threshold for the application of property taxes, we welcome it.

Now, Madam Speaker, there is an interesting phenomenon in local government. The local government field is fit 7/7; seven UNC corporations, seven
PNM corporations. And we had a meeting recently where one of the UNC chairmen said to me: “But Minister ah find yuh ah lil rough with us about this property tax issue.” Because in the meetings, the corporations are very much anxious, excited to receive property taxes, these are the UNC-led corporations, but they are afraid to say it publicly, because it means going against the Member for Siparia. So, Madam Speaker, you have a system of all of them anxious to receive the property taxes and none of them prepared to say it publicly for fear that they will be fired, Madam Speaker.

Not everybody is lucky to be fired like Caroni Central and brought into the Parliament. But other people have difficulties where they are afraid of things like that, Madam Speaker. So, “Gopaul luck clearly eh Seepaul luck” in this instance, Madam Speaker. All that I would tell the chairmen of the regional corporations is fear not. Principle is principle, and it is applied evenly, Madam Speaker.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Now, Madam Speaker, in terms of delivery of local government resources, one of the critical aspects for delivery is in relation to how you feel. And crime and security is a huge part of that. Madam Speaker, under section 48 the Municipal Corporations Act, the municipal police are given life. They are imbued with the powers, common-law powers and statutory powers of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. In other words then, Madam Speaker, they are police.

Madam Speaker, we have 990 municipal police. The statutory strength established is 1,500. We have 220 people about to go into training. But, Madam Speaker, I would like to report that the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has designed a very important management tool for the municipal police. And that, Madam Speaker, fits on to a telephone. It is an app. It has been
built. Madam Speaker, the app is in testing right now, in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. It allows every single police officer, only when on duty, to tune in, to log in, and then command centre knows exactly where municipal police are. They are six minutes away, three minutes away, two minutes away.

Madam Speaker, as part of the economic development and reform of local government, the municipal police will be invited to join as we go on a public tour about inviting homes to take advantage of tax benefits offered by the Minister of Finance, to install CCTV cameras facing outwards. We are inviting the municipal police to work on something called open source reporting.

The Evidence Act was amended, Madam Speaker, to allow CCTV evidence to stand as primary evidence. In other words, Madam Speaker, it was amended so that you do not have to go to court and point out somebody and say: I, Faris Al-Rawi, have pointed out John Brown as the culprit in a crime. The CCTV evidence will speak to that.

Madam Speaker, we intend to launch, for consideration by citizens, something referred to as virtually-gated communities where CCTV cameras can be accessed when required and with permission of homeowners, footage, which will allow us to track crimes, Madam Speaker; to have reports, to see what the car looks like, what the number plate look like, what the description of persons look like, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, I can tell you, as a person whose own family members were the victims of violence, robbed at gunpoint in their own home, my in-laws, the persons who were alleged to have committed the crime were captured on the basis of CCTV evidence in the neighbourhood. The cars were identified. The individuals’ descriptions were matched. But it is because CCTV evidence operated that we were able to have that phenomenon. And, Madam
Speaker, that was no special treatment. That was just plain old evidence-based policing.

You see, Madam Speaker, if you look to our newspapers and if you take the front page of a newspaper every day and you look at 365 days of front pages, you will realize that we are being fed a diet of negativity. That is fair in a democracy. The media, the Fourth Estate, has a powerful position. They can choose whichever angle they wish.

But, Madam Speaker, the diet of negativity that our country is fed is a constant and steady one. And I cannot imagine the example of a parent constantly seeking to raise a child, or making a child feel safe where all you say to the child is: “Yuh stupid? Yuh cyah succeed? Things bad? Yuh home rotten? Yuh falling down? Doh step outside.” Because, Madam Speaker, if you comparatively look at other jurisdictions that are wrestling with the public scourge of crime, none of them report in the manner that Trinidad and Tobago does. I cannot say more than that, because that is our democracy. There is the freedom of choice inside of that. But as it relates to municipal policing, the use of our app is going to end up with data coming to head office.

Disaster management: I have reported that we have dealt with over 7,000 incidents of disaster management; 6,000 victims, Madam Speaker, millions of dollars spent. We have designed an app for that as well. It is in testing.

10.50 a.m.

In the feature, you arrive at the home at the location, a geopin is sent as to where the house is, pictures are recorded, and the form is filled out on a phone. It goes directly to the CSRs in the head office. They take it directly to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Service, so people get away from the indignity of the experience of saying, “Well, look I made a report but I did not see anything
come about.” And that is a fair complaint on their part. The point is that we have developed a system to manage that.

Madam Speaker, we have designed an app called “Local”, L-O-C-A-L, fancy pronunciation, local. The app is a two-step registration process. The fields have been populated. Any incident can be reported in the field of incidents that you can go through, street light blown, road leakage, verge require cleaning, garbage issue, obstruction along the road causing flooding. Madam Speaker, it goes to the head office, it is fed to branches, and the customer, the client sees it in red light, yellow light, and green light terms. It is being dealt with, it is green light, it is yellow light, we are requiring input, and from whom, red light, it is stopped because of the following reasons.

Now, Madam Speaker, what does that do? It allows us to continue the conversation of value for money because in the instance of street lights, for instance, my colleague, the hon. Minister of Public Utilities, is in a serious exercise with T&TEC to fix all street lights, something that we all love. I arranged as MP for San Fernando West to have streetlights in the Marabella area completely repaired. Young boy calling himself “Makamillion” arrives as the truck going up saying, “See wah I do, see wah I do?” Now get appointed, first day, eh, assuming the entire work order went on under himself. But, Madam Speaker, the same way the Mayor of Chaguanas was jumping up and down for the work we did, we are happy to see people jump up and down for the work that the Government does.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** But Madam Speaker, my point is, that allows a conversation with the public. And the conversation, Madam Speaker, is quite simple. This is the number of street lights blown, here is the cost. Because everybody in this country says I do not mind paying my fair share provided I get value for money, I
feel it is going to be wasted. But if you know there are 100,000 street lights to be repaired, and you know the cost is $40 million and you only have two, well you know where you stand in the line because you have to pay for the goods that you are looking for, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I know I am very close to end of time so permit me to turn to the citizens of San Fernando. Madam Speaker, San Fernando is the subject of development like it has never seen before.

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

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Madam Speaker, for far too long San Fernando was left to stand on its own—San Fernando West, I am speaking about. Madam Speaker, I can report that we have spent $1.569 billion in San Fernando, and Madam Speaker, we have done so because with the opening of the Point Fortin access way, 20 minutes from San Fernando to Point Fortin, Madam Speaker. With the influx of people expected, we needed to have our waterfront, we needed to have our urban revitalization, we needed to have our squatter regularization.

And Madam Speaker, I can report to you that after seven years of work with the EMA, we received the Certificate of Environmental Clearance for the reclamation of 3.8 hectares at the waterfront. That job will take exactly six months to fill. That produces, together with the 1.5 acres there, a significant land holding much like the Movie Towne acreage, where the redevelopment of San Fernando now becomes an anchor point.

Madam Speaker, at the PTSC bus yard, Madam Speaker, we have removed all of the buses, we have taken them to OAS Construtora Yard opposite the OAS—at the old OAS site opposite the C3 Mall. Madam Speaker, 200, nearly 300 units are in presale there about to be constructed. The wharf which is now referred to in its old terms as Plaza San Carlos, that redevelopment of the wharf is going on.
Hon. F. Al-Rawi (cont’d)

The Cabinet is right now considering the development of the land acreage around the Brian Lara Stadium for light industrial and the PTSC hub operations, Madam Speaker, freeing up the whole of that area. The fishing port contract has been awarded, the fish port, the abattoir at the wharf, is 100 years old next year, Madam Speaker. We have built a new customs port at the reclaimed site, Madam Speaker. We have widened the Lady Hailes Avenue. We have engaged in HDC redevelopment, Madam Speaker, but the project that I am most particularly pleased about, Madam Speaker, is the expenditure under the HVIP Programme.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And Madam Speaker, the Housing Village Improvement Programme, means that for $175,000, maximum $200,000, Madam Speaker, where we started at $150,000, we are inside squatting communities demolishing shacks and difficult areas on land that people have lived on for over 60 years and which they do not own. We have rebuilt it for $200,000. We have moved families back in. They are beautiful homes where they get the land in their own name so they no longer walk around with the indignity of invisibility. Invisibility to the bank, invisibility to a will, “yuh cah give it to yuh children, yuh cah get equity, yuh cah get ah loan using yuh house”, Madam Speaker. We are creating safer communities for people. Because, Madam Speaker, unless we go into communities that have serious difficulties and bother to care about how you live and where you live, Madam Speaker, it will never happen.

Now, Madam Speaker, I want to say this, these projects and the acceleration of these projects in a burn rate environment that I have described with statistical data, Madam Speaker, we now know how to target. We are supplying more money via property taxes, we are doing it under public procurement law, we are creating thousands of jobs. The 7,000 jobs that I have reported beyond the 23,000 jobs that
we actually have, Madam Speaker, that is not in the Ministry of Labour figures. So the Ministry which I have had command for in the last year has created 7,000 jobs, Madam Speaker.

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

**Hon. F. Al Rawi:** And every one of us can report on that. Madam Speaker, these are new days, the irrelevance of conversations coming opposite is a matter of our democracy. I am not concerned about the personalities and the same old same old comments. I have tracked a trajectory that will allow us for a better future with accountability, it includes municipal policing, it includes better planning and permission, it includes law enforcement.

I will end by saying, expect new vesting orders on the table of this Parliament so that all lands not previously under corporations, last actually updated in the year 2000 will now become outdated so we have greater responsibility. I thank you for this opportunity to contribute.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member for St. Augustine.

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

**Ms. Khadijah Ameen (St. Augustine):** Oh dear. Madam Speaker, there is a technique in cosmetic surgery called liposuction, and it describes the removal of excess fat from under the skin. It is not something that many surgeons recommend, but every year it seems that the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government has no problem with liposuction. Because it is metaphorically speaking that is what the Minister has performed on our regional corporations.

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

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Every year systematically liposuctioning funding from every regional corporation until they are unhealthy and gaunt and unable to perform their
core functions.

The Minister said, you know, he wished he could have sent a PowerPoint presentation. Maybe next time he could save us the trouble and post it on the website because much of what was said this year was said last year. You know, we could have just clicked on the link. Last year the Minister said he launched an app to track complaints. This year he launches another app concerning municipal police, but when he was describing an app that was in the design stage, and then he called the name and I realized it was the same app he described last year. This is another app that is being designed and in testing. Is this app going to use the free Wi-Fi that the Government promised to have nationwide that we are still waiting for? If you continue to announce apps without application people will begin to think of you as the app man.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping and laughter]

Ms. K. Ameen: The Minister spoke about a diet of negativity coming from the population, that, Madam Speaker, is a diet of truth because the review on the performance of local government under the PNM, and on the Government as a whole is negative, and it was proven in the results of the last local government elections where you lost.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. K. Ameen: You lost. The Minister is referring to Makamillion, John Michael Alibocus is the councillor for the Marabella West area, and between Sasha Ali, who is the councillor, between Sasha Ali and John Michael Alibocus they beat the PNM in San Fernando West in this local government elections.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. K. Ameen: So when the Member speaks about, you know, development and clearly the people, the population do not feel it because they did not vote for you in
the last local government elections. You boast about a waterfront, seven or eight years now you acquired the land there, and all we see is the place “dig up”. Is that your performance? San Fernando West’s only completed development in the last eight years is an expensive car park where they spent $132 million; that is their development.

Madam Speaker, it is very clear after listening to the previous speaker and to the Minister of Finance, that the PNM really does not care about local government. It really is a superficial thing as far as I see it continues to be. The UNC government has always been very people-focused. Our policy has been to strengthen local government and our policies have really been centred around improving the lives and the standard of residents in every area. That is our foundation, quality of life. You want to know what the PNM’s foundation quality of life is? Turn to page 51 of the budget presentation and the Minister said, and I quote:

“Madam Speaker, as a foundation for quality of life, we have invested in our road network.”

Everywhere you go to this country the road network is in total disrepair. You have landslips, you have potholes, and that is the demonstration, that is the illustration of the PNM’s foundation for quality life in Trinidad and Tobago. And it is a very appropriate illustration because that is what we see around us, disrepair and shambles.

The only way we as a government can improve Trinidad and Tobago is by understanding what the needs of the people are, and that is why I salute the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, for having multiple nationwide consultations throughout the country.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Ms. K. Ameen: And you know what that did? It allowed every one of us who are elected Members of Parliament and even those in the Senate to listen to the opinions of residents, members of the public, stakeholder organizations, unions, business chambers, get their written submissions.

I heard Members on the opposite side loosely quoting unions, loosely quoting business chambers. You know, the thing is we have things in writing over here. We deal with substance, not hype. So when we as parliamentarians speak in this debate on the Opposition side, we speak representing the voice of the people who elected us.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. K. Ameen: Has the PNM held any consultations with the public? You are spending taxpayers’ dollars, billions of it. Have you consulted with the public as to what it needs? You continue to make decisions in a bubble.

During the recent local government campaign, the UNC spoke about improving communities, and rather than understand how we could make communities safer, how we could create employment, the PNM chastised the UNC for running a national campaign speaking about national issues.

11.05 a.m.

Because the most burning issues which the people had, which were crime and unemployment and safety and so on, were issues that they felt local government did not have the power to deal with. The UNC does not believe that we should shelve local government as something less important. We understand that national objectives and local government and community objectives must tie into each other. That is why we support restarting Community Comfort Patrols in your community to make the country safer.
We support our proposal to increase legal gun ownership for the law abiding citizens in Trinidad and Tobago. When we say “stand your ground,” it is not only about legal gun owners who shoot and kill a bandit or a person who invades their home, it is about standing in our communities and continuing to make our communities safe in spite of the Government failing at their responsibility. We support a nationwide plan to restore and improve street lighting in our communities and take back control of our streets, make our streets safer.

We want municipal police to be used in local government to partner with schools, in the primary and secondary schools to make schools safer. The PNM promised to expand the municipal police by putting 1,000 additional police officers in every regional corporation. The Minister comes to boast about 700 new municipal police officers, the same thing he boasted about last year, but it is not another 700 you know, it is the same 700 he is describing—recycled promises, and he has failed to reach his original promise.

We want secure homes, you want citizens to be able to defend their families. We want secure neighbourhoods and local government play a role in that. Local government plays a role in securing the economy. You undermine local government to the extent where it is crippled to support your call for property tax. And I say, we in the UNC say: Now is not the time for property tax.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. K. Ameen: You speak about all these initiatives and you leave local tourism sites totally neglected.

You know, there is something called religious tourism in this country and I just want to take a moment to mention. You have festivals such as the Soopari Mai were both Roman Catholics and Hindus participate. You have shaving sites at different watercourses, rivers and so on, that ought to be developed by local
government, provide the amenities and so on, and when you have increased activities in these areas, you will see micro entrepreneurs emerging, you will see people in the communities coming out, and so local government should be supporting this. What has the Minister done towards local economic development, towards local tourism development, towards supporting communities? He has failed to say that in his presentation.

The Minister, as well as the Minister of Finance, spoke about local government reform. Well, Madam Speaker, if you do not live in Trinidad, you will think that this Government is really performing on the top of their game, because the words coming out of their mouths do not match their actions at all, at all, at all.

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

**Ms. K. Ameen:** The Minister in the budget, spoke about executive councils becoming more effective in regional corporations, and the Government has yet to proclaim the section of the Act to make executive councils a reality. You have not done that. In fact, in 2021, the law was passed, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform), and since that, the only section that this Government attempted to proclaim was the section to postpone the local government election by creating a four-year term instead of a three-year term. And they failed at that because it was challenged and struck down in court. They have not proclaimed any section of the Act after that. They have not presented to the regional corporations a plan of action to make the reform a reality. And you know, exactly what they are doing now, is exactly what has happened with the procurement legislation.

The Minister spoke a bit about regional corporations, and I take umbrage to the Minister blaming regional corporations, eh, and I felt that he was bringing these corporations into disrepute. When he spoke about zero per cent performance, I
challenge the Minister: name the corporation that has performed at zero per cent. There is not a single regional corporation that did zero projects. You may have a percentage of projects incomplete. But a lot of times the regional corporations, you know what their challenge is? When they commit funding to a project, they have to wait for the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to confirm the availability of funding before they award a contract. To do so will be improper in terms of financial practices. How many corporations have been awaiting releases for months? I have numbers here, I have—and I am willing to share and as time passes, I will continue to share this information, because I feel that the Minister is either misinformed himself, or misleading the population when he tries to throw the blame on the regional corporations.

We have seen a number of repeated promises, year after year. The Minister spoke about the local app, the 1,400 municipal police hired across regional corporations. Madam Speaker, previously in my contribution I said the Minister promised 1,000 municipal police per regional corporation, I just want to correct that, it was 100—100. So, it is a total of 1,400 municipal police officers hired across 14 regional corporations. That was promised since 2015. It was repeated in the 2016 local government election; again, in 2019; again, in 2023; and to date, promises never materialize.

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

**Mr. Indarsingh:** Correct.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance in the budget, spoke about the executive councils. I just want to remind the Government that when you had elections on the 14th of August, the councillors were elected under certain terms and conditions. They were elected as part-time representatives because that is what they are considered now. Within the four-year term, it would be ill advised
for the Government to change a councillor’s terms and conditions from part-time to full-time. It would mean that this Government was going to put our councillors in a position where they have to either resign from their job—we have councillors who may be teachers, who may be public servants, who are business owners, attorneys-at-law on both sides of the political divide, both PNM and UNC. They would have to resign, stop their professional practice if they are an attorney-at-law or an engineer, for example, in order to be a full time councillor under the new law, if that is proclaimed, or they can resign as a councillor and trigger a by-election. Why would you want to operate with such chaos? Do the thing properly, proclaim the law and put things in place before you go about boasting and thumping your chest.

Madam Speaker, in the previous budgets—in the previous elections, we were promised secondary road rehabilitation—200 million went from—it started with $100 million from Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. They gave them an additional $100 million—all of us were excited because roads are in a terrible condition. Apparently, maybe they felt the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government was not performing since nothing was done when that special roads rehabilitation special purpose company—they moved it to the Ministry of Works and Transport and again, we have not seen the result of $200 million allocated for roads and all the roads in Trinidad and Tobago are either bad, worse or “worserer.”

Madam Speaker, we speak about flooding, poor drainage, potholes, that is now the order of the day. The Minister spoke about garbage collection and then called you know, a very high price in terms of the number of dollars spent for collection and disposal of garbage. Garbage collection and sanitation is one of the areas that this Government and this Minister has liposuctioned money out of every
year. They have forced the regional corporations now, to reduce the number of days that they can collect garbage. And you know what is happening? I am on the ground, we are out there, we are seeing it. You have, because the trucks are not servicing the area, mini dumps being created, dumping sites where garbage is starting to pile up and the regional corporations are now forced to get equipment, trucks and backhoes, and so on to go and clean up those mini dumps. And it is because the truck service for the house to house collection of household garbage as well as bulk waste, is not what it used to be.

Right now within the Tunapuna region, throughout St. Augustine constituency and in some other areas—the chairman of the regional corporation Josiah Austin, recently became the chairman, is also aware because his district is also affected, where in a number of areas the garbage collection is really off whack and it is because you have liposuctioned the money out of the Votes to deal with garbage collection. You have been dismantling local government. When I hear about an app here and an app there, and everywhere an app, app, app.

Madam Speaker, we hear about these things as though, you know, all is going well and we know want to streamline it and make it digital. But the truth is that the Government’s handling of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, as well as the state enterprises related to local government, has raised serious concerns. So for example, the Community Improvement Services Limited, CISL, which was closed in 2017 under this PNM government, received a sufficient budget of $60 million in fiscal year 2022. Similarly, the Public Service Academy for Excellence Limited, the PSAEL, was moved to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and now with a new mandate that is really creating some confusion and inefficiencies in its operations.
This brings us to the issues regarding CEPEP. It really is unacceptable, Madam Speaker, that for the period 2016 and 2021 CEPEP has not submitted any audited financial statements, and particularly, in an environment where there have been accusations or allegations that very close relatives of senior government officials have received contracts from CEPEP.

Mr. Indarsingh: That is correct.

Ms. K. Ameen: And we had our very own Sen. Wade Mark commenting on that situation and he said, and I quote:

This is totally indefensible, it is inexcusable, and it is intolerable.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. K. Ameen: He said:

I think CEPEP has now gone rogue, you have spent close to $1.5 billion from 2015 to 2021 and you have to spend another close to $300 million or thereabouts in 2020/2023.

And what we have on the ground is a reduction in areas being serviced by CEPEP under the PNM, compared to what obtained under the UNC-led government. You have many areas where critical maintenance of the community cannot take place. When we have a flood we do make requests and CEPEP would come but really if we have the maintenance before, we can prevent the flooding. So where is the $1.5 million that CEPEP has utilized in this time? The Government has come with numerous false achievements.

11:20 a.m.

One I have spoken about before is the superficial name change to create the Borough of Diego Martin and the Borough of Siparia. Madam Speaker, do you know that not a single cent was given in this budget to transform Siparia or Diego Martin into a borough status? I recall the former chairman of the Siparia Regional
Corporation, Mr. Dinesh Sankarsingh, estimated what the cost of just the name change alone would be to the corporation. He spoke about the need to change signage on vehicles, signage on streets, the signage on the facilities, the stationery, and so on. And he said it was—I cannot remember the exact figure but I know it was over $1 million, and that was only for the name change. But have you seen a developmental plan, something substantive that would transform these regions into boroughs?

I thought that this would have been the ideal time for the Minister to layout some sort of plan to tell us that, you know, when we said it was a superficial name change, that we were somehow wrong, I was hoping to be wrong, and we have not seen any sort of substantive plan being put forward in terms of delivery of goods and services for these areas to match the name change.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. K. Ameen: When the PNM came into office in 2015, Madam Speaker—I am just remembering—they fired hundreds of litter prevention wardens who were hired under the UNC government; fired them. They were protesting by Kent House, local government headquarters, and now the Minister comes to speak about garbage pile up after you fired the litter wardens?

The Minister is speaking about creating jobs. Tell us how many jobs you vacated. Tell us how many people you fired from 2015 to now because they were hired under the UNC government for plain political victimization. Tell us that first before you tell us how many temporary jobs you are creating by these contracts, and so on, that are seasonal. Madam Speaker, the pain and suffering of the results of the incompetence of the Minister is apparent to every one of us because when our citizens face flooding that devastates areas like Bamboo and Woodland, damaging houses, vehicles, infrastructure—in my own constituency, I have been
pleading for flood relief grants. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services is in the Chamber and I have had to be, over the last year, in contact with her on numerous occasions, but the truth is that $10,000 maximum—it is often less than that—compensation that is given to flood victims, it is not enough. You know what the people want, the flood victims want? They want the flooding to stop. They want the Government to put an end to the needless suffering of flooding year after year.

Families have lost their homes, their livelihoods because of inadequate drainage systems. And you know what? The Minister of Works and Transport has an allocation, which I know my colleagues who shadow that portfolio will delve into, but I just want to mention, the Minister of Works and Transport had about $34 million to spend on drainage and flood reduction, and he spent $3 million. People of Trinidad and Tobago have to hear over and over about, “It eh ha money”.

Madam Speaker, under the People’s Partnership government, a lot of our achievements did not cost much in terms of dollars and cents. What it took was dedication. We had training. We had the provision of state offices for the first time and secretarial staff for every councillor. You know what you have now? Councillors being evicted from their offices. You have a challenge where councillors are being told that their landlord, who gets $2,500 in rent, has to be registered with the Procurement Regulator. You have workers being told that they cannot pay them travelling allowances or wacker allowances, and so on, for their tools. You have workers who cannot get proper safety equipment to work. That is what you have now.

We had the devolution to authority and resources within national policy guidelines to tie in local government performance to the central government’s
objectives. We had community development in housing, social welfare, sports, planning and the environment. We had equitable financial allocations to all regions. Madam Speaker, I heard the Minister trying to dispute the accusation of discrimination by region—geographic discrimination. I want to ask the Minister to just do an analysis of the population of the UNC-controlled regional corporations and the PNM-controlled corporations. You will find that it is very close, about 49 to 51 per cent, and I want you to compare the total funding that goes to regional corporations under UNC-controlled and under PNM-controlled. “Ah givin yuh ah lil homework”. I would like you to come back—and maybe you do not have to come back and admit your mistake, but at least you could correct it. UNC corporations are grossly underfunded under this PNM Government.

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

**Ms. K. Ameen:** That is political discrimination.

Madam Speaker, the Minister speaks about jobs created. A lot of the jobs he described are jobs where you have contractors doing work, construction, box drains and other projects. Those jobs really are not permanent jobs. You do not have job security, you do not have continuity, and what we need is security of jobs in this country. So boasting about these jobs after you fired thousands of people really, to me, makes no sense.

The Minister spoke about the training of CERT volunteers. CERT is the Community Emergency Response Team. The training of CERT volunteers is nothing new. The People’s Partnership government trained hundreds of CERT volunteers. Madam Speaker, we also effectively integrated them into disaster response. I am a certified CERT volunteer and I thank God for that, because in the time of disaster we did not see the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government or any other agency out there with us.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. K. Ameen: We had no help, we had no shelters, and to date we still have no shelters. We had no emergency response. And thanks to our training, we were able to get resources from volunteers, get assistance from outside and in some cases, make up “we” own thing to go out there and literally save lives. There were people who could not come out of their homes who needed medication. We could not get any help from any Ministry.

So when the assessment for flood-damaged persons takes place, and people wait for over nine months for flood compensation, by that time they get more flood, you know. Recently, there was a fire in the St. Augustine constituency and the Tunapuna/Piarco Disaster Management Unit was contacted, as we always do, we contact them for assistance. And it is my belief that the Disaster Management Unit of the Tunapuna region does not have the resources to deal with that entire region. I am affected because I represent the St. Augustine constituency, which falls wholly in the Tunapuna region, not because I am a former chairman and because we function very efficiently—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. K. Ameen:—but because, Madam Speaker, it is a bit falling apart. The people there are politically appointed. They may not want to say but they really are not getting the resources that are required.

I am amazed, Madam Speaker, when I hear the Minister speak about regional corporations and public procurement, and what he identified as a hindrance. Whose fault is that? Let me elaborate. The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and every state agency had sufficient time between the public procurement Act being passed and the proclamation that made it effective. During that time, it is the responsibility of each state agency to set up
their procurement units and put the administrative measures in place to be compliant with the law whenever it is proclaimed. Did the Minister set up procurement units? No. Did the Minister appoint procurement officers in every regional corporation? No. Did the Minister appoint clerical staff in every regional corporation? No. Did the Minister put IT support? No. Did the Minister engage the public contractors and suppliers to become registered according to the procurement Act and become a procurement regulator?

You know when they started to do it? After the Act was proclaimed. And the Prime Minister, I remember, in this Parliament gave a statement indicating that CEOs, or they will designate an appropriate person in the regional corporation to act as a procurement officer, because the Act provides for a person to be designated as a procurement officer within the state enterprise. So that is what they did after the fact. And due to the poor leadership and poor management and incompetence, which squarely falls on the shoulders of the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, that is why regional corporations are in this predicament. And it is the same set up you are heading for when it comes to local government reform if you do not put things in place.

So, Madam Speaker, what is the issue with procurement in regional corporations? What happened is that when the section of the public procurement Act was proclaimed, the regional corporations were now in a bind because they were told that it would be improper, it would be illegal to, for instance, award a contract to a contractor who is not in the registry and to not follow the guidelines provided for in the procurement Act. But because they did not have the administrative structure to comply, they had to stop awarding contracts. It meant that even as they went into a period of local government elections, where councils were dissolved and so on, the regional corporations could not award contracts to
sufficiently spend the moneys allocated from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government.

I think most of them did very well in spite of the failure of the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government. So I say, when you come and you read about who did not spend money and who could not spend money, ask yourself why, ask yourself who is responsible, and if you take responsibility, maybe things will get a little—a little bit of things will get done. Madam Speaker, I think I have spent enough time on the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government. I really want to move on to the constituency of St. Augustine.

Madam Speaker, I was born in Curepe, in the heart of the St. Augustine constituency. I was the councillor for St. Augustine South for 10 years. St. Augustine is family, St. Augustine is home, and when I speak in this Parliament or in any other place about St. Augustine, I represent with humility, I represent with all my heart, and so I move to the issues surrounding the St. Augustine constituency.

It is no secret that St. Augustine was terribly affected by flooding. At the end of November to the first week of December last year, we were, I mean, really devastated, from Bamboo all the way to St. Augustine South, some areas in Curepe, and so on. I have sent several letters, emails, made public calls, telephone calls to the Minister of Social Development and Family Services. Her office may have gotten fed up sometimes of me calling, sending follow-up emails, and so on.

One of the challenges we have, that it is important for the Ministry and the Government to address, is that when people get flood in December of 2022, September 2023 should not meet them waiting for compensation. The Government really failed on that one. And there have been occasions in the past, not only in St. Augustine but in other areas, where persons affected by natural
disasters were addressed and compensated within a shorter space of time. It is clear that the Ministry of social welfare has some inefficiencies to address. I was out on the field with the Disaster Management Unit. Regional corporations from other areas sent their units. They did the assessment. The assessment was not done by Khadijah Ameen or any constituent or any political organization. They did their assessments. They took photographs. We did everything. We did everything.

11.35 a.m.

Madam Speaker, I said before that that $10,000 is not sufficient. When a person gets water to window-height in their house or neck-height inside their house, trust me, they do not want $10,000 compensation. That is not enough to restore life and when you have the additional indignity of having to call every minute, every minute to beg for the money, I am pleading let us try to fix whatever led to this long period of time to give the compensation—but the people of St. Augustine really want the flooding to stop.

I want to ask the Minister of Works and Transport, what is the status of the major project that the Government boasted about in the previous budget? The St. Joseph River, the Guayabal River and so on that was designed or proposed to stop the flooding in Bamboo, in Valsayn South, in Spring Village, in St. Augustine South. We still have several leaking floodgates that have not been repaired. We have residents who risk their lives going to repair those floodgates to save the village. I want to pay tribute to Mr. Lall and others from Bamboo. Mr. Lall ended up in the hospital last year and I am asking the Minister if you care a little bit self, go and fix the floodgate, please.

During the flood relief in Bamboo, St. Augustine, Valsayn and so on, officers of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the various
disaster units, the municipal police and so on, were meeting by iShoppes of Bamboo, do you know why? Bamboo No. 2 does not have a community centre up to now. There was years ago, severely dilapidated, pigeon-infested and so on. I want to say special thanks to Mr. Ryan Rajkumar the owner of iShoppes of Bamboo who made his space available—

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

**Ms. K. Ameen:**—because of the failure of the Government. I am highlighting this need for the construction of a community centre in Bamboo No. 2 and the same applies to the Spring Village Community Centre in Kalpoo Street which is due for refurbishment. Both of these areas are within or close to flood-prone areas and they will benefit the community, not only for community events and community development, but in the time of a disaster these can be the official shelter. So I am pleading for the community centre in Bamboo No.2 and Spring Village to be renovated. These communities in St. Augustine suffer flooding.

Madam Speaker, I called a number earlier in my contribution and I have it written here now, I just want to say—to correct the record, $24 million was given to the Ministry of Works and Transport, Drainage and Division for major river cleaning, flood mitigation, pumps and floodgates. You know how much they spent, $3.5 million in the last budget. That is what they spent. Total failure by the Minister of Works and Transport while people get flooded.

The people of the St. Augustine constituency though, continue to inspire me to continue to fight. In some areas it is considered “at risk,” you know you have this new phrase, “at risk areas.” When you call an area “at risk” it is really because the Minister of National Security has failed the citizens in that area.

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

**Ms. K. Ameen:** That is what that is. In Oropune Gardens, Madam Speaker,
through community partnership, Oropune Gardens has seen a decrease in violent crimes, house break-ins and criminal activities. They used to average six homicides, six murders per year, they are now down to one, and they are now solving more of the crimes that take place in the community. The Oropune Police Youth Club, Mr. Kevin Greenidge, and the other NGOs, they have really come together to try to treat with some of the root causes and make the community better and safer. That is standing your ground, Madam Speaker, in spite of the failure of the Minister of National Security.

In order to treat with the root causes of crime, Oropune, like other at-risk areas such as St. Augustine South, requires the provision of opportunities for training, for development and for employment. We have a community centre and commercial centre in Oropune Gardens. There was a sod-turning ceremony at the beginning of the year, I believe. We have not seen the start of construction and I am appealing to HDC to at least tell us when construction of these two facilities will begin.

**11.40 a.m.**

We want to see the Oropune recreation ground, that really is just an empty space right now, developed. Right now in Oropune there are thousands of residents, and you know where they vote, Madam Speaker? In a pavilion. They walk across a muddy savannah. People in wheelchairs, you have to lift up the wheelchairs for people to go and vote because they have no school, they have no community centre, they have no commercial centre, you have no facility in that community that could be used for a community event. So, I am asking the relevant Ministries to please pay particular attention to this.

I want the HDC—the Ministry responsible for the HDC that is responsible for the Oropune Gardens area, to consider agricultural initiatives where the spaces
within the community can be used to get young people involved in growing food in a more organized way. Many have been doing it on their own but I am asking for the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to partner with existing farmers, with young people in the area, and with fellow residents, so that we can have, even within an HDC development, agriculture and the ability to feed our own families.

There are insufficient services in this Oropune area as well. I would like to see maintenance contracts, whether it is through CEPEP or HDC, in terms of cutting the grass at the side of the roads and in the public spaces, the collection of garbage. “Yuh does have” piles of garbage, rats, cockroaches, snakes and it is just a daily occurrence because of insufficient garbage collection. I really would like us to beautify the environment with floral, plants, parks and benches and so on, so that you will have a greater sense of community pride but you will also provide employment and opportunities for some of the young people there.

Madam Speaker, in St. Augustine south, well, in St. Augustine constituency as a whole, there are a few bridges that I have been begging for. I “doh” know if they are waiting for the bridge to collapse before something is done. Dry River bridge in Orange Grove Road, Bassie Street bridge over the Blackman ravine in Spring Village, Blackman Lane bridge in Curepe and the Dry River bridge on the train line. I do not want these bridges to collapse like everything else is collapsing under the Government. I am appealing. You recently visited, you see the need, you have done estimates, I am asking you to deliver.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Work and Transport recently constructed a bridge on the Golden Grove Road in Arouca, after it collapsed, by the way, and that same road south of the Churchill Roosevelt Highway falls in the St. Augustine constituency. In the area from TTPost to Caribbean Airlines the road really is in need of being widened. There is no shoulder. In an emergency, you have any
incident, there is a traffic pile up. It is a route to the Piarco International Airport to cargo and so on. There is sufficient land, vacant land, there. I am asking, I mean, the airport would have their annual drill and I am sure that it would have been identified as a weakness. I am asking the Ministry of Work and Transport do consider urgently widening that road to make it safer.

Madam Speaker, the St. Augustine constituency was once designated under the UNC government as an education city.

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

**Ms. K. Ameen:** This is when we had a forward-thinking Government led by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

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

**Ms. K. Ameen:** St. Augustine is—

**Madam Speaker:** Member for St. Augustine, your original speaking time is now spent. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to wind up your contribution, if you wish.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Yes.

**Madam Speaker:** You may proceed.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** Thank you. Madam Speaker, St. Augustine is the home of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. There are several campuses of the University of Trinidad and Tobago, several private tertiary institutions and numerous secondary and primary schools. Under the PNM Government even for the basics, the very basics for schools are lacking. This is the third consecutive year that I am pleading for the Curepe Presbyterian Primary School for the work started under the People’s Partnership Government to be completed. Last year $5 million was allocated. Whatever work that did, did not allow the classrooms to be utilized. So we are still in the same situation where the children are jam-packed in

**UNREVISED**
the old school.

The former Curepe Junior Secondary, which is now St. Joseph Secondary, I have a number of constituents that go there. It falls in the constituency of St. Joseph but it seems that the Member for St. Joseph did not have time in his contribution to mention that that school has not yet been reopened. It is still overgrown.

The Bamboo Early Childhood Centre was designed. An area was already allocated. I am asking for the Ministry of Education to consider the Bamboo Early Childhood Centre. The Bamboo Settlement No. 2 Government Primary School, Madam Speaker, if you see the condition of this school. It was originally painted white. The condition of the paint and the walls from the moment you walk into that school, I mean, it looks really bad. But that is just a very prominent indication of the minor repairs and so on that are needed. The school is badly in need of painting and major repairs before it gets more dilapidated. I am also concerned because this thing looks—it is either mildew or moss and so on and the health implications of that for the children.

Madam Speaker, there is a school called Tunapuna Boys’ RC School. It is a little school behind the Tunapuna cemetery and sometimes I think it is forgotten. That school is in need of some repairs. So I want to ask the Minister of Education and the Minister in the Ministry to consider the possibility of doing some repairs there. The principal would be very happy. We also must consider the possibility of a primary school in Oropune Gardens. I believe land was allocated for that in the development, but I see more and more children and they are contacting me as the Member of Parliament to ask about PTSC bus services because their children go to school outside of the area. And really, with so many people living there, I think, it is now time for a primary school in Oropune Gardens.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, the UTT Valsayn campus, which was formally the Valsayn Teachers Training College, falls in the St. Augustine constituency. That now houses the St. George’s College from Barataria. I must declare that St. George’s College is my alma mater. One of the best schools in this country. Madam Speaker, for a number of years St. George’s College was temporarily closed because the school collapsed due to the Ministry not having the proper maintenance and so on. So the partial collapse of the school, which is located on Sixth Avenue in Barataria, has seen the relocation to the UTT Valsayn College which was supposed to be temporary. Since then the parents have been given numerous dates in terms of when the construction will be completed. It has been postponed several times. I am asking the Minister of Education to provide some information in terms of the status of the repairs to the school, the estimated date for completion and when students can expect to go back to the original St. George’s College school.

Madam Speaker, a feature of the St. Augustine education city area disbanded by this Government was sustainable solutions to traffic management. In the El Dorado area the Caura River bridge, which is on the Eastern Main Road in Tacarigua just before the St. Mary’s Children Home, that Eastern Main Road is the boundary between St. Augustine and Tunapuna. That bridge, that area, is a bottleneck. Those areas are densely populated, Dinsley, Tacarigua, Caura, El Dorado, Tunapuna areas. A study was conducted under the People’s Partnership Government identifying solutions. One of the solutions was a bridge over the same Caura River further upstream to provide an alternative route. I am asking because I heard the Member for Tunapuna referring to the area as an education hub. It is an education hub but it is your Government that who disbanded the St.
Augustine education city committee which would have supported the need for education hub.

And so when I heard the Member for Tunapuna speaking about a housing development to take place—I cannot remember if it was for providing houses or providing votes. But the truth is that you have to consider alternative routes and the Government continues to plan and build houses in marginal seats where their own specific aims in mind, not thinking about the supporting infrastructure. And if you really are concerned about the development of Tunapuna and the surrounding areas, you will put an alternative route, put and additional bridge over that Caura River to ease the traffic in that area.

I feel so ashamed to know that, I mean, when I heard the Member for Tunapuna speaking about something he said that they were going to open in El Dorado. But the bottom line is, it is this Government that closed down the nursing academy in El Dorado. Closed it down. I have no doubt that my colleague who shadows education, well, I could say Minister in the future MP Anita Haynes will elaborate more on how the Government has dismantled education.

The Member for Tunapuna in listing projects and saying that every constituency has an equal share, Madam Speaker, that is not true. The Member for Laventille East/Morvant in this Parliament told the truth in his contribution because he said that the delivery of government resources is done through the PNM offices. That is the truth, you know. Government resources are surreptitiously distributed by PNM offices through losing candidates who the PNM rejected.

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I just ask you to withdraw that particular word and find another way to say that please.

**Ms. K. Ameen:** I presume it is the word “surreptitious”, so I will rephrase.

**UNREVISED**
Madam Speaker: And again, when you do that, please do not mention the word. Okay?

Ms. Ameen: Thank you. I will rephrase.

Madam Speaker: Okay. And while I am on my legs, I was going to make the announcement after, but I would like to remind you and all other Members, when you are referring to Members again, remember try to distinguish between here and how you speak to them outside. So it would be the MP for Tabaquite.

Ms. Ameen: Certainly. I correct that and thank you very much for your guidance. Madam Speaker, the truth is that government resources have been distributed via PNM offices through losing candidates who the population rejected, and that must come to an end.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. Ameen: So when the Member for Tunapuna mentions projects, I want to remind them that projects awarded by political priority will end up in disaster because rain does not fall by political affiliation.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. Ameen: When you build a watercourse to relieve the flooding from the people in Tunapuna and you drop all the water over the main road and it abruptly ends there, and you promise a phase two, you just dumped all the water and continue to flood Back Street, Macoya Road, and Macoya Extension and so on.

Madam Speaker, I hear the Government speaking about regularization. I want regularization for residents of Dookiesingh Street and Pasea and so on, former citrus growers’ lands in LSA in Bamboo, Valsayn. Madam Speaker, the issues in the constituency of St. Augustine that the Government has failed to address are too numerous for me to articulate in this budget debate and there are other places where I will continue to vociferously represent the people of St.
Augustine and the people of this country because it is very clear that the PNM is disconnected from reality, disconnected from the people.

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

**Ms. K. Ameen:** And they are not even seeing that they lost the local government elections, thousands of people voted for the UNC over the PNM. They lost seats. The UNC won more local government seats than the PNM did and the writing is on the wall for them. They have lost Tobago. They have lost Trinidad. It is only the “and” again remaining. Thank you.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Minister of Social Development and Family Services.

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

**The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox):** Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Appropriation Bill 2023/2024. And I wish to congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance for his comprehensive budget presentation and his team at the Ministry of Finance who often go unrecognized and unheralded for their hard work, research and preparation that assisted the Minister. I would also like to thank the Minister of Planning and Development and her team for their contribution as well with regard to the PSIP.

Madam Speaker, the theme of this fiscal package for 2023/2024, “Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth”, according to the Minister of Finance, speaks to the Government’s commitment to building capacity, developing resilience and maintaining responsiveness in the public sector. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Service will ensure that we continue to help and empower our clients so that they will develop the capacity and resilience required to this point where there is little or no need for the Ministry’s intervention. The
entire thrust of the Minister’s presentation is consistent with the Ministry’s declared intention to align all its programmes and policies with Government’s national development strategy, *Vision 2030*, as well as the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through the Sustainable Development Goals.

**11.55 a.m.**

Both frameworks fully support the thrust to achieve social inclusion among the vulnerable populations by promoting strategies for sustainable livelihood, leaving no one behind. Indeed, we are even more grateful to hear from the budget presentation that there are measures to strengthen the social safety and protection network of our citizens. I am also happy to know the hon. Minister articulated our government’s plan to allocate $5.5 billion to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to achieve these initiatives.

It must be acknowledged that all of the social safety and protection programmes do not reside within the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, but are implemented also by other Ministries, and this provides evidence of the whole-of-government approach adopted under the astute leadership of our Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley. It demonstrates that the challenges that we face in this country are not insurmountable, but when we put our heads together and commit to arriving at solutions for the greater and common good of all our citizens. We applaud the programmes articulated in the budget presentation which support the vulnerable, and some of these include:

- Funding for the Adult Literacy Tutors Association to expand remedial education.
- Strengthening the technical and vocational education component of our school system.
- Providing book and uniform grants to students in need.

UNREVISED
Continuing support for the school feeding programme while providing guaranteed markets for local farmers, and of course the return of the market food box initiative.

- Continuing to sustain existing public assistance programmes.

So, Madam Speaker, we on this side can say without fear of contradiction that there are few countries in the world that provide the suite of grants to their citizens as obtains here in Trinidad and Tobago. The 17 per cent increase in the minimum wage which will impact the pockets of approximately 190,000 citizens was another clear signal that this Government listens to the voice of those who are often considered poor and vulnerable. It is important to make the point, Madam Speaker, that this is a minimum wage which simply means that no employer can offer anything below that to their employees. It, however, does not stop them from offering a higher wage.

And as I listened to the Opposition Leader and subsequent speakers, and even before her, the members of our trade union movement, all of whom were arguing for a larger increase, I could not help but wonder if they live in the same country as I do. Because this is a country, Madam Speaker, where the price of bread increased and doubles increased by 20 per cent when the price of flour increased, and though flour prices have decreased, the prices of bread and doubles have remained the same.

This is a country where the price of transportation increases, and with any increase, of course, of the price of gas. So can you imagine what would happen if the minimum wage was increased by approximately 43 per cent, or 71 per cent as suggested by the trade union movement, there is no doubt that food inflation would skyrocket as the increased cost of wages will undoubtedly be passed on to the consumer, thus defeating the primary purpose of increasing the minimum wage in
the first place. It is for this reason we on this side must constantly caution the general public about the positions adopted by those on the other side.

Madam Speaker, in last fiscal the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services held firm to its course and persisted in its responsibility to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago, specifically our vulnerable clients, all in keeping with our social protection mandate. During the past fiscal year the Ministry remained resolute in our determination to provide the necessary financial assistance to the various vulnerable groups in society through a suite of grants. The cost of this to the taxpayer was approximately $5,600,000,000 as at September 2023, and this facilitated the improvement of the socioeconomic standard of living of a wide cross-section of vulnerable citizens who access the following grants: Social assistance known as public assistance. As at September 2023, there were 16,269 individuals in receipt of the Public Assistant Grant, of which 2,410 were new beneficiaries in 2023. So the total expenditure of that grant to date is $324,602,811.

With regard to our Food Support Programme, as at September 2023, there were 20,063 households in receipt of food support. The total expenditure on that grant as at September 2023, amounted to approximately $136,445,946. During fiscal 2023, the Minister approved the total of 1,632 applications under the General Assistance Grants programme at a cost of approximately $28,812,130. And these are grants available for persons who are vulnerable and in dire need of temporary assistance due to a crisis or an emergency situation, and these include Clothing Grant, Dietary Grant, Education, Funeral, Medical Equipment, Pharmaceutical, Prosthetics, Rental Assistance and School Supplies Grant.

Madam Speaker, $19,452,400 were distributed to flood victims for the replacement of household items destroyed during the flood. A total of 2,504
applications were approved impacting 8,800 in 11 households. So 258 children received the School Supplies Grant also. A total of $3,202,000 was expended on the School Supplies Grant. Let me read that over, a total of $302,200 was expended on the School Supplies Grant, and this was because of an emergency situation, like a fire or flooding.

Our National Social Development Programme: This programme is a social intervention that seeks to improve the standard of living conditions of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago through the provision of basic infrastructure for essential utility services. The programme offers Minor House Repair Assistance Grant which provides up to $15,000 in materials, only for the repair or upgrade of dwelling houses, and up to $20,000 in materials only to effect the upgrades in the event of a disaster. Sanitary Plumbing Assistance Grant which provides up to $15,000 in materials only under normal circumstances, and in the event of a disaster, upgrade of toilet and bathroom facilities for a dwelling house. And this allows for the upgrade of outdoor toilet facilities also, latrines, to indoor facilities where space permits.

Madam Speaker, in fiscal 2023, 231 households benefited from these grants at a cost of approximately $1,014,252. So with an eye on building capacity and increasing empowerment of our clients the Ministry continued its Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development Programme, which provides a mechanism for citizens who are considered vulnerable but have an interest in starting or improving their businesses. Many existing clients of the Ministry who received welfare grants have been able to start micro-enterprises, which foster positive values such as independence and of course self-sufficiency. And for fiscal 2023, 59 beneficiaries received grant funding in the sum of approximately $194,974. And this is certainly one of our success stories as many of our
primary—as our primary objective is to ensure that as many clients as possible be weaned off sponsorship as their circumstances improve, thereby allowing more persons the opportunity to get assistance.

Our Senior Citizens Grants: There were 111,735 senior citizens in receipt of our pension, and of this figure, 9,814 persons were added to the database as new beneficiaries in fiscal 2023. So at the close of fiscal 2023, the total expenditure stood at $4,462,487,545. So in addition to this grant, all recipients now have the opportunity to submit their completed life and residential declaration forms via ttconnect. The completion of the life and residential certificates can be conducted at either of the 11 local assistance boards, or at the seven ttconnect offices. And this initiative is one between the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the National Information and Communication Company Limited, iGovTT, through ttconnect. It allows senior citizens to utilize ttconnect toll free numbers and e-appointment system to make an appointment to submit their completed life and residential declaration form.

As at September 2023, there were 21,828 persons in receipt of our Disability Assistance Grant, 1,745 are persons who were added in fiscal 2023. The total expenditure paid as of September 2023, amounted to approximately $551,955,238. Our Disability Assistance Grant for minors for the period October 2022 to September 2023, a total of 3,483 persons received our Disability Assistance Grant for minors, and of this number, 756 were recorded as new clients for 2023. So the total expenditure on this grant was $64,299,945.

So, Madam Speaker, you will recall that last year the Minister of Finance announced during the budget debate that a one-off Transportation Grant in the sum of $1,000 would be paid to recipients of the various key grant programmes. So a total of 150,422 clients of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
received that one-off Transportation Grant in January at a cost of $150,422,000. And this one-off payment was implemented to alleviate the effect of the increase in the price of fuel. So a breakdown of this payment is as follows:

- Senior citizens pensioners, we spent $109,523,000 in transport allowance.
- Social and Public Assistance Grant recipients, $21,978,000.
- Disability Assistance Grant, adults, $15,978,000; and
- Disability Assistance Grant, minors, $3,004,000.

So, Madam Speaker, in the last fiscal year for grants and services overall, we spent over $5.4 billion. In past eight years we spent close to $45 billion, and this does not include the Transportation Grant that was given out.

So, Madam Speaker, all our efforts at the Ministry have been focused on the prudent management of the funds that are allocated to us. We are persistently strengthening our internal controls in order to increase accountability, transparency and increase checks and balances in order to root out corruption. During fiscal 2023, the Ministry’s Investigations and Compliance Unit consistently advanced its efforts in combating error, fraud and corruption within the Ministry, and specifically in fiscal 2023, the unit recorded a decrease in the number of incidences of fraud and corruption within the Ministry. The clear evidence suggests that most of these cases examined originated from previous fiscal years.

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

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** Madam Speaker, the commitment of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to protect the most vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago from the scourge of error, of fraud and corruption in the delivery of social services. We, this administration, under the astute leadership of Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley stand as guardians of integrity and champions of accountability.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: And in our pursuit of this noble mission we must acknowledge that the path has not always been clear. And I will say in that few minutes—some of what I will say in the few minutes emanate from the desire of this Government to shield the vulnerable from those who would exploit and undermine the social safety net. Criminal activities as we have come to know it, Madam Speaker, do not only occur at the end of the barrel of a gun. We have therefore adopted a zero tolerance position to any crime or evidence of criminal activity uncovered at the Ministry. And like our hon. Prime Minister will say, let the chips fall where they may.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

12.10 p.m.

I have had cause to assemble at the Ministry a formidable team of investigators and compliance officers dedicated to the cause of unearthing and eradicating fraud and corruption within the Ministry. And we have joined hands with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service because we recognize that their work is not only about enforcing the law, it is also about restoring faith in our social institutions, instilling confidence in our citizens and in securing a brighter future for all. So together our mission is clear and our cause is just.

Madam Speaker, of 109 completed investigations under the error category, the unit was able to restore benefits to 90 per cent of the beneficiaries. The ICU, which is the Investigation and Compliance Unit, identified 122 cases of fraud from 2021—2023. These cases involved cashing of large cheques at supermarkets using identical birth certificates, we have found, to access grants. We have found persons with the same birth certificate accessing grants, receiving grants while residing abroad and the emergence of ghost beneficiaries on the payroll.
Madam Speaker, during the 2022 Christmas period, 56 counterfeit cheques under the guise of Public Assistance Grants were discovered by the Central Bank. And this information is in the hands of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and they are actively investigating as I speak. And we are hoping to bring this investigation to a close soon. And this tells us that we have to protect the vulnerable population from the scourge of criminal activity. It also speaks to the stewardship of public funds as these activities erode public trust in government institutions, but this is not all.

Madam Speaker, the unit also discovered disturbing trends and instances of corruption within the system: cheques returned to local boards upon clients’ demise were being cashed, raising questions about internal controls. Similarly, cheques returned by TTPost to the Social Welfare Division for deceased or unclaimed individuals resurfaced as cashed, indicating potential collusion between employees of the Ministry and business establishments, including supermarkets. And particularly concerning is the manipulation of disbursement cheques intended for first-time clients with retroactive lump sums. These cheques are being misappropriated by unauthorized individuals, both internally and externally.

Our investigators unearthed collusion between employees, I mentioned, and supermarkets, where cheques belonging to the deceased clients were cashed. Information submitted to senior management revealed the presence of approximately 28,064 ineligible recipients, leading to an estimated possible monthly leakage of approximately $11 million. Clients were reported as deactivated from the system when they were still kept on the system for payment. Also, the unauthorized use of food cards by unnamed employees of the Social Welfare Division was also identified, but this is not a new thing. It seemed as though this has been in the system for a long time, this has been happening a long
I want to draw your attention to a deeply troubling discovery, namely of a prepaid Mastercard programme introduced by the PP government, led by the current Opposition leader, Member for Siparia during its administration. The prepaid Mastercard programme was created by Cabinet Minute 23/77/2012/0906 to allow for the production of 2,300 reloadable prepaid Mastercard for a one-time grant payment of $510 which was to commence on September 03, 2012. For ease of reference, let me quote the Cabinet Note:

Section 4(a) of the Cabinet Minute agreed to the provision of a one-off grant of $510 to a total of 2,050 needy children, comprising 50 children to be identified by each of the 41 Members of the Parliament for the purchase of school supplies for the school term commencing September 03, 2012.

And section 4(b) of the Cabinet Minute established that the Minister of the People and Social Development be responsible for an additional 250 one-off grants of $510 for the allocation to very needy children, including those identified from within the databases of the Ministry of the People and Social Development.

Let me state that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services investigated these reloadable prepaid Mastercards, which were found in a cupboard—in one of the cupboards in the Social Welfare Division. The application form which accompanied the Mastercards stated that the cards could load up to a staggering $30,000 per day. This simple arithmetic reveals an alarming fact, 2,300 cards, multiplied by $30,000 per day, equals a potential daily sum of $69 million that could have been laundered through this programme. This inconsistency between the Cabinet Minute and the $510 one-off payment and the contract application form, which showed that $30,000 could have been uploaded
per day, is of significant concern.

On the application form it says:

“The Prepaid Card Account can be Loaded or Reloaded up to a maximum of...$30,000 per day, with a maximum of two... reloads per day.

The maximum amount that can be accessed per day is TT $30,000. The maximum number of purchases per day is 15, up to a maximum value of TT $30,000. The maximum number of ATM cash advances per day is 5, up to a maximum of TT $30,000.

The Bank may in its sole discretion at any time from time to time vary the above without notice to the Cardholder.”

So we found some of the cards, we do not know where the others are, where they went and some of the cards have a name on it. The card has names and the application form was now being sent to applicants. So I do not know how the name is on the card and the application form is blank. Okay? So there is a blank application form and a TT Mastercard. And I have it in my possession—I have some in my possession. This is not just a financial figure, it is a moral and ethical concern and a massive red flag for financial impropriety. The sheer volume of funds that can flow through these cards is astounding.

The questions that beg to be answered are as follows—and I know the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas East will follow me, so therefore there are some questions that I would like answered. I also want to note that the timing of these cards, 2012, the Member of Parliament for Chaguanas East was a member of staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services in this same department. Why did the PP government decide to issue a one-off grant payment on a reloadable Mastercard to the value of $30,000, after the Cabinet approval was for $510? We have the Cabinet Note. Was this about serving the people or was an
underlying nefarious agenda lurking beneath the surface? Who were these cards truly intending to benefit from this scheme? Was there a manipulation of beneficiaries, meaning beneficiaries could have knowingly participated in this fraudulent activity?

The card already had names and then it was attached to an application form. So it means that persons did not apply for the form. Were there not other ways that the regime could have provided the grant without creating a reloadable prepaid Mastercard? Was there not at that time an already existing framework which had the necessary policy, procedures and controls to guide and facilitate this one-off payment of $510? Was this Mastercard system chosen and preferred to avoid scrutiny, bypassing restrictions, controls and auditing procedures? Was this an avenue for money laundering as reloadable prepaid Mastercard can be used to move illicit funds more discretely—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—without detection? Prepaid Mastercards can be used to move illicit funds more discretely without detection. Why did the PP government introduce such a complex system that had the capacity to facilitate a high level of money laundering?

As the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, charged with taking care of the vulnerable, I cannot and will not let this matter and these lingering questions—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—go to the wind. And stay with me as I tell you about the intricacies, anomalies and inefficiencies created by these Mastercards. Financial impropriety is not a victimless crime.

Madam Speaker, I am sure you will agree that our democracy rests on

UNREVISED
transparency, accountability and the trust we place on our leaders. A deeper scrutiny of Cabinet Note 23/77/2012/0906, where this bewildering move with unnecessary complexity was made by the PP government which produced these 2,300 reloadable prepaid Mastercards for a one-time payment of just $510, these Mastercards were addressed to named beneficiaries and left either in the care of the Social Welfare Division, head office, or some constituency offices, along with an application form. And let me establish up front that at this period, I was the Member of Parliament Laventille East/Morvant, and during the relevant period, at no time, did I participate in or was aware of that prepaid Mastercard programme.

So we talk about discrimination and it would appear as that this only went to the PP Members of Parliament because I called a few of my colleagues who were Members of Parliament at the time and I asked them if they remember anything about this card and they know nothing about it; all of my colleagues. So we received none but yet the Cabinet Note stated that all Members of Parliament were supposed to receive 50 of this card. We looked for—we continue to look in the Ministry for the evidence with regard to distribution of these cards. No evidence could be found, but the cards were issued because we checked with the bank.

Madam Speaker, I would like to know who received these 2,300 cards and I want you to note the cart before the horse in this story because, of course, they were left in the care of Social Welfare Division or a constituency office with the applications form for beneficiaries who were already named. How can something be created and sent to a beneficiary who has yet to apply? It should be noted that the application form, which accompanied the cards, did not identify the TT $510 limit per beneficiary. And this raises questions and concerns about transparency and informed consent. Beneficiaries may not have been even aware of the limitation on these cards which could lead to unintended misuse.
Investigations conducted thus far discovered 40 of these cards still in the possession of the Ministry, addressed to the named beneficiaries and, of course, the head office, Social Welfare Office or constituency. And let me reiterate, the card was to be loaded with a maximum of $510, according to the Cabinet Minute, but the application and card was sent to the beneficiary with the possibility of loading $30,000.

So between 2012—2015, that is the year the reloadable prepaid Mastercard that has since come into my possession was expected to expire, there was a potential to launder TT $69 million per day if all 2,300 cards were loaded with the maximum allowed. And this amount is significant and highlights the severity of the risk associated with the reloadable prepaid Mastercard in question. And more concerning is that the Minister who sat as the Minister of Finance in the Cabinet at that time was the past CEO of the bank that approved these cards, and I say nothing more on this matter.

A similar scheme was executed in 2014, which is also under investigation, but I hasten to add that election was called on June 13, 2015, by the then PP government and Cabinet went on to agree on July 2015 to provide 4,000 prepaid cards, repeating the same scheme as was done 2012 and 2014. Where are these cards?

Madam Speaker, creating reloadable prepaid Mastercard for a one-off benefit payment defies logic, as prepaid card programmes typically come with various expenses, such as card issuance cost, processing fees, activation fees, distribution cost, administrative overheads, maintenance fees. So these extemporaneous costs would have been well known by the then Minister of Finance.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: So, Madam Speaker, it may have been more prudent to use any of the existing grant payment methods, which were available at the time, such as cheques, direct deposit, bank transfers. Madam Speaker, you know that people like to say if “yuh know ting, send it to de police”? Well, we have done just that.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: And as I stand here to make my contribution, there has already been collaboration with the police on the issue of potential fraud and money laundering activities that may have taken place during the implementation of this Mastercard fiasco.

12.25 p.m.

As a Government, we cannot ignore the potential implications of this ruse. It is our duty as responsible citizens to hold our Governments accountable for its actions and decisions, and we must ensure that our systems are designed to protect the interest of the people and not to facilitate elicit activities.

Madam Speaker, only this week five persons have been charged with conspiracy to defraud the Government of $900,000, almost a million dollars, for the purpose of operating a bogus home for the older persons, and one of these persons is a former employee of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. And this is one of many cases that is receiving the attention of the officers of the fraud squad. The challenges with corruption in the Ministry are real, but our efforts to combat them are not in surmountable. It is our duty to address them head on and we are committed to doing so. And as the Investigations and Compliance Unit continue its work in the Ministry, it will continue to investigate all cases of fraud, corruption and error. Our goal is to follow-up and all cases reported to the police, and the work of the unit is only just beginning.
I want to reiterate that our commitment to protecting the most vulnerable citizens of Trinidad and Tobago is unwavering. It is a commitment rooted in our values and it drives us to work tirelessly to ensure that every citizen can live a life of dignity and security.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Madam Speaker, I move on to speak a little about NGOs. I know someone mentioned the NGO units, I will move on to the NGOs. In the Ministry’s drive to fulfil its mandate, we have continued to support vulnerable groups through the provision of financial assistance to NGOs through annual subventions or financing for one-off grants for specialized programmes or projects.

For fiscal 2023, the sum of approximately $51,920,000 was allocated to 22 NGOs, inclusive of three statutory boards, to support the work of these organizations, and to facilitate the delivery of specialized services for our vulnerable clients. It must be noted, however, as part of the Ministry’s value for money approach, several NGOs that previously received a subvention were not complying with the Cabinet approved mandate and the other requirements for funding, and we have been working with these organizations to ensure compliance. Of the 22 NGOs, 17 and three statutory bodies received financial support for fiscal 2023 in the sum of $38,285,898, and these NGOs primarily deliver services in the areas of support for socially displaced persons, support for women and victims of all forms of violence, psychosocial and clinical interventions, and services for persons with disabilities and several youth organizations.

The Ministry also provided support for special projects and programmes by NGOs that were aligned to the Ministry’s overall mandate via the provision of one-off grants. As of September 2023, the sum of $66,500 was spent on one-off grant funding to support key areas such as support for persons with disability; assistance
for transitional housing programmes; education and wellness initiatives targeting senior citizens, family intervention programming with a special focus on healthy marriages and the family unit; support for victims of domestic violence; grief support for widows; and mental health first-aid as a means of treating with suicide ideation.

Initiatives were also undertaken to support social sector NGOs through capacity building, knowledge exchange and information sessions as well as to promote deeper partnerships with the Ministry and other social sector NGOs. These included virtual knowledge-sharing initiatives which facilitate that the transfer of knowledge and learning opportunities to NGOs on best practices for operational and programmatic development.

Sessions included tips and tools on navigating virtual environmental safety specifically as it pertain to vulnerable groups such as older persons, children and youth, how to safeguard themselves from online predators, romance scams and financial risk, and orientation and sensitization on sign language inclusion for NGOs towards more inclusive surface delivery. Approximately 63 NGOs participants benefitted from this session. Additionally, the Ministry partnered with the Cropper Foundation for World NGO Day this year, and 80 NGO representatives participated in virtual discussion and NGO information sharing on challenges and experiences in a post-COVID climate, digitalization efforts and opportunities for civil society.

During fiscal 2023, the Ministry conducted a careful review of the clauses of Trinidad and Tobago disability Bill, plus invited organizations that work with persons with disabilities and Government Ministries, a representative from UWI to provide feedback. Persons with and without disabilities were able to provide feedback through this process, and it is our desire, Madam Speaker, that when we
bring this Bill to the House it would have gone through a rigorous process and review so that it will be unanimously passed by both Houses in this Parliament.

To date, 15 Ministries and nine organizations that work with persons with disabilities responded and provided comments to this Bill. So we do not believe in the top-down approach. We believe that persons with disabilities have a voice and must be heard. We believe in their motto, “Nothing for us without us”, and this means that they must be included in the discussions about anything that is being proposed or implemented for them. We value their opinion and this is why we took the approach to hear from them before we move forward with the Bill.

In fiscal 2024, the Ministry will finalize the outfitting and the refurbishment of the national therapeutic and resource centre with therapeutic equipment to facilitate the treatment, rehabilitation of their various categories of disabilities. Tenders went out to facilitate the outfitting and I believe that we should be awarding a tender with regard to the continued refurbishment of the centre. And you know, Madam Speaker, I want to say that there has been some information out there which is erroneous because I understand that Mr. Phillip Metivier has been out there stating that the Ministry put out the children with disability who use there. The first thing that I would like Mr. Metivier to provide for me is where he got the authority to utilize that building because the building is not fit for persons to be there. It was under refurbishment from August the 3rd, 2022 to March the 16th, 2023. The Ministry of Works and Transport has been there conducting the fire and safety works at the building. So it begs the question: How did he get in there? Who gave him permission to use the building?

That is not a building that is supposed to be used because at this point in time the works are ongoing and, therefore, no one should be there. That is a risk and it is risk for the children with disabilities. So I would like him to bring the
authority to me because he has been going from media house to media house saying that he was put out. I want to know when did he get in, and where is the approval that he got in writing from the Permanent Secretary who knows nothing about him being in that building. Okay? Because that is of serious risk if something happens to those children. And I would like to find out that information from Mr. Metivier as he goes about creating mischief.

At this point in time, the tenders actually just went out with regard to the outfitting of the building and, therefore, we are working assiduously to try to have it in place as soon as possible. We recently signed an MOU with Digicel foundation and they are assisting us with the outfitting of the building. That MOU was signed two weeks ago and, therefore, we are moving fast-pace ahead to try to get it ready as soon as possible. I also would like to say that the centre will serve as a multi-disciplinary resource centre for persons with disability. It will provide assessment, therapy and training. A community-based therapeutic approach will be used in order to improve the quality of life experienced by persons with disabilities, and they will receive adequate and effective habilitative and rehabilitative services.

The suite of services will be offered in phases. Where phase one would include speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and behavioural therapy. Phase two would offer aqua therapy, physiotherapy, music, art and drama. And further, parents and caregivers would be equipped with necessary skills to continue therapy at home and student social workers and therapists will have the opportunity to be trained there. So we have a whole programme in place. We have a team of persons who is in charge of that building and, therefore we are moving ahead. We have not put out any children with disabilities out of the centre. It seems as though that Mr. Metivier has been illegally occupying the centre.

UNREVISED
I move to social displacement. During fiscal 2023, the Ministry turned the sod for the construction of an assessment and temporary housing facility in South Quay.

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

**Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:** This five-storey facility that our homeless citizens can now call home is located on a site area of about half an acre with a floor area of 62,000 square feet spread over five storeys. It will host a minimum of 200 homeless persons and 25 staff at a time with adequate accommodation for a six-week minimum assessment period, because, of course, they have to be assessed first.

If persons are found to be substance abusers, then they will be taken for assistance. If they are ill, they will be taken to the hospital for treatment. If there is a mental issue then we will organize with the mental health persons to assist them. The grounds of the building will include parking, a hard court, courtyard, green space, vegetable garden. Level one will include a reception and assessment centre; a day user facility with activity centre; and a night user facility with a shelter, washrooms and laundry. Shared communal space includes dining hall, gathering space, counselling and meeting rooms. Levels two and three and four will house male and female dorms including TV rooms, gathering space. There will also be administrative offices and family dorms with shared living, kitchen and laundry services. We also will have a library.

The cost of construction and outfitting with tamper-proof furniture and fittings is approximately $55 million. The price tag of this facility where I saw some persons mentioned that it was just too much for persons who are socially displaced, I do not understand that but whatever we are doing we must do it to the best of our ability because it is people, it is human beings that we are catering to..
Sen. The Hon. D. Cox (cont’d)

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: But if cost extends far beyond mere numbers, it represents a profound investment in humanity, in compassion, and in the transformation of lives.

So, Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will continue to help, empower, and transform the lives of the poor and vulnerable among us. We will continue to fight against corruption. We will ensure that there is a high level of accountability and transparency when it comes to spending the money that has been allocated to all the persons who are currently beneficiaries of the Ministry’s grants and programmes which we continue to give our grants the full amount and on time every month. And those that will be the beneficiaries in the future, and we are committed to ensuring that no one is left behind. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for Chaguanas East.

Ms. Vandana Mohit (Chaguanas East): Thank you very much. Thank you for the opportunity, Madam Speaker, as I continue this good fight, as I continue this lobby for my constituents of Chaguanas East and the people of Trinidad and Tobago at large.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: As I enter this debate on the appropriation Bill, 2024, Madam Speaker, I stand ready to be called pessimistic, but I am firm in my belief that I am here to fight for the poor and vulnerable and be their voice by expressing the realities of what they face in this country.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: And, Madam Speaker, this budget represents an abject failure on
this Government’s ability to address the real challenges affecting citizens.

Madam Speaker—

Mr. Hinds: [Inaudible]

Ms. V. Mohit: Have some respect. Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: One minute. Member for Laventille West, please oblige with the observance of Standing Order 53. Member for Chaguanas East, try and not be distracted. Remember that you are addressing the Chair.

12.40 p.m.

Ms. V. Mohit: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I must commend my colleagues who would have spoken before me for their strong contributions and most importantly, the Leader of the Opposition who provided a sharp rebuttal in expressing the realities of what our citizens are experiencing. Her clinical dissertation represents what an administration on this side would undertake with immediate effect upon assumption of office. I dare say, we did it then, and we can do it again, Madam Speaker, and we will do it again.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I just had the pleasure of listening to the previous speaker and I want to say that I am not here to defend myself, but I am here to set the record straight.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I sat for the last couple of days and listened to all the speakers who contributed from the other side, and they have all come here patting the backs of each other. Some were even engaged in giving votes of thanks whilst they claim they are doing the best for the vulnerable and leaving no one behind. Madam Speaker, is this the same Government and was that the same Minister who spoke before who told the population that they were being greedy
and not needy? Is that the same Government who would have asked our citizens to forsake their macaroni pie? Madam Speaker, is this the same Government who asked our citizens to use a coal pot and ride a bicycle? Madam Speaker, this Government has shut the doors on the disabled in this country.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, now they are coming for your food cards and I say to the citizens—

Madam Speaker: Member, I love the fact that we could hear.

Ms. V. Mohit: Oh, sorry.

Madam Speaker: And I am not at all trying to curtail your passion, but maybe you could control the volume of it, please.

Ms. V. Mohit: Sure. My passion is really strong today. I am sorry, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, and in trying to justify why they are coming for our citizens’ food cards, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services would have just made some serious allegations bringing my name into it. But what I want to say here today, Madam, I have lived a life of service.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: And nothing will throw me off. And yes, Madam Speaker, I worked under the Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme. I started off as a case worker in later 2012 and then I graduated to a liaison officer position. Madam Speaker, the Minister’s behaviour in this honourable House today can be described as nothing but irresponsible.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I dare say I know nothing of what the Minister
spoke about here today and I want to tell the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, do not ever try to dirty my name.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Madam Speaker, I have worked with both. In my tenure working at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, I have worked with both PNM representatives, UNC representatives. Ask anyone of them, they would have received the best service from this liaison officer when I worked at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Madam Speaker, I would have worked throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago under the Ministry’s guidelines. Nothing else but the Ministry’s guidelines.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Since 2015, this Government took office and today in 2023, they coming to talk about some Master card which I know nothing about. So what happened to the previous years? “You now decide to dig in ah cupboard?” Madam Speaker, this is their justification for their plan to take back the food cards from our citizens and to cut the food card programme.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Madam Speaker, the Minister’s contribution and what she stated about me as working in the Ministry can be—“Ah really, ah really” am very upset about this situation. It was heavy on insinuation and low on facts.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Madam Speaker, if the Minister has information like this, then she should take it to the police and if you are saying it was taken to the police, then you are compromising an investigation here today.

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

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I want to share something with you and for the purposes of the population’s ear. When I began working at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, do you know the first three months, Madam Speaker, I—

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: Members, everybody who has not spoken will get an opportunity once “dey catch my eye” but we owe some respect to the Member for Chaguanas East. Please, continue.

Ms. V. Mohit: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: The first three months working at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, when I recognized the workload, I saved every cent of those three months, the salaries that I would have received for those three months, every cent, without lunch, drinking water to fill my belly to purchase a vehicle to do the Ministry’s work. So when they come here to tell me about I worked and this happened and that happened to try to dirty my name, I say check yourself and get in line.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, what the Minister should have been answering today is how under your tenure so many cheques went missing, so many food cards were missing and stolen from “ah cupboard” in the Ministry but you come here today to tell me about cupboard and Master card. You cannot even account for food cards missing from “ah cupboard in ah Ministry” but coming here to dirty my name.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I waste no more time on that because, as I said, I do not have to defend myself. I have given my life to national service, hence the reason I am here today.

Madam Speaker, the presentation of a budget or any suite of Government fiscal measures should be a much-anticipated event eagerly awaited upon by the population. It should create excitement, happiness and eagerness since some tangible development policy should be contained in its delivery. However, Madam, at any given budget delivery in this country and the ensuing days under a PNM administration, it is usually associated or let us say predicated on shock, anxiety and general depression.

Madam Speaker, for example, look at the gas stations on budget day because of the fear persons have for this Government’s fiscal measures. Madam Speaker, this period, and I refer to the budget period, for citizens, as currently obtains, is replete with a discouraged population mirrored in doom and gloom while digesting these depressing measures as contained in this 2024 budget presentation.

Madam Speaker, what positives exist in this budget?—and they are claiming positives exist. What positives exist in this budget for those families post-COVID-19 who are on the breadline? There is an absence of sustainable job creation measures. What positives exist in this budget for those families struggling to make ends meet? Madam, the farcical minimum wage increase cannot address their misfortune and we must face the facts. What positives exist in this budget for senior citizens who are in the throes of depression as they stretch their inadequate pension cheques beyond what is humanly reasonable? And what positives exist in this budget for the plethora of young persons of school age wiping windshields and engaged in huckster activities at the various intersections along the nation’s major road ways? What hope does this budget offer for them? What positives exist in
Appropriation (Financial Year 2024), Bill, 2023

Ms. Mohit (cont’d)

this budget for the farmers of Chaguanas East and this country to encourage increased food security? Absolutely none. Rather, Madam Speaker, there continues to be old age problems with no incentives or solutions in sight. This budget may be good for them on the other side but not for the population.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, this budget and the PNM Government—promises continue to fail miserably in addressing the existing and emerging social problems plaguing the nation. Those opposite continue to live in some type of paradise. Today, this country is beset by the following: lowering of real incomes. Beset by the following: rising unemployment, rising cost of living, continuous escalation of criminal activities, deterioration of the social fabric of the society at the level of family and community. Madam Speaker, despite the country being ravished by these factors, since the PNM assumed office, it has now dawned on them to develop themes and medium-term goals as stated on page 14 of the Social Sector Investment Programme. They are now looking at the national social situation and trying to put together Goals 1 to 5, then 1 to 3 in terms of themes, as it relates to dealing with the real issues that affect people.

Madam Speaker, in other words, what they have now recognized is that poverty, crime, health and education is the cornerstone since they have created their visionless 2030 document. And where did these emanate from? All of these emanate from the failed policies of the PNM, nothing but the failed policies of the PNM.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, this society that we currently live in is a society where the common concerns would reflect that we are all second-class citizens and the reason for this is that the Government has never pursued policies in the
function of real democracy, social justice and class equality but they rather pursue policies solely dedicated to keeping them in power.

Madam Speaker, it is quite stunning that in the face of social deterioration and collapse of the social services, and even the collapse of the society, that this Government has the temerity to commend themselves for fiscal prudence and economic foresight as stated in page 12 of the budget statement, when over their history, Madam Speaker, they would have frittered away the wealth of this country. It is about time that we examine the reality and look at what is in this budget 2024.

Madam Speaker, where in this budget is there provisions that the sick and elderly can afford vital and basic drugs from the pittance they receive as old age pension? Remember CDAP, Madam Speaker? CDAP is a failure because at most times, the medications are unavailable for whatever reasons.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Now, you know what they are saying? Sometimes when you go to the pharmacies and the health institutions, “oh, that is expensive, we cannot provide you with that” and I get that a lot in my very own constituency. Madam Speaker, this is not me saying this. Guardian article dated March 21st, 2023, headline:

“Pensioner worried as hospitals run out of chemo drugs”

And we must listen to Mr. Lewis who said:

“After spending his life teaching, Woodbrook pensioner David Lewis is now worried about his fate, as public hospitals are out of the much-needed chemotherapy drug Xeloda.

With Senior Citizen Pension at $3,500, Lewis says it would cost $4,000 for a regimen of tablets for just one of three sessions.”

UNREVISED
12:55 p.m.

Madam Speaker, at times our senior citizens, they are forced to forgo medicine in order to buy food since the cost of both are extremely astronomical, Madam Speaker. Yet those opposite delude themselves that everything is okay, that we are doing well, this Government is doing well. They delude themselves, Madam Speaker. What about labour when we examine the realities, where in this budget are there provisions for labour? How many citizens are unemployed, a situation that has exacerbated post-COVID-19, Madam. How many graduates and young people are underemployed and/or are seeking to migrate to potential greener pastures, thus compounding, Madam Speaker, the brain-drain issue plaguing this nation. And, Madam, again, this is not me saying this. *Guardian* article dated 7th, 2023, headline:

“Unemployment rate leaves people distressed
Job seekers…”

—and I quote:

“Job seekers from across the country said that the labour market feels hopeless, with many people who have degrees forced to take up jobs that they are overqualified for—at fast food restaurants…”

—Madam Speaker—

“…or security agencies—just to make ends meet.”—Madam Speaker.

And yesterday the Minister of Labour wanted to come here and tell us about “eat ah food” in the OJT programme? “Eat ah food”, Madam Speaker? Really, Minister of Labour? Madam Speaker, if these people have no choice, what are they expected to do?

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Sit at home and look at their degree certificate and say, “when will
I get a job, boy”? Madam Speaker, they are left with no choice but head to these establishments, and you have heard it for yourself:

“…fast food restaurants…”—and—“security agencies…”

Madam Speaker, on a weekly basis I am doing, you know how many MTS letters of recommendations for persons holding nursing certificates and so on, just to get a job? It is real, and it is the reality existing out there.

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

**Ms. Mohit:** Madam Speaker, how many are working for minimum wage, even taking into consideration the new $20.50 per hour, which falls well below what is required, Madam Speaker. And you would have remembered the Leader of Opposition mentioning in her recommendation that the minimum wage be raised to $25 per hour. Madam, this increase by the PNM, in reality means that a person would earn $164 between 7.00 am to 4.00 pm bearing in mind, the one hour for lunch is not paid. Madam Speaker, but I will deal with this later on. How many, Madam Speaker, are being retrenched, rotated and re-deployed at lower positons with reduced earnings? And this is not me, again, I refer to Loop TT article dated November 10, 2022:

“Nearly 2,000 retrenched during COVID-19 pandemic”

Madam Speaker, 2000 retrenched, reported in the Loop TT. Yet those opposite delude themselves that everything is okay in this country.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Madam Speaker, as I deal with the realities again, what about the status of children in terms of inclusion in this budget? Where in this budget meaningfully addresses this problem? How many have to work for a living rather than be schooled, Madam Speaker? How many cannot attend school because their parents cannot afford food, books, clothing and transportation, which have beyond
the poor and vulnerable’s earning capacity, Madam Speaker? This is not me again, *Guardian* article dated April 09, 2023:

“Girl, 14, pleads: I want to go back to school”

And I quote:

“...the children were forced to leave school or be absent frequently due to the parents/guardians not having jobs, food, or money to send them to classes to achieve an education.”

Madam Speaker, how many children are abandoned, homeless, and living on the streets? How many children are selling, and taking drugs, and alcohol? How many of them are now joining gangs and even committing crimes, Madam Speaker?

1.00 p.m.

This is the reality of what we are facing in this country. Yet those opposite, Madam, delude themselves into believing that everything is okay in this country.

Madam Speaker, the reality is what about housing? Where in this budget are there meaningful provisions and measures for housing? I listened to the Laventille East/Morvant MP speak and I wondered, based on what he said—I am not imputing anything—but based on what the Member said, whether his focus, as a Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, is on PNM strongholds. Madam Speaker, he said so much, but I awaited to hear something for Chaguanas East and other places in this country. Madam Speaker, the reality is they mentioned housing—and I know they would come to say that. Many persons have applied for housing, awaiting 20 years, Madam Speaker, then somehow or the other, you write for them, they get an interview and that is the end of that. You get that there are awaiting allocation and they are on a lottery system. So when would we deal with the vulnerable awaiting housing?
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, is this Government aware that in some circumstances, up to 10 persons are living in one room? Madam Speaker, how many citizens have had to relinquish their homes because they can no longer afford mortgage payments or rent payments, Madam Speaker? How many are living in sub-human conditions? And this is not me again. Guardian article, dated August 08, 2023, headline:

“Family in one room”

Madam Speaker, how many can realistically afford water and electricity bills? Can you imagine the impending increases, Madam Speaker? How many people can afford to live in this country, given the astronomical cost of living? Yet those opposite continue to delude themselves that everything is okay in this once prosperous nation.

What about the escalation in crime? Where in this budget are there provisions? Is the Government aware of the increases in robbery and home invasions, especially in Cunupia? The Minister of National Security spoke to this before. Madam Speaker, they are now even attacking schools. I refer to a Guardian article, dated September 19, 2023, just last month:

“Robbery and break-in at the Cunupia Secondary”

Madam Speaker, how can this Government through whatever strategies save the life of the next 13-year-old from being raped, and when reported, murdered, along with her uncle? How many citizens were robbed with aggravation? Those opposite should answer these questions. Yet they want us to believe that everything is okay and the delusion continues unabated, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, despite all that has been put before, they continue with this charade through propaganda and public relations. Madam Speaker, all that has
been echoed during this debate is fluff and propaganda. Madam Speaker, what I have recognized is the Minister of Finance, once “de books looking good”, the Minister of Finance is good. Madam Speaker, where are the facts? Today, I want to quote from a calypso classic, namely the Mighty Shadow’s immortal classic, “Poverty is Hell”, Madam Speaker; where the lyrics state:

“A poor man living in a teeny-weeny hut
The children hungry, nothing in the pot
He gone by the neighbour to beg for some rice
The neighbour under pressure, ‘Boy things ent nice.’”

Madam Speaker, if these words are the living embodiment of the living existence of the population today, nothing else is. How prophetic, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, you see in this country, there lies an inequality at the heart of our financial and economic system, wherein maybe 10 per cent enjoys a proper standard of living, whilst the rest barely can stay afloat and the mass of poor people struggle to say alive.

Madam Speaker, according to CSO’s website on poverty, they have defined poverty as:

“…a lack of income to ensure sustainable”—the most important word—
“livelihoods; it includes hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and basic services, as well as social and economic discrimination.”

Madam Speaker, the opposite are quick to shout out that the Opposition is engaging in politics when we call them out for creating increased poverty levels in Trinidad and Tobago, but it is not us.

Madam Speaker, the Trinidad and Tobago Express newspaper article, dated August 8th, headline:

“Family in one room
Mum pleads for help”

And I quote:

“Raquel Richardson Johnson’s mornings begin with a plea to the heavens, the mother of three praying to God that her family of five will escape the grip of financial turmoil which she says has ensnared them and made it nearly impossible to survive in recent times.”

I quote again, _Guardian_ article, dated July 19, 2023:

“Family with newborn triplets struggling to survive”

And I quote:

“It is a precarious trek from the family’s plywood house perched on a hill. The waterlogged bridge leading out of the house sinks as Robley walks across it. She then had to climb up an almost 45-degree incline of oil sand and mud to get to the road which is in dilapidated condition and cannot be accessed by emergency vehicles.”

Madam Speaker, I quote again, _Guardian_ newspaper, dated July 03, 2021:

“Growing poverty in T&T: Low-income people have smaller chance of survival in pandemic”

And listen carefully:

“One man was reportedly selling galvanise sheets off his roof to buy food recently. Children have dropped out of school as parents are unable to provide regular meals or pay electricity and internet bills to ensure they access online schooling.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“Poverty is”—real—“hell…”

—to reiterate the words of the Mighty Shadow.

However, the Government is elected by the masses because in most
instances they lobby the electorate for their support under the pretext that they will alleviate poverty, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But what strategies exist for the elimination and, let us say, the reduction of poverty in Trinidad and Tobago? Madam Speaker, the reality is this must be undertaken within the context of a comprehensive approach. And the Minister spoke of all-of-government approach, but never went in to details, so let me go into some details. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in terms of a comprehensive approach, I want to deal with increasing access to education. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is crucial in the fight against poverty, since it can provide individuals with the skills and knowledge to elevate themselves by securing good jobs to improve their economic prospects, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a mere one-off grant of $1,000 to needy children via the means test would not lift them out of poverty.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: And let us face the facts—and they know that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and stop acting as though you are giving the vulnerable something. The Leader of the Opposition, since during the pandemic, would have asked you to give those seeing hard times, as we may say it, a one-off grant to assist with school supplies. You are now coming in 2024 to do that. So do not act as though you are doing something so great.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there must be sustainable measures, which are evidently absent in this benign set of fiscal measures, which, from page 3 of the budget statement, simply outlines a series of fanciful economic and financial micro and macro statements which are merely designed to distract the average citizens from the realities that the 2024 budget is devoid of any developmental policies, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which can improve their current standard of living and ease the burden of hardship imposed by this indifferent regime. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I
quote Guardian article, dated November 28, 2022:

“Education must be Government’s top priority”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in terms of a comprehensive approach or all-of-government approach, economic growth—another strategy that this budget ought to address was economic growth, which would create jobs and increase wealth, which will catapult people out of poverty. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I refer to page 8 of the Budget Statement 2024 by the hon. Minister of Finance.

“…our domestic economy grew by 1.5 percent in 2022. Further, growth continued in the first quarter of 2023 at a rate of 3 percent.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, economic growth, given those hollow pronouncements, the population wants to know how many jobs were created? Has the wealth of individuals increased? Mr. Deputy Speaker, the answer is a resounding no.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: And I quote, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from Express newspaper article, dated April 17, 2023:

“Unemployment,”—listen carefully—“poverty causing crime, Mr. Hinds”—in this case referring to the Member for Laventille West, this headline article. Wherein the Minister of National Security said:

“In Trinidad and Tobago, jobs are not easy to come by, so money will automatically be an issue. That now certainly, will impact ‘living comfortably in T&T’.”

Therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, where is the evidence of jobs? Those opposite cannot provide any empirical data.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now move to income inequality, all-of-government approach, if we are speaking that. Income inequality exists where some people have more wealth than others, conversely reducing middle-income earners capacity
to sustain themselves. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the property tax will become an additional burden when operationalized. Middle-income households are the ones who suffer the brunt of government’s taxation policies, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Minister belatedly, after strident calls, adjusted the minimum wage by $3 per hour. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I refer to page 127 of the Budget Statement 2024, and I quote:

“Madam Speaker, I propose to initiate action to minimise the country’s socio-economic imbalance and stimulate consumer spending aimed at economic expansion. To achieve this objective, I propose to increase the minimum wage by 17 percent, or $3.00 per hour, from $17.50 to $20.50 per hour. This measure will benefit approximately 190,000 persons in the workforce...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, he claimed he was initiating action to address the socio-economic imbalance, but what is the reality of this miniscule, this tiny increase, Mr. Deputy Speaker? For anyone it is equivalent to $24 daily. Do you know that this Government has granted the working class, Mr. Deputy Speaker? A sandwich loaf costs $14.80. A tin of sardine costs $12.25. This sandwich loaf and a tin of sardine totals $27.05. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you minus the $24 daily, you are still short and have to borrow $3.05 to access this bare necessity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of bread and sardine. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is what will benefit 190,000 persons in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services wondered if we live in the same country as she does? Mr. Deputy Speaker, yes, we live in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
1.15 p.m.

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, but one thing I am sure about is we do not get the pay the Minister of Social Development and Family Services gets.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: And many persons outside there do not get—or they would wish to see that pay the Minister of Social Development and Family Services gets.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move to point four in terms of comprehensive and all-of-government approach in terms of provision of financial assistance Mr. Deputy Speaker. Poverty can only be addressed or ended by financial assistance such as grants and food support. Financial assistance programmes usually provide a safety net for persons experiencing financial hardships enabling them to afford the basics of life such as food, housing, and health care, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This would help persons falling deeper into poverty. Where in this budget are such provisions articulated? They come here to justify and use my name today. They attempt to hoodwink the population. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance even stated and I refer to page 103 of the Budget Statement 2024, and I quote:

“Specifically, in 2024, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will be mandated to restructure the Food Card Programme to include a mandatory market box component.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, at this time I wish to dissect some real concerns that I have noticed in this 2024 budget, and I have extracted some figures from the Draft Estimates Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the financial year 2024, under Head 78, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Mr. Deputy Speaker, General Administration: Salaries and C.O.L.A, $1 million increase. Rather, General Administration: Sub-Head 01, Item 001, Sub-Item 01, Salaries and C.O.L.A., a $1 million increase. General Administration: 02/001/16

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in total in terms of employment, $18,460,000 increase. Mr. Deputy Speaker, yet, when superimposed against the core deliverables which are the initiatives that defines the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, in other words, they exist for the following. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to go a little bit on the core deliverables, and listen. Households: Sub-Item: 04/02 Senior Citizens Grant, no increase, no decrease same. Household: Social Assistance an increase of $1 million. Households: Urgent Temporary Assistance, a decrease of $2 million and yet still people are awaiting so many Flooding Relief Grants in Trinidad and Tobago. Households: Rehabilitative Programme, an increase of $500,000. Households: 04/08: Disability Grant, same, no increase.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a total under the core deliverables you have a net decrease, what is alarming is there is a net decrease of $500,000 in terms of the core deliverables. However, the alarming sting in the tail is the $18,460,000 allocated to the employment Votes. So no increase to the core deliverables, actually have a decrease but you have an increase in the employment Votes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, from these figures am I to infer that a greater number of employees would be required to administer the Social Services Grants which reflects an overall reduction? Mr. Deputy Speaker, this cannot be fiscal prudence, or as the Minister stated at page 64 of the budget, relative to another endeavour, that the Government conducts its business in a sane, sober, and sensible way. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is not evident of sanity. Mr. Deputy Speaker—
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: —this is not evident of sobriety. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is not evident of sense in any way.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, could these sums—and we are not against employment, but employment increased and the deliverables decreased. Something is definitely wrong.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, could these sums have not been used to increase social benefits? Across the board even if at the rate of the minimum wage. There is something amiss, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that those opposite are not saying. Is it or is that deliberate or is that by accident, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I ask?

Today, I call upon the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, to immediately review this serious disparity in the allocations and implore her in tandem with the Minister of Finance to immediately regularize this abnormality. Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member? Member, your initial speaking time has elapsed, you have an additional 10 minutes, you care to avail yourself?

Ms. V. Mohit: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Ms. V. Mohit: Thank you very much. Mr. Deputy Speaker, social services grants must be increased. Under our administration, we increased the Senior Citizens Pension from $1,950 to $3,000. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we increased the Disability Grant and the Public Assistance Grant, the Funeral Grant, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I can go on and on, you on the other side, in 2015 you met a society that was resilient and you broke it down.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to quickly look at the Social Sector Investment Programme in terms of the NSDP. What is really mind boggling and I just spoke about the core deliverables is that at present, under the National Family Services, the NSDP—not the national family services rather the NSDP—the annual salary and allowances for this department totals a whopping $1,221,000, for only seven persons under contract for employment.

But Mr. Deputy Speaker you heard my colleague from St. Augustine. And I want to ask what did this department achieve? I am not against employment, however, there must be some measure of cost-benefit of our grants or so for our citizens. Mr. Deputy Speaker, Minor House Repair Grants in an entire financial year, 42 grants were approved. In an entire financial year under Sanitary Plumbing Assistance, 17 applications approved, Mr. Deputy Speaker, really? House Wiring Assistance, an entire financial year, 11 grants were approved. And this is from the Social Sector Investment Programme, so nobody could say I am speaking an untruth. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 42 grants, 17 grants, 11 grants in an entire financial year. Mr. Deputy Speaker, not value for money. No wonder our citizens are out there crying out for help yet they are saying it is okay.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to quickly move to the National Enrichment Centre. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to—the Minister said she wants to ask Mr. Phillip Metivier how did he end up there? I want refer to a question answered by the then Minister of Planning and Development where the Minister responded to a question and said, there are four main NGOs that serve persons with cerebral palsy and who utilize the National Therapeutic Centre. There are the care helpers, the Cerebral Palsy Society of Trinidad and Tobago, the Cerebral Palsy Association of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Caribbean Kids and Families Therapy

UNREVISED
Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Social Sector Investment Programme, the Minister said works are being done at this centre. The Social Sector Investment Programme reflects that works have been completed. The Minister in her speech last year indicated that works at this centre have been completed. How is the Minister coming here today to tell us that works are taking place at this centre?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I received a letter last week and I kept that letter from the Cerebral Palsy Society of Trinidad and Tobago asking me to assist them in acquiring a facility. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was trying my best, I am still trying my best. Based on what the Minister has said, the Cerebral Palsy Society of Trinidad and Tobago went to the facility to utilize it, and they are told—I am told that they were told that they can no longer utilize the facility. The facilities—someone the name of a facilities manager has been liaising with them to tell them they can no longer—

**Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]**

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Silence, please.

**Ms. V. Mohit:**—utilize the facility.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Silence.

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, so when the Minister asked who gave permission, you gave permission.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, today we publicly call upon the Government to immediately provide access to the therapeutic centre for these persons requiring these assistance—

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:**—in Carlsen Field forthwith. This humiliation must end
immediately.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now move to my constituency. Every one of us would have lost someone close to us through the criminal scourge. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of National Security has finally found some common courtesy and decency to offer an apology to Trinidad and Tobago, but really and truly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is not common courtesy you know, he trying to save face, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I ask how much time I have?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** You finish at just about 1.33.44.

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Sure.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** That is just about six minutes.

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, my constituents are crying out for help.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Members, please, please, please.

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, the former Minister of National Security, Mr. Edmund Dillon—the people of Enterprise have been clamoring for a police post with no answer from this Minister of National Security. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the former Minister of National Security, Mr. Edmund Dillon promised in this House that Enterprise will get a police station, to date nothing.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** At least if you cannot give us the police post, eventually you may see me coming in this House—we asked for the police post, we did not get it, we asked for more resources for the police, we did not get it. Eventually, I may be coming here asking for a police officer.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am asking the Government to please look at
a mobile unit at a central location, possibly the Price Plaza area within the Chaguanas district immediately, Mr. Deputy Speaker, immediately.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, citizens are looking on demanding all 41 parliamentarians to provide tangible measures to address this crime situation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to quickly deal with the traffic situation in Chaguanas and inform this Government that they need to address the perennial problem of traffic congestion in Chaguanas. I note the junior Minister in the Ministry of Works and Transport, during the election, coming to Chaguanas trying to claim the work of the MP for Chaguanas East by saying that they are dealing with the traffic situation, a bridge which he never visited in his life, Bridal Road Bridge in Jerningham.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, even accusing the UNC of building a walkover wasting money, accusing the UNC that we wasted money for a walkover that is used once a year. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the residents, *Express* article October 15, Arjun Ramjattan of Chaguanas, I want to let the goodly Minister know, Arjun Ramjattan said this:

“New walkover will help plenty people.”

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

**1.30 p.m.**

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister arrived when works have already been done. So tread on the right path. Be careful of huffing the work of the MP for Chaguanas East.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, flooding. I want to tell the Minister of Public Utilities that my constituents look at the Parliament channel and they have observed your responses as it relates to the WASA line at the S-Bend, and you need to address
this issue as soon as possible. Some of my constituents have even described the water situation, no water in their taps, as ridiculous, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to quickly—the GAAP Programme, the Minister of Youth Development and National Service. One of my constituents died awaiting a caretaker, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wrote to him twice and he came here and said that he is doing so much in terms of the GAAP Programme. One of my constituents died awaiting that programme, a caretaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: MP, you have just about two minutes.

Ms. V. Mohit: Sure, thanks, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to thank my constituency office staff—

Hon. Member: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit:—as I get ready to close. They work tirelessly. They work 24/7 365 days, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to ensure that we give the service required to the constituents of Chaguanas East. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to sincerely thank the business community, as well as all stakeholders and groups who have been assisting me in my tenure to serve the people to the best of my ability. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would have seen the results of that in the Local Government Election 2023.

Hon. Member: [Desk thumping]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, these fiscal measures might appease the vulnerable for today, but not tomorrow. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government must accept total responsibility for the failure, suffering and pain inflicted upon the minds, bodies and souls of our citizens. What have they done—what our citizens have done to deserve this callus treatment, Mr. Deputy Speaker? All I can end by saying is, they laughed at our state of emergency. All I can end is by saying, Mr.
Deputy Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago is in a state of undeclared emergency, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Ms. V. Mohit:** I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the hon. Member for Tobago West.

**The Minister of Sport and Community Development (Hon. Shamfa Cudjoe-Lewis):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker for the opportunity to contribute in this debate. Mr. Deputy Speaker, after listening to the Member opposite who spoke before I did, there really is nothing to respond to. What I hope the Member would have spoken about is covering the fraud that took place in the Ministry that she is shadowing. Instead, she took the time to try to defend herself giving us her personal stories and speaking of her character and so on, but Mr. Deputy Speaker—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member for St. Augustine. No, Member for St. Augustine, you continue to have to repeat every time. Please. Member for Chaguanas East, please, please. Proceed.

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, the thing collapsed long time you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:** They have no leadership, no direction whatsoever over there, but I will let that pass. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I said, there is nothing to respond to, the Member was caught off guard, the Member walked up there in a frazzle like a wet fowl, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:** —and there really is nothing to respond to.
Mr. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: As they sit there Mr. Deputy Speaker—,

Mr. Hosein: I rise for 48 (4).

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: —they know nothing.

Hon. Member: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Charles: 48 (4).

Mr. Hosein: Yeah.

Mr. Charles: Offensive or insulting language; not from her.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second, one second, one second.


Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right.

Mr. Charles: Tobago rejected [Inaudible]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Naparima, Couva South, Couva North and also Barataria/San Juan which one, Standing Order?

Mr. Charles: 48 (1) and 48 (6).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right, thank you all right. Again hon. Member, I would like you to just retract and say that—if you care to say it over differently, or you can move on, either or I just need you to retract.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you, I retract. The Member is unsettled, the Member is discombobulated.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping and laughter]

Mr. Charles: 48 (1) and 48 (6).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right, thank you.

Mr. Charles: I am not discombobulated.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: “Nobody talking bout you”.

UNREVISED
Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, I would overrule on this occasion, proceed.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, as the Member stated they know nothing about what they are speaking, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Their response is, we were not there. But Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are those of us who were there. I am standing in this Parliament, this is my 13th or 14th year of service. I was there when they were in government. So we have seen and witnessed most of these atrocities. So for them to stand here to tell us that they are new, and they do not know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is nothing to respond to. But the people of Trinidad and Tobago remember—

Mr. Charles: 48 (6). Nobody lives there.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hold on, hold on.

Hon. Member: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, no, Members, please. Again, the Standing Orders are there for a purpose, and if as the Speaker, it is being abused, I will bring it to your attention. Member for Naparima, fair enough?

Mr. Charles: Yes Sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right, but I am not saying you cannot use the Standing Order, but again, use it wisely as we go along. Proceed.

Hon. Member: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the previous speaker accused the Government Member of trying to dirty her name. Nobody needs to help the UNC to dirty its name, the UNC does it all by itself.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I proceed. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I represent the mighty constituency of Tobago West.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: I heard some Member over there on the opposite side say Tobago West rejected me. Tobago West voted for me over and over again resoundingly and there was no need for any recount at any time. I have doubled votes on my opponents not once but twice and I shall do so again.

Hon. Member: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we in the constituency of Tobago West, we moved from our Spring Garden office to Scarborough to better serve our constituents. We are now in a central location, the traffic has been good. We have been reaching out to constituents and they have been enjoying the service of the constituency. I want to say thank you to my constituents first and foremost. If it were not for them, I would not be here. It is a pleasure to serve the people I love. We are still walking each and every week, talking with our constituents, learning from them, loving them and doing what we ought to do as a representative of Tobago West. We have had the usual Christmas and Easter festivities. We take pride in educating our constituents. So we have initiatives like women empowerment sessions, and the human library and so on.

We recently just delivered book support service to over 120 students for this school year and I want to thank the parents who had the confidence in the Tobago West MP to do so. We continue our weekly walkabout, our roving public day, forms day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which is one of my favourite initiatives, where we bring the constituents who have forms to fill out, we help them fill out the forms so that they can access grants and access the service of the Government and the Tobago House of Assembly.

UNREVISED
I am pleased that this Government have seen it fit to expand and to support ALTA in adult literacy because that is a major problem, I know not only in my constituency, but across Trinidad and Tobago, helping constituents understand forms, helping them read, helping them fill out forms so, I am happy to have forms day and that is one of my most successful initiatives in the constituency.

I cannot make my contribution to the budget without speaking a little bit as to the state of affairs in Tobago. As you know the leadership has changed in Tobago and I must say that our people are suffering at the mercy of a hapless, hopeless bunch of miscreants. They—let us do Watson Duke, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and it has been chaos from there on—

Mr. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to rise on 48 (8), the Member is clearly referring to persons of another elected House.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Show me the Standing Order.

Mr. Hosein: 48 (8) please.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, one second, one second.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No Members. Okay, Member, I am sure you can say that differently. I will appreciate, again.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, our people in Tobago are suffering at the mercy of a hapless, hopeless bunch of people.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Yeah? This bunch of people led us to Watson Duke. And they told us that he was our messiah and our saviour and they were coming to fix things in Tobago, and that has not been the case. It has been total chaos and we in Tobago have been in the news for the wrong reasons over the last year.
Anybody who is alive and well and sees what is taking place in Tobago know that the place heavy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that it is not what it used to be. That there are people who are afraid to speak up and speak out. They are being victimized politically. You cannot even speak on social media to say you have a different point of view. They are being bullied, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They are losing their jobs and being placed on the breadlines. Tobago contractors are being made to suffer. They are being sidelined for work in exchange for providing work and developmental Trinidad contractors and that is the truth as to what is taking place in Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So when I speak, I speak on behalf of the people of Tobago West and as an MP, I have public day each and every week and these are the concerns that come to my table, that come to my desk, that come to me in Tobago West, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You see the budget exercise, it is not only about speaking to the figures, but each and every Member stood here today and spoke about what is taking place, the state of affairs in their constituency. If I am supposed to speak openly and honestly about what is taking place in Tobago, that I will do, and that I must, that is what I was elected to do.

Hon. Member: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: But at the end of the day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, despite being bulldoze, by keyboard bullies and those who discriminate and those who tell falsehoods to try to, you know, discriminate against the people of Tobago. They say if you look like a PNM nothing for you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that has been the experience. But I want to remind you, I am confident that I serve a calm, conscious, conscientious and courageous people. We may be laid back—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—but we are not backward. And when the time is upon us, we will do what we must. A word to the wise is sufficient.

I am happy that my constituents will benefit from the minimum wage increase, the $1,000 book grant provided by this Government, back pay to public servants as promised, at least they are “gonna” get that before the $1,000 ex-gratia payment that was promised to them.

The Tourism Accommodation Upgrade Programme, we have extended that Programme as the agovernment to help tourism accommodation entities not only in Trinidad, but more so in Tobago. I remember when I assumed duties as Minister of Tourism in 2015, the Tourism Upgrade Programme was not offered to Tobagonians, although the bulk of the tourism business was taking place in Tobago, the Tourism Accommodation Upgrade Programme was not offered to Tobago by the UNC, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And it took this People’s National Movement Government in December of 2015 to extend that programme to the business people in Tobago who are into tourism accommodation. That has been so since December 2015 to today, where they can get 40 to 50 per cent off as they upgrade their rooms and so on and receive the different incentives from central government. That was not so before December 15th, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So it is really interesting to hear the Member from Moruga as she made her contribution about what tourism in Tobago should be and it is a shame that tourism is not what it should be.

1.45 p.m.

When they had their turn, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Crown Point Airport needed upgrading and refurbishment and they turned a blind eye to that. It took this Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley-administration to follow through on the promise that was over 30 years old to expand and refurbish the Crown Point airport.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Crown Point Airport, the belt that the luggage is transported on was not working and they provided a slew, a slide for people to slide their bags down. It took this People’s National Movement Government to come into power and to make those changes and to fix the airport, and that $2.1 billion project is taking place today after so many years of promises. We are the Government that brought Sandals, the offer of Sandals to Tobago. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this opportunity would have provided top-class, world-class rooms to Tobago, improving our product, improving our advertising which our government could not possibly afford.

We know the kind of advertising that Sandals does for its destinations. So as much as I heard her compare the figures to Barbados, which has two Sandals, and St. Vincent and so on, when you compare our room stock to what is available up the region, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is chalk and cheese. And I am not saying that the answer to our tourism problem is Sandals, but it would have certainly helped, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So to sit here and to cringe and cry about what you think tourism should be in Tobago, when it was your turn you did precious nothing.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Tobagonians would also benefit from the improved security that we will be providing at our ports, $80 million towards police vehicles. I know some vehicles have already come in earlier this year and the Minister of National Security had seen that some of those vehicles had been transferred to Tobago to serve the police in Tobago. The adult literacy programme—I spoke about that earlier—$400 million in agro-incentives, and it is interesting because Tobago farmers get two bites of the cherry.

We get to apply for grants at the Tobago House of Assembly and get grants at the THA, and get grants through the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and
Fisheries here in Port of Spain. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have worked with the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries in providing, earlier this year, grants from the Ministry in Trinidad paid for by central government to farmers in Tobago who have benefited both from the Tobago House of Assembly grants and the agri grant from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. So we get two bites of the cherry as it relates to many grants, whether it is sports grants, cultural grants, support from NLCB, and so on. Just like we have the Elite Athlete Assistance fund in the Ministry of Sport and Community Development here in Port of Spain, there is the Lalonde Gordon fund in Tobago. And I do not know how much the Tobago House of Assembly has really used that fund to support its athletes, but I know a lot of the applications come to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development and we serve and support to the best of our ability.

More specifically, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us talk about the allocation to Tobago; $2.585 billion and that is $64 million more than what we received last year. It is the usual, roughly 4 per cent of the budget, however, it is $64.2 million more than we received last year. Of course, every department, every Ministry, and in Tobago we would call for more funding, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the central government will continue to fund other projects like we usually do in true PNM fashion for the Tobago House of Assembly. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remember when we were in Opposition in 2010 to 2015, when the UNC read its budget, there were not any extra projects for the Tobago House of Assembly. When they gave us our allocation, it was $4.03 per cent flat. If they could take a penny and cut it in 0.3, they would have cut it, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is how exact the allocation was.

So this year we have gotten 4.4 million, I would say nothing to shout—4.4 per cent. I would say nothing to shout about because it is the usual, but I am
appropriative for the additional works that are going to be done in Tobago through other Ministries, whether it is the $400 million to be spent on the airport, the $1.9 million to be spent on the Roxborough Fire Station, works being done at Rockley Bay at Magdalena, the works that are going to be done at Dwight Yorke Stadium, the contribution towards the de-silting of the Hillsborough Dam. That is another 30-year-old promise to the people of Tobago that was finally delivered by this administration.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe: De-silting of the Hillsborough Dam, a $60 million project, not paid for by the Tobago House of Assembly, but coming out of the allocation from the Ministry of Public Utilities. And if our memory serves us right and if we want to be honest about central government’s contribution to Tobago’s development over the years under the People’s National Movement, we would speak to the $1 billion project of the gas pipeline down at Cove, we would speak to the $132 million project for improving electricity capacity at Cove, we would speak to $2 billion spanking new ferries funded by the central government, we would speak to the Roxborough Police Station that was promised by the UNC year after year after year. They kept telling us we will get it soon.

We got the Roxborough Police Station, we got the Shirvan Police Station, we got the Roxborough Fire Station done by this People’s National Movement, central government. We fixed the Magdalena breakwater, refurbished the golf course at Magdalena, refurbished the Magdalena hotel, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe: The wastewater treatment plant for south-west Tobago, I was there when Minister Hinds was the Minister of Public Utilities and commissioned that project.

UNREVISED
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Delivered that project in collaboration with the IADB, and the list goes on, and on, and on. So I cringe when I hear Members of the Tobago House of Assembly trying to mislead Tobagonians, telling them that, “Central government has done nothing for you, have made no contribution to your development”. It is untrue. It is insulting the intelligence of Tobagonians and that ought to be condemned and decried, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I cannot sit by idly and watch that happen because it is such an embarrassment to the intelligence of Tobagonians who have been around. As a government across many Ministries, we continue to cover the cost of national programmes to the benefit of Tobagonians. Whether it is the pension that is coming out of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services allocation, that does not come out of the Tobago House of Assembly allocation. Pensioners in Tobago are paid by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Your Public Assistance Grant, your Disability Grant; GATE in Tobago is covered by the Ministry of Education, not the Tobago House of Assembly, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Just one second. Again, you all are free to go behind the Speaker’s Chair and have the discourse, you know. Members on both sides, you all are free. Right. Thank you. Right. Proceed. Sorry for that interruption.

Hon. S. Cudjoe: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I hope I get injury time. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the running of the Airports Authority, the running of the port in Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, all funded by the central government of Trinidad and Tobago.

NEDCO grants to Tobagonians; sports grants under the Ministry of Sport
and Community Development; culture grants from the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts; YTEPP programme in Tobago; all funded by central government. NLCB grants to support sport and culture activities in Tobago; the OJT programme in Tobago is funded by the Ministry of Labour, central government. So to try to build this story that there is no help and no support coming from central government and all you do in Tobago is funded by the 4 per cent, that is not true.

I am a Tobagonian, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am all in support of internal self-government, improved autonomy and authority for the people of Tobago and an increased allocation to match with that autonomy and authority. The Bills are before the House and we hope to get the support of the Tobago House of Assembly, the Opposition and the Independents in passing that said Bill so that we can grant to Tobago improved and increased internal self-government. But when we lie to the electorate, when we mislead and provide false information, we are destroying our democracy, because democracy is something that must be preserved and protected, and we have said, “Each person gets a vote and each person could choose who they want to lead them”, but what good is your democracy if the people are being fed false information? They are not being allowed to choose honestly and wisely because they are being provided with false information. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the whole Ross Advertising and the “Do So!” movement, that is still very much alive and well in Trinidad and Tobago today.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** And some may say, “What does that have to do with our development”? It has everything to do with our development, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because you are clouding the minds of the electorate, preventing them from making an informed and educated choice and decision because you are flooding
the airwaves with lies and hatred. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that cannot be a right thing to do.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** So—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, I know I have been giving you a little leeway, but I would prefer—you just used—right—

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** Untrue. Untrue.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Yeah. I prefer you use a different word.

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** I like that term.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Yeah.

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** Yeah. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, flooding the airwaves and filling people’s head with untruths. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have heard from those opposite, they are making announcements, telling the people that, “It have $1 million tax”, and so on, and they know very well that it is not true and they continue to make those announcements, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** These figures and these measures and all that we do as leaders and as a Government would mean nothing if the people out there are being fed hatred and untruth, and being riled up to fight.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I witnessed, and I am sure many other Members witnessed, earlier this week for the reading of the budget, the UNC supporters gathered outside and a Member of this Parliament lining then up and telling them, “Oh, look, Foster Cummings. Boo, boo now”, and they would “boo”. And that Member went further as to put the strikers, or the people who were out there of Indian decent in the back line and pulled those of African descent to the frontline, trying to send a message and trying to wreak havoc and promote hate when we are
coming here to work on a budget as leaders, both of us, Government and Opposition. We come in here and we call ourselves honourable, you are out there on the sidewalk doing that? Honorable nothing.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** Honourable nothing. So you preach a message of, empty your trigger, and that kind of thing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and then come here to complain about crime in your community. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have to set the example. It is we who have to bring this thing back. We are the parliamentarians who these youngsters and the people look up to, and for you to bring busloads of people down in front of the Red House and tell them to “boo” and line them up based on racial orientation? In this country when we say, “every creed and race find an equal place”, you do that for a budget exercise?

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** As I said, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have been here for 14 years and I am saying the standard has dropped tremendously, and we are not setting a good example for our constituents when we do things like that. That must stop. And you are not to act honourably just when you come in here. When you are out on the pavement representing people, you are to act honourably too.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to return to my contribution.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Tobago House of Assembly received this allocation, 4.4 per cent of the budget, and I am saying they received their full allocation last year, and I want to know, what did the Tobago House of Assembly do with its allocation last year? I think Tobagonians need to know that, as much as we say the allocation for this year is not enough. One thing that we are forgetting to tell the Tobagonian public is that the Tobago House of Assembly, recurrent and
development allocation, they can move left, right, up, down as they like. So moneys allocated for recurrent, while we cannot move it around freely in Trinidad, in the Tobago House of Assembly, they can take moneys from recurrent and utilize it for capital expenditure.

In addition to that, when we do not spend our recurrent or moneys at the end of the fiscal year in a Ministry, that money goes back to the Consolidated Fund. In Tobago, when you do not spend the moneys in Recurrent Expenditure, or when you do not spend your money you can keep it for another fiscal year. How much of last year’s money did the Tobago House of Assembly save? How many Tobagonian contractors did you give work? How many new Tobago contractors did you develop? How many opportunities you provided for small businesses in giving them grants and so on? How many Tobagonians did you fund to go get scholarships, and so on, to go to university?

I understand that, yes, the Tobago Carnival is upon us. We finally got a budget of $12 million. I understand the Tobago House of Assembly is also subsidizing carnival costumes to the tune of $1,000; must be nice. Mr. Deputy Speaker, but at the end of the day, the Tobago House of Assembly spends its money based on its preferences. So when they receive their allocation, they can decide whether they want to develop a Tobago contractor to build Scarborough Secondary School or whether they want to spend it building a stage in the sea. That was their priority, to build a stage in the sea, and they told us it is the only one in the Caribbean with such a beautiful backdrop, and that is where they prefer to spend their money. In is on the Tobago House of Assembly to decide whether they want to provide jobs for Tobagonian students who went out and got their degrees and came back looking for proper work to help to lift Tobago’s status, or you want to give it to people to troll and to shape the narrative and give them healthy, hefty
salaries. That is your decision. That is your prerogative.

2.00 p.m.

So, at the end of the day, we like to say other people are standing in the way of our development, but oftentimes we also are standing in our own way of development.

I remember being part of this Government—

Hon. Member: [ Interruption ]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again—

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, from early this morning, it has been said that, again, all mobile phones on silent or switched off, please. Again, I will not be tolerating any more noises from mobile devices.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I remember coming to this Parliament as a part of this Government and bringing, for the first time, the opportunity for a measure that allows the Tobago House of Assembly to borrow for the first time. When Mr. Orville London, former Chief Secretary, was head of the Tobago House of Assembly, he did our credit analysis, and so on, and said, “Okay, we are fit to borrow.” We came here and we made the case so that we can be allowed to borrow up to $300 million. The former PNM accessed $165 million. Therefore, $135 million is left there to be accessed. We want to find out why did the Tobago House of Assembly not access this money fiscal 2021/2022, fiscal 2022/2023. That money is supposed to go toward development. And these are the conversations, I believe, the Tobago House of Assembly needs to be having, not only with Tobagonians but also with the national community when we make these cries for more moneys and so on.

It is all about the same transparency and accountability that you call on
central government to show. I think the people of Tobago deserve that same kind of accountability and transparency in the management of our affairs. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, nonetheless, we, the central government, continue to advance Tobago’s development and to make our contributions by contributing to the Tobago economy.

Projects that will advance the Tobago economy: The expansion of the airport; making sure we have a proper working ferry service; the cargo services between Trinidad and Tobago—and I know Minister Sinanan, Minister of Works and Transport, will speak more as to the cargo situation and the plans that are afoot; the building of the marina—the plans to build the marina, hopefully we get the support and the cooperation of the Tobago House of Assembly, et cetera.

So we are continuing and advancing in our journey to build the nation. It is not about focusing on the next election, it is about providing opportunities for the next generation, and that is what this PNM administration is all about.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we continue with our work in providing support for the UTT, Tobago Campus; the Tobago Information Technology Limited; the National Energy Skills Center in Goldsborough. I have worked hand in hand with many Ministers to deliver services to Tobago.

Recently, I worked hand in hand with the Minister of Public Utilities and we delivered projects to improve the water supply in Tobago: the pipeline project at Lowlands, Lambeau. Mr. Deputy Speaker, booster stations for Culloden, Cutthill and French Fort. The installation of a 450-metre pipeline at Mason Hall, a pipeline also at Canaan. I remember the booster station and the work done in the Shirvan area, which has improved the water supply in south-west Tobago considerably, providing much ease to the tourism accommodation, the hotels, and so on, in Tobago West and we are very, very pleased about that.
We provided, working hand in hand with the Minister of Public Utilities, lights for the first time to Big Stick Gully Road in Bethel, lights for the first time to Piggott Trace in Carnbee, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And as I speak, we worked on the two water wells in Tobago in Mary’s Hill and in Signal Hill, and as I like to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have produced significant water to bring us to a point of getting closer and closer to 24/7 water supply in Tobago West, and that is the work. After promise, after promise, many years, administration after administration, that is the work of this People’s National Movement, delivering to Tobago. And there are those who will like to sing another story and put in the heads of the Tobagonians that, “Oh, the Prime Minister does not support them even though he is from Tobago and he is working against them.” They are building a political campaign based on hatred and that does not take a country and a people anywhere.

2.05 p.m.

If you make the comparison, Prime Minister after Prime Minister, government after government, it is this Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley administration that has delivered to Tobago projects that other governments thought—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—were too expensive and too pricey. You know how long we have been promised the refurbishment and expansion of the Crown Point Airport, Mr. Deputy Speaker?—along with so many other different project, the first ferry. We are owning for the first time in our history these two fast ferries, top class, Mr. Deputy Speaker. No other government did that for us. No other Prime Minister did that for us and the investments made in Tobago, Roxborough itself is a new town, new police station, new fire station—
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—new administrative complex, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Oh, God if they had put that in Tobago West—anyway, Roxborough. Roxborough has developed tremendously and I do not know if they have recognized what has taken place under our watch or if they are willing to acknowledge but those who have eyes to see would see. Nonetheless, we continue doing our work which is to advance the development of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to turn my attention to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development. This has been a watershed year for sport in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: There are many who say, well, we did not medal at the world championship. Yes. They are an older crop of athletes who have been around longer. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we performed outstandingly at the CAC Games. We performed outstandingly at the Commonwealth Youth Games. And I say it is a watershed year because we are seeing new athletes, young fresh athletes blazing a trail and making their mark and making their names in their respective disciplines.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: As I speak today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to salute all the athletes who performed, those who medalled and those who did not medal at the Commonwealth Youth Games, at the CAC Games and the many different international competitions and leagues that took place this year. I want to especially recognize athletes like Dylan Carter, Nicholas Paul, blazing a trail in cycling.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: The only one of his kind from the English-speaking Caribbean, Kwesi Brown, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I want to salute young Nikoli Blackman junior world champion of the world, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—coming from little Trinidad and Tobago. I want to salute athletes like Zarek Wilson. And I want salute, I recognize in tennis we have little Ms. Campbell-Smith blazing her own trail and making Trinidad and Tobago proud.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: So it is a young new fresh crop of athletes who are out there shining their light and making the world know the better part of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I salute the national governing bodies who are doing amazing work with our youngsters, from Sonja Johnson in chess, taking chess into the different schools and into the communities.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Sonja Johnson the President of Trinidad and Tobago Chess Association took chess into the prison system of Trinidad and Tobago and our female prisoners were ranked in number one, two and three in the world—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—in those types of competition. And that is what it is all about. It is about maximizing the full potential of sport, utilizing sport to help to develop better students, to develop better communities and to touch the lives of many of our residents throughout Trinidad and Tobago. There has also been a shift where we as Government have directed much of our funding to community sport. We are partnering hand in hand with community groups to deliver football leagues, community cricket leagues, you name it, sport and family day. You have groups
like GT Fitness doing amazing work in communities like Maloney and their heading to Tobago soon, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:** You have Santa Cruz. There is a football club in Santa Cruz also doing outstanding work. I worked with Member Rambally with a group in Chaguanas and they are utilizing sport to lift and to build the new cricketers and instil good values in these youngsters through sport. So that is what it is all about, utilizing sport as a tool to build and to lift, to unite, to improve capacity to enhance the development of our people. And that is what it is all about, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Tobago Youth Football League. Oceanus—what do you call it?—they did the canoeing, the rowing and so on. They went abroad and they won in their category, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, we are doing a lot of work with communities. It is not always about winning medals and going to the Olympic but utilizing sport as a tool for development, for transformation, for touching hearts and changing lives in a positive way, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** Over the last fiscal year, our total contribution to national government bodies, to individual athletes to community groups and so on has been, at least, $70 million directly into the hands of our athletes and into the hands of our national governing bodies in hosting sporting activities nationally, regionally and internationally, bringing the world to Trinidad and Tobago. We have ramped up our efforts in physical projects. Now you can speak to swimming pools in areas like Maloney; in Morvant; in Sogren Trace, Laventille.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** And we are building right now in Malabar. The Trinidad and
Tobago Defence Force—

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:**—is working hand in hand with the Ministry of Sport and Community Development to bring services to our youngsters to train them. Right now we have work taking place at—we have completed phase one in Diego Martin, in Cocoyeea you have the schools in the south using the pools in Cocoyea.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:** We have done phase one work in Siparia. And as we go into the new year we received the report from the specialist engineer as it relates to the swimming pool in Couva. We received the report at the end of July and the scope of works would be passed, I think, it is around the 16th of October, and then we go out to tender towards fixing the problem at the Couva swimming pool. And we go from community to community developing facilities. This year we will see the refurbishment of indoor facilities like St. Paul, southern indoor facility, eastern indoor facility, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is about bringing sports into each and every community, promoting sport for all, working with community groups, working with the defence force to develop sports throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

We have refurbished the Hasely Crawford Stadium for the Commonwealth Youth Games. The Hasely Crawford Stadium which had been left to run down, year after year, administration after administration. It took this Government to do it. We are going to be refurbishing the Jean Pierre Complex in this fiscal year, Mannie Ramjohn Stadium and Larry Gomes. We are starting with the lighting and then doing the other works during this fiscal year. Works have already started at the Ato Boldon Stadium, we are there refurbishing the field and doing some structural work also.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, is it about utilizing the facility not only for those
communities but to promote Trinidad and Tobago as a hub for sport tourism in the region. If our facilities are up to standard and we encourage our national governing bodies to invite more and more persons and groups to come to do these different tournaments and so on, we would be a better place, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is about providing opportunities for our athletes, for our officials, putting in Trinidad and Tobago on the map because these same athletes and their parents would come back another time to experience Carnival, to experience the Tobago Heritage.

Commonwealth Youth Games we hosted for the first time. The first time in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:** The first time in the Caribbean and it was a resounding success. The president of the Commonwealth Game Federation said, it is the best youth games that she had ever seen.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:** And this was the seventh youth games, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Government made an investment of $35 million in that project and so far the TTOC has spent about $27 million and their bills are still coming in until we get to the $35 million. In Tobago alone we have spent, at least, $8 million in the hands of hoteliers to house these people for the Commonwealth Youth Games. So it is all about—and that is funded by central government. It is bringing business, economic activity to Trinidad and Tobago, putting heads in beds, providing opportunities for our people to benefit from the goodness and the greatness of sport.

We have also hosted this year different tournaments in tennis whether it is the Davis Cup, Americas Group IV; the ITF COTECC. We hosted the Archery
Federation just last week in Tobago. They had a conference for the Americas. We hosted Carebaco in badminton at the National Racket Centre. The list goes on and on. We also did some CONCACAF games here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is about expanding new horizons for our youngsters, for our people for the development of Trinidad and Tobago. Our sporting programmes continue. Pink Rain campaign promoting women and girls in sport. We have Girls Run TT taking place as we speak where we have sponsored over 300 girls to get up and move and make 282 miles between March to the 30th of September. We are working with Bafasports and national governing bodies in introducing cheer, dance, karate and these different sporting disciplines to women and girls.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we worked with the Jamaican Government this year and more specifically with G.C. Foster towards improving our delivery of sport in school. They provide the training for us. They provide the technical assistance to us and I really want to salute Ms. ‘Babsy’ Grange, Olivia ‘Babsy’ Grange, Minister of Sport from Jamaica. She has welcomed us with open arms to see what they are doing in Jamaica and we are now working hand and hand to develop our school system in athletics in Trinidad and Tobago. I want to express sincerest condolences to the G.C. Foster family on losing Mr. Gibbs Williams who was one of the key architects in developing the training programme for Trinidad and Tobago. They sent to us, in the July/August period, 10 technical staff to work with 65 of our sporting technical people in Trinidad and Tobago to provide support in schools. He was shot last week Friday and we, the sporting fraternity in Trinidad and Tobago extend our deepest sympathies to the Government and the people of Jamaica. I want to move swiftly to community—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, your initial speaking time has elapsed. You
have an additional 10. You care to avail yourself?

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Yes, please. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move quickly to community development. Community development is a very important part or has been an important very part of our Government framework since our inception. Mr. Deputy Speaker, Dr. The Hon. Eric Williams saw community development as a fundamental part of what development as a people and found ways to develop that Ministry and build community centres throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you search up the Caribbean I am sure you find that Trinidad and Tobago has the most community centres in the Caribbean.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: We boast of over 300 centres. And when these centres were set up, the intention was to empower the communities so that they earn their own income and pay their own bills and do their own refurbishment and so on of the community centres. Mr. Deputy Speaker, unfortunately here we are 60-something years later and the Ministry is still covering the full bill. We continue to work with village councils. We continue to work with community groups towards establishing self-sufficiency. But I must say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is an uphill task. This year we trained 6,984 persons in our short-skills programme whether it is in making oils, soaps, bread, giving them different skills so that they can go out there and establish their own businesses so that they could improve their hobbies and work towards self-sufficiency, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That has been a resounding success.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have “With these Hands” where we helped some of
these persons to develop their own businesses and even give them seed funding so that they can start up. Mr. Deputy Speaker, Export Centre Company which falls under the Ministry’s remit, they work to help our artisans get on the international market. We have developed Craft Hub TT and Parlour TT to provide something like Amazon that allows them to put their products online to sell to people in the diaspora and those who are willing to purchase.

We have established a new community development policy where we work with private sector companies like Digicel and NGC to bring community projects from the ground up in different communities. In Beausejour, Patna, we delivered the dirt oven and they are building a tourism project around that. In Marabella we delivered an ICT centre. We work with Digicel also to deliver ICT centres in areas like Maracas. And there are many other programmes or projects that are coming, working hand in hand with the private sector and the communities just like, for instance a fish fry project in Marabella and so on. This year we celebrated 60 years of the Prime Ministers Best Village competition and we saw over—

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe:**—200 groups from the 10 different districts come out to support. We had over 980 junior best village campers. We had 38 queens enter the La Reine Rive competition and that has been a success also. However, we all know that Best Village is not what it used to be.

2.20 p.m.

In the month of November we start consultations in Tobago in north and south Trinidad towards getting feedback from Best Village fraternity towards improving CRC projects, community recovery projects. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a project of—it is a programme of this Government where we are working with specific communities to improve their standard of living and how they see life,
MpowerTT we work specifically with young men teaching them life skills, exposing them to different skills and the world of work. This year we worked with over 300 young men from different communities, particularly East Port of Spain, Arima, Tobago, and we are going to have that programme again in this fiscal year. The youth-league project we give internships to youngster from these troubled communities, expose them to the world of work and give them a start-up to start their own businesses and get back to school and so on.

As I close, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to thank all our stakeholders, because it truly takes a village, so whether it is YTEPP, Digicel, ALTech, Bankers Association, teaching our residents in our communities how to manage money and so on, we have been working with a number of different groups and agencies to empower and educate Trinbagonians, and I want to thank them all, because it takes a village.

As we close, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I say again, these fiscal measures mean nothing if we cannot carry ourselves properly and generate and promote a culture of love and unity in Trinidad and Tobago, if we cannot keep the peace in our communities, if we cannot carry ourselves as upstanding honourable members. If we still in this day and age bring truckloads of people out in front of the Parliament to strike and line them up along racial and ethnic lines, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are in a sad sad place and no budget could save us. No budget could save us if that is the attitude. We on this side, we will continue to do our work. It is about building a nation. It is about providing opportunities for each and every Trinbagonian—

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:**—where every creed and race find an equal place, and you would hear from every Member we deliver projects and programmes to benefit each and everybody. We do not go out there and say this is for PNM or this is for
Indian or this is for African. The People’s National Movement has always been a rally for all.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:** It has been so since inception. It is so today, and no amount of hatred and nastiness from anybody opposite or otherwise could stop that. We are a love party and this is where the love is. And Trinidad and Tobago could continue to rest and rely on the People’s National Movement for intelligent leadership, and for fairness, and for proper representation, because we serve good people, and good people deserve good representation. You will find that in the People’s National Movement.

One more thing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I heard the Member for Siparia tell the people of this country that, oh, now in order to see them you have to buy a ticket for $1,500 to go to Hyatt, pouncing on our fund raising event to raise funds for our party. We raise funds for our party honestly and earnestly.

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:** And I know no other representatives that walk their constituencies like we do. We are in our constituencies day-to-day, week-to-week seeing, serving, loving, touching people, and to try to create this impression that we are out of touch and out of reach, those who know us know us, and that is why they vote for us over and over again. And there are those who say we “loss here and we loss there”, but at the end of the day it is not about the next election but the next generation, and we will continue to make the hard decisions—

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

**Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:**—and take the necessary action to lift all of Trinidad and Tobago as a country I love. You could find that in the People’s National Movement, and I can rest easy knowing that as we show up each day to Cabinet, to
Parliament, we are doing what is in the best interest of Trinidad and Tobago no matter how they paint us. In the end nothing wrong “doh” last long, as Ms. Beard from Buccoo told me. And all that they are trying to do to overturn and to wreak havoc in this country, everything in the dark would come to light. “Half ah dem” before the police and facing the courts, Mr. Deputy Speaker. “Yuh doh find dat over here”.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: And we will continue to raise up that standard in this country because we are held to a different standard. We are the People’s National Movement. We are not afraid of that, and we will continue to live and govern this country with a standard that the people could depend and rely on us.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for my time spent here. Let us keep the fire burning. Let us make the change that we want to see in Trinidad and Tobago and continue to love and lift our constituents as what we want Trinidad and Tobago to be. Mr. Deputy Speaker, with that, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Couva South.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (Couva South): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I seize the opportunity to join this budget debate here this afternoon. And firstly I want to take the opportunity to commend the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, for her outstanding response to the budget presentation of the Minister of Finance in the context of her thought-provoking analysis, and her analysis over the state of the economy and the decadence which we are in terms of the state of Trinidad and Tobago as a result of the PNM Government, or governance of this country under Prime Minister, Dr. Keith
Mr. Indarsingh (cont’d)

Rowley, for the last eight years.

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** And the contributions which have been placed on the record by my colleagues who have spoken in this debate here during the last couple of days, in the contributions of the Members for Caroni Central, Cumuto/Manzanilla, Moruga/Tableland, Pointe-a-Pierre, Fyzabad, Caroni East, Oropouche West, St. Augustine, Couva North and Naparima, clearly have demonstrated that we are indeed prepared to govern Trinidad and Tobago once again whenever the general election is called.

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to thank my parliamentary colleagues on both sides for the words of condolences and the sympathies that have been extended to me and my family on the passing of my late mother, Mrs. Tara Jasmatee-Indarsingh, who departed this life on the 29th of September 2023 and was laid to rest on the 4th of August 2023, when she was cremated on the banks of the Caroni river.

**Hon. Member:** October.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** October. And in the many tributes paid by family, friends and well-wishers during the course of her passing, my mother was recognized as a woman who could have made a dollar stretch with this skill being perfected out of necessity given the financial hardships faced by many households of her generation. And she and many other mothers and parents have laid the foundation through struggles, selflessness, love and fiscal management for my family and current generations to enjoy the successes which we can enjoy today. It is in reflecting on this acute ability held by my mother to make efficient use of household scarce finances that I lament the budget presentation made by the
Minister of Finance who, instead of making a dollar stretch, could only stretch a budget speech with rehashes of spent promises and data—

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:**—incongruent with modern realities so as to make himself appear that he is doing an acceptable job. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am taken aback in relation to the use of language by the Member for Tobago West in relation to how the Member spoke to of her political opponents in Tobago. For me, it reflects the disdain, the contempt, of which the PNM has for its political opponents in Tobago, and it also reflects a political “tabanca” that they cannot deal with the blows that were inflicted upon them—

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:**—in the last Tobago House of Assembly elections. And they still continue to tote the feelings which are being clearly demonstrated in the contribution made by the Member for Tobago West. Instead of advocating for a sense of camaraderie and unity in dealing with the stakeholders of Tobago, I get a strong feeling that it reeks of what I would call total contempt and arrogance for the people of Tobago.

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** And once as you are outside of the fold of the PNM and you are politically opposed to them they cannot see anything for a better and unified Tobago. And the central allocation or the allocation from the central government as it relates to the budgetary allocation for Tobago signals it is nothing ground-breaking, it is nothing out of the ordinary, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It signals to us that it is business as usual, and indeed there is no autonomy on the horizon for the people of Tobago. What they want is that the people of Tobago must accept a water-down autonomy Bill and there must be no robust legislation really to govern
the relationship between the people of Tobago and the central government of Trinidad. That has been the track record of the People’s National Movement in meeting and treating with the people of Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Because it was clearly demonstrated when the Minority Leader in Tobago House of Assembly stated that the Chief Secretary should not complain about the budgetary allocation, and for me that statement is indicative that they want the continued abuse of the people of Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And in relation to the affairs or the outline which has been stated in the budget presentation by the Minister of Finance, it has clearly demonstrated to us on this side, and I think the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that the issues on the sister isle still continue to exist and still continue to afflict the people of Tobago after eight years of “Ah we boy” being the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: The sea bridge dysfunction has not eliminated itself for it has not gone away, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

2.35 p.m.

And it is a matter of deep concern for us in the Opposition because there are frequent cancellations, delays, unreliable ferry services—have serious consequences for the economy of Tobago. It has also had an impact on tourism, the sea bridge unreliability negatively affects Tobago’s tourism, a critical source for revenue on the island. And tourists and investors alike are deterred by the uncertainty of travel to and from Tobago leading to a decline in economic opportunities and growth, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thought that the Member for
Tobago West would have addressed or sought to address some of these issues which are indeed impacting on her constituents and those of the Member for Tobago East also. In fact it is afflicting the entire population of Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Nothing about agriculture and commerce and the inability to transport goods and produce efficiently between the islands has dire consequences for Tobago’s agriculture and commercial sectors, or commerce sectors.

Mr. Charles: Teach her, teach her.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Farmers and businesses face significant challenges in getting their produce to market in a timely manner. What about the economic growth, because without reliable transportation links, Tobago’s potential for economic growth and diversification will remain severely hampered, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And then what about the air bridge issue?

Mr. Charles: Nothing.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Again, it is symptomatic in the context of what I have stated as it relates to the sea bridge issue. Flight cancellation, delays, fares and so on, high fares, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we heard nothing about tourism competitiveness, transparency and accountability, and investing in Tobago’s future. Instead we heard of that political tabanca, and you know what, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Tobago West in her act of desperation attempted to wade in the UNC about the UNC assembling members outside of the Parliament before the budget presentation commenced, and bordered on accusing the UNC of creating a sense of divisiveness along racial lines in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Padarath: Not border, she blatantly said it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, again, Members, please, only Couva South is
recognized at this please, eh, only Couva South. Proceed.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** And I want to tell the Member for Tobago West, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the people of Trinidad and Tobago who voted for the United National Congress in the last local government election and who continue to support the United National Congress, and by extension the people of Trinidad and Tobago, can indeed see through the utterances of the Member for Tobago West. And today I condemn—

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:**—I condemn such sleight of hand utterances designed to create hatred and divisiveness in the society along racial lines. The United National Congress is one of the most unified political parties—

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:**—that represents the diversity of Trinidad and Tobago under the leadership of Kamla Persad-Bissessar, and no Member of the UNC on this side will have—we will have none of that divisiveness which is being promoted here.

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** And I will sit down and allow anyone of them to get up and tell me that if indeed that is what the PNM stands for, in promoting divisiveness and racial hatred and tension in Trinidad and Tobago.

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

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

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Okay, Member, I am giving you a little leeway. Proceed, just be careful as you continue.

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not being irrelevant, you know. I am being relevant in the context of what emerged in this Parliament today and
enough is enough.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Enough is enough. That is our role and responsibility in the Opposition and Members on this side. We must not sweep things under the carpet.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: When we stand to speak we must have the strength and fortitude to call a spade a spade and call out the PNM whenever they go outside of the established norms and stray, and attempt to create this divisiveness in the society—

Mr. Charles: Wickedness.

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Member: Ashamed of themselves.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And as the Member for Couva South I represent a constituency, and all of us on this side, the 19 Members, we represent constituencies with a sense of equality, and here, every creed and race find an equal place.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will move on because after eight budget presentations, we are into the ninth budget presentation from the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Finance, and I just want to present to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a snapshot of some of the headlines which have been making the rounds in Trinidad and Tobago over the last couple of months. And only last Saturday in the Express newspaper, last Saturday 07, October, 2023:

“Guard slain on duty
Gunshots ring out at Brentwood Mall…”

“Three in court for bank worker’s death”

UNREVISED
“Municipal police hold vigil for murdered children”
“Supermarket owners urged to form alliance against crime”
“Murder rate worsens”
60 killed in September; detection rate stagnant; 18 more murders than September 2022.

Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“KFC delivery driver”—are being—“robbed of…chicken”—and chips.

Places of worship are being robbed—

**Hon. Member:** Health centre. They rob the—

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Horses are being stolen; citizens are being robbed, raped and brutalized in their home, murdered; home invasions have become the order of the day; extortion and gang violence is the order of the day; persons are shutting down their businesses and migrating.

When businesses are shut down persons continue to lose their jobs, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Infrastructure has collapsed in this country to the point that in every nook and cranny, driving has become—driving your motor vehicle in this country has become like if you are navigating an obstacle course and, of course, citizens cannot get water in their taps. In fact the headline was recently:

*Suffering in Cedros: Frustrated residents without supply.*

And even in recent times you could not even get something as simple as a birth paper in this country. And one headline was:

“Fire service ‘crisis’

…‘Too many stations without appliances’”

And that will lead me straight into some issues that were unfolded in this debate. And the front page of today’s newspaper was one entitled—splashed broadly across the newspapers and headlines, and I refer to the Minister of National
Security, the Member for Laventille West, and the headlines was:

“Hinds hurt”

Minister says:

“...it ‘pained’ him...to see the video of a woman...‘dragged’”—in the city’s street—“apologise to all...victims of crime.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know when a general election is on the horizon, you know. Probably in the last retreat that they had down in Crews Inn, their public relation handlers told them that indeed they are under pressure, they have failed the people of Trinidad and Tobago. When the Minister of National Security came to deliver or make his input or contribution in this budget presentation, he was hamstrung. In fact he was straightjacketed.

Mr. Charles: He had to read.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Apparently they produced or they prepared a speech for him—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And told him do not go out of line because he has been an abysmal failure as it relates to the handling of crime.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the citizens of this country, they do not want apologies after eight years, they want action.

Hon. Members: Yeah. [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And you know what would have given, you know what probably would have given the population of this country a sense of satisfaction yesterday? Not apology, because anytime a government is elected into office it is to look after the well-being of its citizenry and improve their quality of life and standard of living.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Charles: “Well putted.”

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And if into your ninth year you come to apologize to the country, it tells you or it tells me, in fact, that you are trying to soften or create a soft landing so when the general election is called, the people will buy into your propaganda. The only thing that will work is either you resign—

Mr. Charles: Yeah! “Well putted.”

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—or call the general election, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—because the population has had enough. And whether it is for roads; whether it is for a lack of job creation; whether it is for hospitals; the education system; the lack of opportunities for young people; the collapsed sea bridge; the collapsed air bridge; the inability—people now have gone back to the days of barrels and buckets under the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West.

Mr. Charles: Marvelous Gonzales.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Nothing will save you and we will accept no apology from any Minister of Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we on this side as I said, we will not fall victim to any crocodile tears or any half-baked apology.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Because we will never forget, it is the Minister of National Security who told the country, who told all law abiding citizens, it was not his job to make people—

Mr. Charles: Safe.

UNREVISED
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Hinds: [Crosstalk]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: It was not his job to make—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members.

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—citizens feel safe and he could check with Fazeer Mohammed if he needs.

Hon. Members: [Laughter and desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: If he needs. I will not attempt to legitimize the truth. He could check with Fazeer Mohammed to legitimize—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

2.50 p.m.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it leads me to the very important issue too whether there is a crisis in the fire services of Trinidad and Tobago. Because, as I said, for 2023, if my data is right, I think that 13 persons have already died as a result of fires, unfortunate, tragic. We do not like when those situations occur or unfold itself, but it is our responsibility, Minister, to get you to do your work. That is the role of the Opposition.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: This is not about politicizing. This is making a case for voiceless persons who have been harmed, who have been traumatized, families which have been traumatized as a result of the inaction and incompetence of the Prime Minister and the entire Cabinet. It is not the Opposition’s fault whether there are not enough fire attendants or not enough breathing apparatus, and so on, for firefighters who are going beyond the call of duty in serving the people of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And in some instances, where these fires have occurred and the 13
individuals have died, persons have died because fire stations within the range of victims were not properly equipped. And yesterday, the Minister of National Security, in his wisdom, may be well-intentioned, but I do not know if he got his facts wrong or he was not properly briefed and so on— I am just asking these questions in the context of the law-abiding citizens, the taxpaying public of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as it relates to the state of affairs within the fire services of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Because the Minister told, and I stand to be corrected, that fire stations throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago, they are properly equipped and also they have the appropriate breathing apparatus. He said every fire station in Trinidad and Tobago has the appropriate breathing apparatus.

And then, being as responsible as I am, I looked and I came across a social media post where a fire officer by the name of Keone J. Guy, who I am reliably informed, was attached to the San Juan Fire Station, took to social media, and I quote:

“While I sit at home and attempt to recover from partial thickness burns to my face, injuries I received due to the lack of critical component of PPE (Breathing Apparatus) the Minister of National Security uses the cover of Parliament to falsely indicate that every station has its full complement of Breathing Apparatus Sets.

The only thing worse than being injured in the line of duty and then being forced to line up at…public institutions for assistance, is the Minister’s false statements which unfortunately means that no meaningful relief can be expected.

The lives and quality of life for both fire officers and the citizens they have
sworn to protect are unfortunately put at further risk when efforts are focused on covering up critical shortcomings as opposed to dealing with them head on.”

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And that leads me to the very important issue. Someone in their winding up, the Minister of Finance probably—not someone, but the Minister of Finance or someone on the Government side should get up and tell us really and truly, in the interest of all of our citizens of this country indeed, whether the status of breathing apparatus in the Northern Division are as follows: Chaguaramas Fire Station, zero, in terms of breathing apparatus sets; Four Roads, one; Woodbrook, zero; Belmont, zero; Morvant, zero; San Juan, two; Santa Cruz, zero; Tunapuna, two; Arima, two; Sangre Grande, two; the headquarters, four. And I am reliably informed that at least the minimum should be at least four sets of breathing apparatus in each fire station, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is woeful. This is incompetence. This is a lack of care.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: After having the full knowledge that 13 deaths were as a result of fires in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government needs to act. And the Prime Minister, in responding to a question that I posed some months ago in this very said House, accused me of politicizing the issue. This is not about politicizing the issue. This is a responsible Opposition which has—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—a sense of duty and care for the ordinary citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And if it means raising it again and again, in and outside of this Parliament, we will fulfil our duty—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Mr. R. Indarsingh:—on behalf of the voiceless. And that is why the Opposition-led Kamla Persad-Bissessar, went throughout the nook and cranny of Trinidad to engage in meaningful discussion, in relation to our level of preparation in responding to the Government, in relation to this budget presentation, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, today is the 10th of October. It is also—we are commemorating World Mental Health Day, and mental health is a universal human right. But under eight years, into their ninth year of governing Trinidad and Tobago, it is a fact that mental health issues have continued to escalate and we must ask why. Crime is causing anxiety and trauma. Unprecedented job losses are resulting in mental stress and agony. Record retrenchment, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Young people have no opportunities. And I want to tell you the leading cause of mental health stress in Trinidad and Tobago is the People’s National Movement, led by—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—Dr. Keith Rowley and his incompetent Government for the last eight years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the budget 2024 titled: Building Capacity for Growth and Diversification—they have presented eight. There has been no economic growth and diversification in this country—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—for the last eight years. And then they want us to believe—the Minister of Finance wants us to believe that after 96 months—12/8s are 96—that economic growth and diversification will start in the 97th month. They want us to believe that.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping and laughter]
Mr. R. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, from where I sit, diversification is merely a buzzword with this Government, and it is doomed to fail because the budget does not encourage any forward thinking. It does not focus on proper, what we would call, thorough investment in education and skills development. It promotes neither sustainable practices or focuses on sustainable practices, as my colleague, the Member for Caroni East, would focus on, in relation to the environment and future generations and so on, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There is an absence of a clear roadmap for economic growth. It is a disappointment, which cannot be understated, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and all I could say is that the people of Trinidad and Tobago must know that if our economy is to grow, then the PNM Government must go because mediocrity is luxury—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—we cannot ill-afford, Deputy Speaker.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Labour—I would not say much on the Minister of Labour because he did not have much to say yesterday during his contribution. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Labour in his contribution alluded to the minimum wage and the industrial relations front and so on, and he said that:

“The increase in the minimum wage helps to guarantee…those at the lowest end of the earning…”—who will help to—“…meet their basic needs.”

And it will help the most vulnerable in the society.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the trade union movement has rejected, in a very unified approach, the minimal or, what we would call, the meagre increase in the minimum wage because we, in the Opposition, stand for the blood, sweat and tears of workers. We have also been on the side of workers. We have always agitated for improving their standard of living and their quality of life. And what is of
concern to us in the Opposition will be, what will be the realistic power of this increase to workers earning the minimum wage? Because in the upcoming fiscal year, the Regulated Industries Commission has already signalled—because apparently political pressure is being applied from the central government, that there will be impending rate increases as it relates to water and electricity. Property tax will be imposed on the entire population, and it will continue to erode, in terms of the ability of minimum wage workers to survive on a daily basis, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And just to illustrate, and I quote the position adopted by the Joint Trade Union Movement, and I quote:

“While some may argue that it is better than no increase at all, one must look at the fact that the figure is woefully low, given our economic realities. The rental of a two-bedroom apartment goes at a minimum of $2,500 per month; which means that workers are left with a balance of $1,053. In other words…the Government is asking the major of the population in this country to live on $1,053 per month.”

And that is why we have continued to articulate that there should be discussion around a subsistence wage or a living wage, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

3.05 p.m.

**Mr. Indarsingh:** And the United National Congress, when we return to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, we will facilitate discussions via social dialogue and tripartism to have a discussion that is centred around what we would call a subsistence wage or a living wage to facilitate meeting and treating with the vulnerable in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, then the Minister attempted to piggyback on what was presented by the Minister of Finance as it relates to the state of industrial relations and the collective bargaining process. The Minister of Finance during his budget presentation boasted that the trade union movement accepted a 4 per cent increase. What he did not tell you is that the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance and the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago hijacked the collective bargaining process.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping].

Mr. R. Indarsingh: It was not free, it was not fair, it was not independent, it was negotiated in the public domain with both of them consistently moaning and groaning about the size of the public sector and the need to reduce the wage Bill in Trinidad and Tobago and the implications for outstanding “backpay” and so on, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I want to tell you that also the trade unions understood that if they went to the special tribunal—because the last time, the data and the history will tell you that when trade unions went to the special tribunal, they got less than I think 1 per cent per year. So based on the history and based on the antecedents and understanding, what it means in sending a matter to the special tribunal, it was one of really being bullied and cornered so it was never free and fair collective bargaining.

But you know what, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Also, the Minister should have addressed the very important issue because this is for a five-year period and there is an outstanding period that is to be addressed in the context of 2019 to 2023 and beyond and what will be the Government’s approach to the entire collective bargaining process. Will it be fair? Will it be independent? And will it be allowed in the context of—will the Chief Personnel Officer have a true role in
meeting and treating with the unions in Trinidad and Tobago along the lines of what we would call the collective bargaining process?

And in that context, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was a headline because they spoke under the broad heading of industrial relations and meeting and treating—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have just about two minutes of your initial speaking time, you have an additional 10 minutes. Do you care to avail yourself?

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Certainly, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed, proceed.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And they spoke about industrial relations. Good industrial relation practices will tell you that you need to meet and treat with unions along the line of mutual respect, not bullying and intimidating and negotiating in the public domain.

And today, I am of deep concern, it has caused me a great sense of trepidation because yesterday, there was an article in the Trinidad Guardian which states that:

A “TTALPA source…”

It reads that:

“Pilots are resigning as State moves to decertify union”

And that is shades of the PNM since 1965—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—anti-worker, anti-union, anti-people. One only has through their minds back to the administration of Prime Minister Manning when there was a move to decertify the Transport and Industrial Workers Union at PTSC and decertify the Communication Workers Union at TSTT.

And I call upon the Minister of Finance and also who has the line responsibility for Caribbean Airlines and the Minister of Labour, if he has any
decency and respect for the trade union movement in this country and workers alike in this country, clear the air on whether the Government is moving to decertify the pilots association who are the recognized majority union.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And indeed if they are decertified because of the highhandedness and disrespect for the workers of this country, I assure you that an incoming UNC Government within due process and the means within the labour laws of Trinidad and Tobago will re-establish a recognized majority union status for the body or association representing the pilots association.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Madam Speaker, very quickly, I move on to the state of affairs at it relates to this $4,000 for public retirees or retirees who have served the people of Trinidad and Tobago in the context of the public service. If you listen to the Minister of Finance, you will think that this $4,000 one-off payment is the best thing since slice bread. But I want to read into the record, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am trying to just find my notes and I think Madam Speaker has returned to the Chair. And I want to ask the Minister of Finance because in 2019, if you read page 40 of the budget presentation of Minister of Finance, I quote:

“…I propose to review public service pensions with a view to indexing these pensions at an appropriate level. This review will be completed in fiscal 2020.”

Madam Speaker, this again is a Minister of promises, a Minister who continues to mislead the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So when he comes and he tells public servant retirees to take $4,000 as a one-off payment, what it really means is the Minister has been deceptive. The Minister has failed public servants
who have retired, and today I challenge the Minister to tell us what is the status as it relates to reviewing the public service pensions. Where is the report, Minister? Your deception, we will not tolerate it, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** And in that regard, an old age pensioner, a retiree sent me a WhatsApp message last Friday, 10.00 o’clock in the night, concerned about the deception of the Minister of Finance and he said and it read:

> It is over 10 years since old age pensioners have received an increase. The last time this was done was under was the Government of Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:**

While government retirees—he said—while many have also benefitted by moving up to $3,500, there are those who were above that point and have received nothing.

They have received nothing for 20 years now.

And I retired in 2002 and I believe the last increase was given only to those government retirees who retired on or before 1999.

Madam Speaker, and he lamented in his message:

> Pensioners have to pay bills, groceries, car, gas, rent, mortgage, medical bills and so on and why is there no apparent consideration for pensioners and why this Government has consistently neglected government retirees for the last eight years.

So, Madam Speaker, this increase or this payment of $4,000 to government retirees, while we welcome any money for any person in this country because of the pain and suffering, it is a one-time mamaguy and we reject the deception of the
Mr. R. Indarsingh (cont’d)

Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Dr. Moonilal: That sounds like him.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And then, I have to deal with the very important issue of the National Insurance Fund and this system has been allowed to rot, it has been allowed to decay because of the inaction of the Prime Minister and his entire Cabinet. We must not only train our guns on the Minister of Finance because they were warned.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: So, Member, so it may have been automatic to say that, but I will ask you—in the whole context, I think that is unparliamentary, you could do better than that. So withdraw that and find another way to say it please.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I can assure you I will not knock it on him.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping and laughter]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: It is important—

Madam Speaker: You have not withdrawn it yet.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Certainly.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: I will never go against your guidance on the—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: I know that.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: I withdraw, I withdraw, Madam Speaker. It is important for us to address this very critical issue of the status of the National Insurance Fund and to plug that one billion-dollar gap and more and we have not heard from the Minister of Finance because they granted two amnesties, we were not told how
much revenue that brought into the fund. We also were not told what they have
done with the compliance department as it relates to the delinquent and errant
employers in this country. And at the end of the day, they could deceive you and
tell you that they are engaged in consultation with the people of Trinidad and
Tobago as it relates to the way forward but it is already a done deal. The
consultations are going fast.

The Government has decided that they will move or increase the retirement
rate or the age to access this pension to 65. But what they are not telling the
population is that if you take it at 60 or 61 or 62 and so on, you will reduce
approximately 6 per cent of your full entitlement and you will have what we would
call a reduced national insurance pension. That is the sting in “de” tail that they
are hiding from the population of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Madam Speaker, very quickly too as I come to my final
couple of minutes in my contribution. I am concerned, the Opposition is
concerned about the status of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. We
reject it because it will lead to further unemployment in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: The Government has not said what will be the method of
employment. They are creating two parallels in terms of they are reducing the
established public service and they want to create a political public service in
Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—where they want to ensure that there is employment by
contract where Ministers will have the sole prerogative and authority to create
political party groups in the new Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority and that
is why we are saying we reject, we reject the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority.

And from a constituency point of view, Madam Speaker, the holes are numerous. It has been stated by all of my colleagues. Potholes, poor infrastructure, no water, the education system is in shambles. I hope the Minister of Education can find money to build the Sonny Ladoo Early Childhood Care and Education Centre.

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** I hope that the Ministry of Works and Transport can find the appropriate monies to fix the Phoenix Park Road or the UTT road.

**3.20 p.m.**

You will hear my good friend who is about to enter in this debate, the Minister of Trade and Industry, who has the responsibility—line responsibility—for the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate. She will come—the Minister, Madam Speaker, will come during her debate and boast about the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate and hundreds of millions of dollars. But what she will not tell you is the sad state of the road that leads—

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

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:**—to the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate, a road that is traversed by all, which leads you to the port of Point Lisas. It leads you to the UTT campus, it leads you to the Savonetta stations—fire station, Madam Speaker, and also the Point Lisas business park. But you know recently when they carry the Prime Minister to turn the sod for the solar park—where they got the name wrong, “eh”. They “doh” even know the geography of Trinidad and Tobago. If they want help they could ask me.

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

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, the Phoenix Park road should be built by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Trade and Industry.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and let me say it is always a pleasure to come to the Lower House to speak in the budget debate. This particular budget debate 2024, fiscal Appropriation Bill - Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth. And let me start by dispelling any notion of deception which the last speaker spoke about in reference to the Minister of Finance. And instead, I want to say that the Minister of Finance must be commended for the delivery of a comprehensive, a targeted, and a very purposeful—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—fiscal package at a time when we continue to feel the effects of global economic shocks from international events including the pandemic, supply change disruptions, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and the high global inflation. Let me also just say to the Member for Couva South just one comment. TTRA is not about losing jobs. It is unfortunate you see the negative side all the time. TTRA is about gaining revenues for the country.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And I also would take the opportunity to thank, obviously, the Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley for his very astute
leadership as we continue on the path to sustainable development, growth and development. In fact these two gentlemen, the hon. Prime Minister, and the Minister of Finance, have demonstrated their commitment to develop and strengthen the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. In contrast, last Friday we listened to the Leader of the Opposition, really it was nothing new, nothing constructive, nothing positive to offer, same old rhetoric. But what I noticed is that she regaled us—the Member—regaled us, consultation after consultation, word for word from every organization in Trinidad and Tobago, including our Alcoholics Anonymous, right.

And I want to remind her that consultation is what we do in the budget process. And as soon as the budget is finished, it is a cycle. Consultation begins with all institutions, and what we do is not come to the Minister of Finance, or not come to the House and read from every organization or person who has written. They have all written to the Government as well. What we will do is we would listen, we would distil the information which is put before us, and then together with Government policy, we would produce for the nation our short and medium-term plans, which will fit in into our *Vision 2030*—2030 development plan. That is where our consultation goes.

And I can tell you from the Ministry of Trade and Industry’s standpoint of view, that we have a strong relationship with all of the chambers in Trinidad and Tobago, from Point Fortin, to Sangre Grande, to Port of Spain, and they are all strong partners in the development process, and consultation is an ongoing agenda. But instead I can say that the Leader of the Opposition, the only accomplishment was the demonstration that, look with the right spirit, the Member can stand on her two feet, and speak for four hours in a manner that will tell us—

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—that she belongs no other way, the Member belongs no other place than Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And as I thanked everyone I have to thank all those accounting officers, budget officers as well, I forgot, everybody worked assiduously into the night to bring our accounts to a close, and facilitate this process.

3.25 p.m.

But, Madam Speaker, this Government continues to steer Trinidad and Tobago on the path to economic recovery. This was demonstrated in the Central Bank’s July 2023 Economic Bulletin, which reported an improvement in domestic economic activity in the first quarter of 2023, and the trend, which is expected to continue into the year, bolstered by activity both in the energy and the non-energy sectors.

And I go straight to the trade outlook. Trinidad and Tobago’s trade surplus for the rest of the world increased by 145 per cent; from $19.5 billion to $47.6 billion over the period 2021/2022, and that shows you strength and resilience. Total exports increased by 54 per cent, from 58 billion to 89 billion, and our products produced in Trinidad and Tobago are now in 143 markets worldwide. And on the non-energy side—and I am giving you the figure for non-energy exports—excluding petrochemicals like methanol, urea and ammonia—that increased by 15 per cent, from $15.6 billion to $17.9 billion. So, I want to say that demonstrates that the manufacturing sector showed stellar performance.

There was exceptional strong GDP growth in 2022, in the manufacturing sector. And I am talking output here, coming out of COVID, at 6.1 per cent. And when we look at the breakdown of the main driver of performance within the
manufacturing sector, it is the food and beverage and tobacco sectors which showed a 31.7 increase in output. I am speaking output. And the fact is that these sectors are expected to grow a further 10.5 per cent in 2023. Check your Review Of The Economy. Again, the textile clothing, leather and wood paper and printing increased as well, by 15.8 per cent; very promising output in terms of the manufacturing sector.

But I want to look, Madam Speaker, at where they left us. And I want to compare. So, I go back to 2015, and I looked at manufacturing, including petroleum and chemical products using GDP at current prices. And using GDP at current prices, in 2015, the manufacturing sector output was $24.4 billion. And where are we in 2022? $45.1 billion; a whopping 86 per cent increase. And when petroleum and chemical products are removed—so non-oil manufacturing, excluding manufacturing, as excluded petroleum and chemical products and again using GDP and current prices—in 2015, the figure was $11.4 billion. In 2022, $15.7 billion; an increase of 38 per cent.

And again, pulling away the strongest sector, the food and beverage sector, then, $8.2 billion in 2015; and in 2022, GDP at current prices 12.6 billion; an increase of 54 per cent; 54 per cent. I do not know how they have the nerve to speak about diversification. Because diversification, they do not understand what it is. That is about increased revenue. That is about increased exports. That is about increased export, and we see that in the non-energy sector. We have demonstrated that this is a diversified sector that is continuing to perform.

And according to the Review of The Economy, non-oil revenue is expected to expand by a considerable $5.3 billion in 2024 to $35.5 billion, which will represent 66 per cent of total revenue. And that is diversification. And I would have more time in the Senate to speak to the services sector, which is a strong contributor as
well to the non-oil sector. So that companies in the manufacturing sector, I can tell you that they too are diversifying, because you have now, traditional retailers entering the sector, and existing ones, expanding their product offerings, new products and new product lines, machinery, and equipment. And I will demonstrate that later on. We also have a wave of young and new manufacturers whom we are pleased to support through a myriad of incentives, financial and non-financial, and in particular through trade missions, all of which have been proven to be successful. So, we continue to work very closely in the Ministry of Trade and Industry to grow and expand Trinidad and Tobago’s non-energy sector and they are clearly reflected in the export performance of this particular sector.

I now want to examine the non-energy exports, minus petrochemicals, which include methanol, urea, and ammonia. I have left in melamine and urea resins, which is glue. And all of these are further downstream products. That is the reason why they are left in. So that the non-energy manufacturing exports, as I said before, increased by 15 per cent, from 15.6 billion to 17.9 billion over the period 2021 to 2022. And that represents 14 per cent of total exports.

Now, the main drivers in the non-energy manufacturing sector are: the iron and steel subsector, valued at $6 billion, representing an increase of 8 per cent from 2021. And driving this growth were exports of ferrous products, roofs, roofing systems, and so on, framework, steel doors, et cetera.

Secondly, the food and beverages subsector, valued at $3 billion represented an increase of 22 per cent from 2021. Driving that would be our flavoured waters, our prepared foods from cereals, our non-alcoholic beverages, et cetera. Our basic chemical and fertilizer subsector; notice I said basic, followed strongly behind, valuing $673 million, representing an increase of 38 per cent from 2021. And that would include melamine, which is a derivative from urea, which is used in
construction products and plastic products. Carbon dioxide, oxygen, cleaning chemicals, detergents; all of those will fall under chemicals and fertilizers. But there were also noticeable increases in our plastic and rubber subsectors. Again, that showed a 64 per cent increase from 2021, with an estimated value of $65.2 million. And again, these would include exports as urea resins. And urea resin would be glues and adhesives, plastic tubes, other plastic packaging, and so on.

Our paper subsector made notable strides, growing from 27 per cent to $599 million. And driving this figure would be our toilet paper tissue, facial tissue, and various types of paper, and so, on. And the tobacco manufacturing sector was valued at about $259 million; an increase of 23 per cent. So, performance beats “ol’ talk”, and the manufacturing sector has been doing absolutely very well.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I looked at our key partners, with the first being the United States of America, where our non-energy manufacturing exports, again, I go non-energy, have increased by 19 per cent to $9 billion in 2022. Again, our iron and steel products, melamine, urea resins, bitters, chocolates, scrap metal, cocoa products, et cetera. And then our second highest trading partner would be CARICOM, whose exports have increased by 11 per cent to $5.2 billion. This increase is a direct result of the various trade missions.

And I want to congratulate here ExporTT and the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association who have done yeoman service in taking our goods out to the region and extra-regionally as well. So that, our country’s top export market within CARICOM in 2022 would have been Guyana at 1.3 billion; Jamaica at 1.2 billion, increased by 22 per cent; Barbados at 545 million, increased by 9 per cent; Suriname, 552 million, increased by 21 per cent; St. Lucia, 341 million, increased by 22 per cent; St. Kitts and Nevis, 132 million, increased by 34 per cent. And
again, we are seeing the outcome of targeted Government interventions, in terms of policy, and also in the form of missions and wider support under the Export Booster Initiative, through ExporTT. Again, Madam Speaker, performance beats old talk.

And so we ask ourselves, how did we do this? And how will we build on this stellar performance? And as I said before, this was as a result of both the private sector initiatives and strategic approaches by the Government. Our trade missions have been a huge success. And the TTMA, in collaboration with ExporTT, conducted eight trade missions to Curaçao in fiscal 2023, along with Jamaica twice, Grenada, the DR, Colombia, Suriname and St. Lucia. And I accompany them whenever I am able to. I try to do most of the missions, so that I can actually make the connections a little better, the political, the executive connections as well. And that influences the outcome of our missions.

In addition, there were several international trade shows, and through ExporTT, there was attendance at the Guyana Basins Summit, the China International Import Expo, the Havana International Fair in Cuba, and EXPOCOMER trade show in Panama, and the Suriname Energy Oil and Gas Summit in Suriname.

In addition, the TTMA, of course, would have hosted the very successful—I congratulate them again—trade and investment convention in July 2023. So all told, our business persons, our manufacturers would have benefited from more than 1,500 business-to-business meetings, done through 216 companies. And this is why we have realized all of these export orders.

In fiscal 2024, the intention is to do 10 trade missions by TTMA, supported by the Ministry and also ExporTT. And they have already done the first one, which was Guyana. It has been their largest so far. Thirty-nine companies
participated in that mission in early October. And then, of course, they are off to Antigua, Belize, DR, St. Vincent, Curaçao, Suriname. But they are also now venturing into more extra-regional territories. And on the calendar for 2024 would be Miami, Canada and Panama. And I will tell you why.

They are also looking at the planned mission for Ghana in March 2024. That is to look at opportunities, and this is following the visit of his Royal Majesty Otumfuo Osei Tutu of Ghana, where we held several business discussions; with whom we held several business discussions.

In addition, under the Fit 4 Europe II project in fiscal 2024, the EU has hired a consultant who would ascertain the export readiness and do export readiness training for our SMEs. And based on particular criteria, 20 SMEs have been chosen from the food and beverage, from the personal care, the plastics, the ICT, the energy services, fashion and entertainment sectors, to participate in trade missions to Sweden and Germany.

And underpinning all of this, and as part of its strategic approach to export development is the work by the Export Booster Initiative done through ExporTT. And, therefore, there are several programmes which companies would have benefited from again: the International Certification Fund, 13 to date, three were done in fiscal 2023; the Export Accelerator Programme, nine were done in fiscal 2023; Tobago Indigenous Suites programme, 10 companies received support for packaging and product upgrades; labelling and testing, seven companies benefited; good manufacturing practices and food safety requirements, 14 benefitted in 2023, another 15 will be trained in 2024; co-financing arrangements, et cetera, 11 companies would have benefitted.

Seven companies are going to be coached under the Export Development Programme. Seven in 2023 and 10 in 2024. Eleven firms completed the Tobago

UNREVISED
export assistance, and this is separate from the suites. And that is support for the entrepreneurs programme in Tobago. And we are targeting another 10 companies for 2024.

Alongside that, we are going to focus on new opportunities through expanded market access. And again, this includes the negotiation of new trade agreements. And I can tell you that we have completed the fourth round of negotiations for the Partial Scope Trade Agreement with Chile. And, therefore, the fifth, and we think final round of negotiations will be held in early December 2023. So, we are hoping.

3.40 p.m.

I tell you that the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Chile and Trinidad and Tobago is in 2024, and I think it will be quite significant if we can sign that agreement in 2024.

Again, the outcome is to provide access for Trinidad and Tobago exports, preferential market access to 19.5 million consumers. Alongside that, we are still working on the Partial Scope Trade Agreement with Curaçao and we will continue negotiations in the second quarter of fiscal 2024. And we are working with CARICOM on expanding the CARICOM and Colombia Agreement on Trade, Economic and Technical Cooperation, and that will secure preferential market access for an additional 308 products into Colombia, and those negotiations are ongoing by CARICOM.

But again, I was speaking about how would we further bolster that export performance, and what we have done is that we have reinforced the architecture, the commercial architecture, for increasing exports through the establishment and the appointment of commercial officers and attachés in strategic intra-regional and extra-regional markets. So that we have set up—we have already set up three
commercial offices in Panama, with responsibility for Central and South America; in the UK, with the responsibility for all of Europe and the UK; and in the USA, with responsibility for Canada. Three commercial officers are already established in-country and they have embarked on the process of hiring the deputy commercial officers to be available to the business community in Trinidad and Tobago.

Additionally, the two commercial attachés, one in Guyana, with responsibility for southern Caribbean, with a focus on Guyana and Suriname; and Jamaica, with responsibility for Haiti and Dominican Republic, DR, they are now in post as well, and together they will serve the business community, forge new linkages, find new markets and fulfil new demand. So that we expect our commercial diplomacy to be at its best, with the combined efforts of these personnel, and also the existing missions that we have across the globe.

And in fiscal 2024, we will give consideration for the appointment of additional commercial officers and we are thinking of, as I said, I think I may have said it before, the Asian and the African markets. But if we are expanding at the rate we are expanding in the manufacturing sector, it means that we have to prepare the right personnel with the right skills to be able to fill the necessary positions, which will result.

And so, as we had announced before, we do have up and running the national apprenticeship programme for the non-energy manufacturing sector. And it is over the period we intend to train 335 persons across four operational areas in mechanical engineering technology, electrical and electronics technology, industrial maintenance technology, and mechatronics. I want to say that cohort one, that means the 135 students, those who have completed successfully the first year, they have now been placed in industrial attachments in 73 manufacturing companies. In other words, some of those companies have accepted more than one
apprentice and we are very, very, pleased about that. Now they are getting practical training and this again is a true collaboration—you talk about consultation and collaboration, this is true collaboration with the private sector.

We expect that cohort two, which commenced in June of 2023 with 100 trainees, they would follow the same process, and again we intend in fiscal 2024 to launch cohort three. And alongside that apprenticeship programme, also within the manufacturing sector, is another sector which we have targeted for growth, which is the wood and wood products manufacturing subsector which employs, as it is, about 4,000 persons and is already an earner of foreign exchange. So that according to the CSO—and these are not false statistics. According to the CSO, at June 2023, the sector contributed .02 per cent to the economy. However, I keep saying there is significant potential in this sector as the exports grew from 28 million in 2021, to 37 million in 2022, a 32 per cent increase, therefore signifying the hope that this sector has in terms of exports.

So, again, as you know, we launched the apprenticeship programme for the wood and wood manufacturing subsector. And so they are studying carpentry and woodworking and joinery, and so on, and cohort one is in progress, and we do intend to bring on a second cohort in 2024 as well.

I want to say again that the manufacturing sector could not have been the success that it was without the support of the EximBank of Trinidad and Tobago and the FX facilities which had been set up under them by the Ministry of Finance. So there is the facility for the local importers of basic food and pharmaceutical and other essential items, but for the local manufacturing and exporting companies, this is pivotal.

And I want to put to rest the false notion peddled by the Leader of the Opposition that the Government is only providing foreign exchange to large
manufacturers. It is entirely false. And I want to tell you, I got the stats from EximBank, 158 companies, the majority of which were SMEs, accessed a total of US $689 million as at September 29, 2023, under the FOREX Facility for manufacturers. So a complete falsehood by the Leader of the Opposition.

In addition to that, there are two new manufacturing initiatives. And I will speak a little bit about the green manufacturing initiative and then, of course, the other one, the export sales of manufacturing companies benefiting from the exemption of the business levy charge.

But going back to the green manufacturing initiative, let us all admit that the world is experiencing a climate crisis and therefore, it is the responsibility of all industries to do their part. And so, in fiscal 2024, the Ministry of Trade and Industry will launch the green manufacturing initiative, and really it will largely assist all manufacturers in the non-energy sector, but also particularly the small and medium-sized ones that are adopting or improving green manufacturing practices. These green manufacturing practices would include the reduction of pollutants during operations, a decrease in greenhouse gas emissions, minimization and recycling of waste materials, and the production of eco-friendly packaging and biodegradable products. This will reduce the negative effect on the impact on the environment, and improve resource utilization, and increase comprehensive benefits throughout all stages of the product life cycle. And it is aimed, first and foremost, at reducing Trinidad and Tobago’s carbon footprint, and it signals the Government’s commitment to environmental preservation and climate goals.

The first component really refers to what we call “energy efficiency audit assessments”. And what the initiative will do is fund consultants to undertake energy efficiency audits of companies in the non-energy manufacturing sector to examine their energy efficiency and to identify energy-saving opportunities. And
we will work with the NEC to develop a list of preapproved consultants for the GMI. And the GMI will fund 100 per cent of the cost of the audit capped at $200,000 for small manufacturers, and also 50 per cent capped at $150,000 for medium-sized manufacturers.

Component two has to actually deal with the greening of manufacturing implementation, so that based on the recommendations of the energy efficiency audit, manufacturers are expected then to retool the production process, so the purchase and installation of equipment and technology and so on, and this fund will assist small and medium-sized manufacturers again with a financial contribution capped at $250,000. And this is again targeted at them.

There is also a component three based on training and green upskilling of staff, and when we announce the initiative, I will speak more of that. And we are at this time revisiting and operationalizing other incentives and waivers to promote the use of renewable energy and energy efficiency, including what was on the books before and not implemented, the 75 per cent accelerated depreciation for plant and machinery and other tax allowances and so on. But I will give you the details when we actually launch.

So again, the manufacturing sector has signalled that they are very much appreciative of the exemption from business levy, and that is for manufacturing companies whose gross receipts fall within 30 per cent.

Underpinning all of this is our trade policy, the Trinidad and Tobago’s current trade policy, which is set to expire in December 2023. And I am pleased to indicate that with respect to the main goals of the policy, with regard to growth and production and export of non-energy goods and services, as I indicated, we have achieved this.

Growth in our trade with CARICOM, this has increased by 25 per cent.

UNREVISED
between 2021 and 2022. Growth in market share with traditional and non-traditional markets, again we have achieved exports to the US. This has increased by 87 per cent. We are even exporting to countries like Ghana and Spain, et cetera. And all of our main policy goals have been achieved, and so we are at this time developing with the ITC. We are now going to begin the development of the national training strategy for 2024—2029, and this is going to take nine months to be completed and we are very pleased to see the outcome. As I said, with the ITC, the International Trade Centre, doing the project but, of course, we will be working along with them and we are looking forward to seeing the design of a strategic trade development road map, and also the development of indicators of sector and functional strategies and so on.

I want to go on now to investments, Madam Speaker. I want to say that Trinidad and Tobago continues to attract investments, especially in the non-energy sector, demonstrating continued confidence in the economy. And there is one variable which is indicative of this confidence, and that is private sector credit. And simply put, businesses are borrowing for expansion, and I will explain this.

And I go to the Central Bank report. And in the first nine months of fiscal 2023, there was steady growth in private sector credit, both by non-bank financial institutions by 17.7 per cent, and commercial banks by 6.9 per cent. In June 2022, the total private sector credit was 64 billion, and in June 2023, stood at $68.6 billion, which is an increase of $4 million. Again, that is testament to the strength of the private sector in contributing to the growth of the economy. And I want to say that it remains a fact that the private sector always does very well and grows under successive PNM governments.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** And data would show the expansions in the
private sector credit would be at a sectoral level, in terms of agriculture, construction, distribution, hotel and guest houses, manufacturing, and I would say that is 13.4 per cent, personal services, et cetera, again indicative of a healthy growing economy in which the private sector is identifying opportunities for growth and taking full advantage of it.

And that is why I found it to be very disheartening again when the former Prime Minister and now Leader of the Opposition, in her contribution, was using very disparaging terms and painting with a broad brush the business community of Trinidad and Tobago. They have heard you and you will feel the brunt of that.

So I want to go to investment facilitation and give you the figures. I am going to speak to closed investments which are not yet materialized; closed meaning that the companies have signed, they have taken their decisions to set up new operations. In terms of closed investments not yet operationalized, there were five closed foreign direct investments to the extent of $966 million expected to generate 1,089 jobs. And why are the jobs so high? It is because of the particular sector, that is the BPO sector, and one of those investors is Nearshore Teleservices. They are currently finalizing negotiations for a site in Longdenville, Chaguanas, and their investment is $7 million, they will hire 400 persons.

3.55 p.m.

Again, I will save—let me call out some more as I go along and the 12 closed local development investments amounting to $582 million are expected to generate 364 jobs. And again, this is all done through InvesTT. There are a host of other private sector initiatives going on throughout Trinidad and Tobago that we are not able to track but again, it hints at, and it speaks to as a matter of fact, the confidence in Trinidad and Tobago. So those are in closed investments. So, just
to give you the full figure—17 closed investments at $1.5 billion generating 1,453 jobs, five closed FDI and 12 closed local investments.

In terms of—there are closed ones which also became operational in 2023. And the total for that the 13 investments which became operational in 2023, amount to $264 million generating 529 jobs. Some of those that became operational in fiscal 2023 would have been the ANSA McAL Chemicals plant, which is an upgrade to the AMCL, the ANSA McAL Chlor-Alkali plant at Point Lisas Industrial Estate. That was $67 million. Khan’s Poultry processing, again, another one of their initiatives $52 million and, of course, there is Cinema One, the establishment of a new theatre in Chaguanas that is $15 million, but there is also made operationalize foreign direct investment as well closed in 2023.

But the biggest of them all that I want to demonstrate here today, is that of the reinvestment and again, I go back to manufacturers, reinvestment by manufacturers. Would you believe there were 14 major reinvestments by manufacturers amounting to $1.4 billion expected to generate 923 jobs in this last fiscal and there is no overlap from the former figures which I spoke of. Again, these reinvestments represent decisions by existing companies that they will expand in Trinidad and Tobago, they will improve their local operations again signifying investor confidence in our domestic economy, satisfaction with governance under the PNM, again, I say to the population businesses do well under the PNM.

And I look at those reinvestments and I could tell you just about a few otherwise I will take all of my time. Kaleidoscope Paints Limited, they are now diversifying and they will open in a month or so, their new beverage manufacturing plant $65 million.
Guiltless Gourmet by John Dickinson, as you will know they had ventured into—yes, they are into paper products and tissue paper. They went into Guiltless Yogurt, I had the opportunity to walk the floor recently of their new ice cream brand called Sunday—I am sure you have seen it in the market some days ago and so, that is another investment of $30 million soon to be open.

Then of course, I also walked the floor two weeks ago of the Carib Glassworks Limited plant. That is a new line and that plant, $200 million in warehouse and plant and machinery. It is a new line expanding its packaging capability from the stage of returnable glass bottles to actually the finished product. And this plant is among one of the more advanced in the world, and really represents that company's single largest investment in decades and we are very pleased to have that.

In addition to that New Wave Marketing would have invested in the expansion of their plant and they do PVC products as well. TCL would have spent another $51 million in kilns and other equipment. As I said, VEMCO would have spent another $20 million. CPI, the Caribbean Packaging Industry is another $27 million and plant and equipment. Associated Brands, an entirely new chocolate factory $70 million and so on. Just all of these another new beverage manufacturing firm to be opened again—they have diversified into manufacturing, another $95 million. AMCO, who is into packaging and plastic bottles invested a further $50 million and I can tell you I have a number of pipeline investors.

So, all I want to say, and I know there was this conversation about unemployment, I keep hearing it ringing through, you got to take it as it is—unemployment in this country has declined to 3.7 per cent.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Our labour force participants expanded to 609,800 in the second quarter of calendar 2023, from 595,000 persons. And I say this here, because there is a clear relationship between investments and the reduction in employment. And I want to congratulate all of those business houses, which have chosen to continue to invest in Trinidad and Tobago. But if I summarize, as I leave the numbers, Madam Speaker, $3 billion in investments representing closed operational and reinvestments, expected to translate into 2,900 jobs, all of course—most of it into the manufacturing sector, the BPO sector, et cetera, and as I said, there are numerous pipeline investments that I would not want to speak about. But I would love to go to the next chapter today. I will tell you why.

In order to accommodate all of these investments, industrial parks are vehicles for investments, they are absolutely necessary. And you would know yes, the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate is completed and will be commissioned shortly. Now, there are about 49 lots which are leased, totaling 43.3 acres, and therefore 62.8 per cent of the lots or 64.3 per cent of the leasable acreage is already committed. So to date, and there are updated figures as I have come to you, 18 investments have been committed for PPIE, at investment levels of $458 million and expected job creation of 861 jobs, in addition to, a data centre, which has to be built through the Ministry of Digital Transformation, so 19 companies.

But the point I want to make is because the Leader of the Opposition said that listen:

You have 14 investments that means only a quarter of the park occupied.

You all would take four years now to probably occupy the rest of the park. She did not do the maths right, because collectively, these investors will occupy two-thirds of the lots and leasable space of the park. All of the five factory shells
have already been taken. For instance, SM Jaleel took two factory shells, FCMC will take eight acres, PriceSmart is taking 10 acres, but it means clearly that the Leader of the Opposition does not know what is happening within her own backyard. Right? Does not know. But what is worse Minister of Finance, is the last speaker, Member Indarsingh, is not keeping her up to date because it is in his constituency.

So and I also want to refute the statement made by the UNC chief spokesman on the economy Jwala Rambarran—Phoenix Park is not a white elephant. Phoenix Park is not a white elephant. And you know what a white elephant is? A white elephant is the $1.5 billion that was spent on the Beetham Wastewater Project.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** That is a white elephant. So, I do not know why he is having a headache over Phoenix Park and our ongoing development of industrial parks. Right? So Phoenix Park as I told you, I do not have the time to give you all the details but in the Senate, I will regale you with the list, yeah. So, there are now 19 investors including the Ministry of Digital Transformation into the park. One of them, Summit Luggage, the park is not open, but they are already operating, they have begun with just one line so far, but what they are—producers of travel products and they will export to USA and Europe and so on, 22 local persons are already employed at Phoenix Park. Right. And again, that is demonstrating that Phoenix Park is a good destination for manufacturers of high quality products.

I want to say to you that we have a delegation of 15 Chinese investors interested in investing in the PPIE and they come to Trinidad in the next week. And then in November, there is a promotional investment tour to three major cities
in China's Jiangsu Province, InvesTT and exporTT will be there as well. Well, Jwala Rambarran will get another headache because the Factory Road Industrial Park, I have said it before, it is completely sold out.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** So I do not know what is his issue with industrial parks.

Why it is still on the books is because we are completing the infrastructural works. Right? But again, with the tenants of that park—it is a smaller park—the investment is expected to be about $725 million creating 1,191 jobs. Well, he would get another headache because—and I do not know what the UNC if they have a problem with us developing, maybe the PNM developing central Trinidad, but that is how we are. We in government, we are looking after the interests of all of Trinidad and Tobago. So you get your headache, we are building another park in Dow Village Industrial Estate and why—

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:**—yeah, Member Indarsingh would be pleased. So, we will commence development of that 147-acre park in Dow Village again, for non-energy activities including—not only manufacturers, but those businesses that provide services, transport services et cetera, logistics and distribution and so on and that is expected to be completed in two years. And you know what, Madam Speaker, we will continue to build more parks. Right.

Now I want to go to the Moruga Agro-Processing and Light Industrial Park. That is a different park because that is in a rural area. And I will make the point and yet, they start grinning already—they are against development, in particular, the MP for Moruga/Tableland. Right. Because your modus operandi is always to mimic and to stall and to hinder, et cetera, and is the same thing happening with
Lengua/Indian Walk you know, just look at the action in the court preventing the people from going back to the polls, is the same thing.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Minister—

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Yes.

**Madam Speaker:**—your original speaking time is now spent you have 10 more minutes to complete your presentation, if you so wish.

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Absolutely. Thank you very much.

**Madam Speaker:** Please proceed.

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** And the whole point about it is that they are incapable of thinking big and they do not understand development and how incremental it can be, especially when it comes to rural areas. But we are concerned, not just about food security, we are concerned about developing and putting industry in all of the rural areas in Trinidad and Tobago, and when we launch the special economic zones, you will understand our intention to really industrialize rural areas. Right. We are concerned about the people, not only of Moruga, but all of the people including the people in rural communities. And so, there are six closed investments in the park. In other words, those people have signed, they have said, “We have agreed that we are going to be establishing there.”

But it is difficult to transition from a producer to where you are now into full production value added production. And, therefore, what I would have expected from the Moruga/Tableland only two of those are already operational, I would have expected that she would have promoted the products which are being
produced by her constituents in her constituency, tell us all the jams and so on and process vegetables that are being produced there. None of that. Right?

But we are proud of the work we are doing, I can tell you I met yesterday with a gentleman from Trinidad Chocolate Factory, he is working with us right now I am processing a grant for him for the purchase of machinery and equipment to assist with a transition. That is development PNM style. Right? And so, we will continue on I can tell you by the end of the—certainly within this fiscal, we will be establishing—not establishing, commissioning, opening the Moruga fishing facility. So for Moruga, is forever ever, backward never. “Yeah, we coming.”

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

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** And so in the time that I have—how much time do I have?

**Madam Speaker:** Your time ends at 4.16.30.

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Right.

**Madam Speaker:** So you have about eight minutes.

**Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:** Yes, but I do have the opportunity to speak again in the Upper House and thank you, Madam Speaker. There is one opportunity that I would like to speak about, which has been growing under us and that is the business process outsourcing industry. And it is, over the last years we have developed more than 20 of these BPO industries in Trinidad and Tobago, representing both local and foreign clients. And you have of course several major commercial banks that have created shared service centres in Trinidad and Tobago. And the reason for all of this is that, Trinidad and Tobago is seen to be an ideal place for BPO nearshoring solutions, and that is an account of our geographic proximity to customers in the Caribbean and into the North American markets and so on because of our educated population, English-speaking, modern ICT.
infrastructure, high quality and available real estate, convenient air connectivity, reliable power and utility systems and so on.

4.10 p.m.

But in addition to the nearshoring of services for which we have accumulated—already operational we have BPO investments in this country with over 1,865 jobs, and that is your iQor and their call centre, Port of Spain; Bill Gosling, Teleperformance, DirecOne, Ascensos, Equisoft, Nearshore Outsourcing, nearshore services. They are all and we have another 31 million in the pipeline with 674 jobs. What we see the opportunity for is the nearshoring manufacturing, and that is an attractive proposition that we have put to the United States for US firms to operate in Trinidad and Tobago.

And, again, because of Trinidad and Tobago’s low-cost energy—low energy costs, it would significantly boost their capacity, and so on, to produce competitively-priced products. So again, that is something that we have on the table. We do have a plan, which we have shared with many of our investment partners, including the US, and what we have done is at the last COTED meeting, we did put it on the table, so at the upcoming USA-CARICOM Trade and Investment Council meeting to be held in Guyana next week, nearshoring, particularly nearshoring manufacturing is on the agenda and that is because of Trinidad and Tobago. We put that there.

So we see ourselves as a wider nearshoring territory capable of meeting the demand for nearshoring services and manufacturing. And that has come out because of all the—come out as absolutely needed because of all of the supply chain disruptions that you have had and which many of the larger—the globe, in fact, endured. So in the short time that I have, I want to tell you that we will continue with our investments. We do have an India trade mission coming, arising
out of a meeting which was held in New Delhi in August. Our High Commissioner, Dr. Gopaul, will be leading an investment—an Indian trade and investment mission to Trinidad and Tobago during November, late November to December the 2nd, to explore opportunities and joint ventures, mergers, investments, technology, transfers, and so on.

They would look at our parks, and, of course, we are also continuing our negotiations with Ghana for a Reciprocal Promotion and Protection of Investments Agreement, known as a bilateral investment treaty, and that again to encourage trade and investment. And we have completed the first round of negotiations in May of this year and we will go to the second round in December of this year. When I go—I have about five minutes, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: You end at 4.16.30, so you have three minutes.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Right. Thank you, Madam Speaker. And when I go to the Lower House, I will speak extensively about our new trade and investment promotion agency which will be fully operationalized in the first half of 2024. I will also speak to the special economic zones as well, the regime, which is well advanced and where we have finalized regulations and these will soon be laid in Parliament, and this too will be fully operationalized in the first half of 2024. I would take the time then to speak about our digitalization agenda and the ease of doing business in terms of the enhancement of the TTBizLink platform, where in July of this year, I said we will do it in fiscal 2023 and we did it.

We, in fact, enhanced 36 existing services across seven Ministries so that now as well, most importantly, all users can make payments online for permits and licences for all e-services that require payments. I want to say to you that we will establish 14 new e-services to the TTBizLink platform in fiscal 2024. Of course, what would we be talking about, greater time and cost efficiencies and savings. I
will speak to you further about the Port Community System in Trinidad and Tobago which have started and which will yield several deliverables as we go along. The main focus of my contribution in the Upper House would be on SME development, as SMEs are the backbone of our economy, and especially in relation to our diversification agenda. I will speak to all of the products and initiatives that we have done, including the more recent products and initiatives made by the Minister of Finance in the recent budget.

Then I will also attach myself to the services sector, in particular to the yachting sector and the growth which we are seeing already, and also the new Yachting Marine Apprenticeship Programme which will be established, where we would in fact hire and give stipends to 150 young persons. And then, of course, I would spend much of my time on the success of the creatives, Madam Speaker, and address as well food prices. So whatever I have not—it is not possible to do everything in such a short time, I will deal with those later in the Upper House. But again, as I close, I want to say that our economy continues to demonstrate resilience. Today our non-energy sector is in fact more vibrant. Our businesses, both in the manufacturing, in the services sectors continue to grow, and they are the major catalyst for economic transformation.

This Government, Madam Speaker, is about vision, it is about development, it is about people, it is about building the economy when, of course, I know, empty rhetoric on the other side. So we will continue to transform Trinidad and Tobago into a new society and a new economy by adopting a very strategic and targeted approach to developing Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker: Minister, your time is now spent.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Madam Speaker: Member for Mayaro.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to contribute to this extremely important debate as we look at fiscal appropriations for 2024. Let me first commend the Member for Siparia, Leader of the Opposition, for a very well, clean, clinical delivery in terms of her response—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray:—to the Minister of Finance’s budget presentation. It was direct, Madam Speaker, and purposeful on the day of the delivery. I also wish to commend all my colleagues on this side who have contributed—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray:—in their specific way under their specific portfolios which they have done so with precision and exactitude.

Madam Speaker, I am proud to say that it is this side of the House which continues to fight for and defend the interest of all the people of Trinidad and Tobago and just not the chosen few.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray: I rise today, Madam Speaker, as the Member of Parliament for Mayaro, representing the hard-working citizens of a constituency which desperately wanted budget 2024 to speak to the issues that matter to them. Madam Speaker, issues such as job creation, better infrastructure, better roads, access to reliable water supply, better educational opportunities for their children, flood management, school transportation, and most especially, they wanted to hear what was being done to combat the explosion of violent crime which has our fellow citizens across our nation living in daily fear for their lives.

Madam Speaker, most Ministers of Finance would judge the success of a
budget presentation by how it improves the quality of life for the citizens they serve, but not this one.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** In Trinidad and Tobago where a Government has inflicted unrelenting hardship over the past eight years, you would expect the Minister of Finance to ease the burden of living by reducing taxes, taming the cost of food and medicine and returning communities to safe zones. Madam Speaker, these are not unreasonable demands; far from it, Madam Speaker. Indeed, they are the very basic items that are being demanded by every citizen here in Trinidad and Tobago from Mayaro to Chaguanaas to Charlotteville. Sadly, Madam Speaker, budget 2024 addresses none of these critical issues comprehensively which everyone in our nation is concerned about.

A national budget, Madam Speaker, is more than just an Excel spreadsheet of allocations to various Ministries. A national budget is a blueprint of national priorities. It is a vision that charts a way forward for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Not only does it just set the way forward to achieve our dreams, but rather it inspires us in the very act of collectively dreaming for a better nation, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, a national budget should be a fight for a better future for every citizen, but this budget was not a fight for a better future. It was an act of national surrender. Madam Speaker, this budget was a surrender of our national hopes and dreams. This Government has surrendered on crime. They have surrendered on flooding. They have surrendered on infrastructure. They have surrendered on the economy. The “onliest” thing left to surrender is Government by calling the elections now.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** Madam Speaker, this budget is telling the people of our nation,
"You are condemned to a sick economy where mass joblessness is normal, where runaway crime is normal, where collapsed infrastructure is normal, where dry taps is a way of life”. This budget, Madam Speaker, is telling those who are dreaming of starting their own businesses to give up, the red tape and bureaucracy is not worth it.

This budget is telling our young people to forget about the digital economy and the coming revolution of artificial intelligence, instead just focus on trying to live day by day. This budget is telling us that our only national dream is to dream of a government-sponsored issued food box. Madam Speaker, allow me for a couple of minutes just to share a story. I would like to take a moment to share a story, a story that reflects the aspirations and dreams of so many people in our beloved country.

Madam Speaker, my parents, like many of our fellow Trinbagonians, started their journey from humble beginnings in Mayaro. My grandfather took my grandmother and their four children from Fyzabad and brought them to Guayaguayare with two grip and $100 in their pocket. My grandparents rented a small house for $5 a month. My grandfather took advantage of the early development of the oil sector and offered himself as a road builder in the Tesoro fields, and during that time my grandmother opened a little parlour which she started a little business.

Eventually my father, he too became a dedicated policeman and my mother continued with the shop—with the parlour and the shop and it grew out into a successful business. It was their dedication, Madam Speaker, coupled with the opportunity to access the tools to start a small business that allowed them to grow and send my siblings and me to school. It was through their efforts that created a dream for a better life for themselves and their children, but I was able to continue
my studies and form my own businesses. But, Madam Speaker, I am acutely aware that my story is not unique. There are countless individuals in our nation with dreams and ambitions eager to contribute to the growth and diversification of Trinidad and Tobago.

4.25 p.m.

The success of my family and many like ours was made possible because they had confidence in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, they had the confidence that their dreams were achievable, that their vision could be accomplished, and that their hard work would benefit their children and their grandchildren. It is my view, Madam Speaker, that this is precisely the role of a national budget, to provide all of our citizens with the tools and the resources they need to pursue their dreams.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray: Our citizens, Madam Speaker, do not want a handout. All they are asking for is for the State to give them a hand-up and a fighting chance, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, we must recognize that fostering economic growth and diversification cannot be achieved through top-down policies alone. It requires an unwavering commitment to empowering our citizens at the grassroots level. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our economy and they need more than just lip service in the budget.

We need initiatives that make it easier for aspiring entrepreneurs to access funding, receive training and mentorship, and navigate the bureaucratic hurdles that often stifle their potential. We need targeted investments in education and skill development to equip our workforce for the challenges of the 21st Century, not
a vaille-que-vaille approach, Madam Speaker. Budget 2024 should have been a beacon of hope, a blueprint for a brighter future for all Trinbagonians. It should have laid out a comprehensive plan to provide access to the tools and opportunities needed to realize the hopes and dreams of our people.

Madam Speaker, over the last eight years this Government has developed the unfortunate habit of calling anyone who disagrees with them, unpatriotic.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** When my colleagues on this side express genuine concerns over government policy, they get accused of wanting this Government to fail. Let me say this today quite clearly, Madam Speaker, as a patriot of Trinidad and Tobago, no one on this side of this House wants our nation to fail.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** My children, as well as the children of my colleagues opposite all have to live in this country together.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** When this Government fails it means our country fails, it means the dreams of all of our children fail. We on this side, Madam Speaker, will continue to question this Government and raise our concerns where we see it, not because we want the Government to fail but because we want the children of Trinidad and Tobago to succeed.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** Madam Speaker, one might have expected the Minister of Finance to address pressing issues like poverty, failing infrastructure, and economic diversification, run-away and rampant crime, the issues of flooding, food insecurity. Yet, Madam Speaker, the Minister seems to define success merely by the absence of new taxes, a view that reveals the disconnection from the needs of

**UNREVISED**
the people of this country.

The morning after the Minister’s budget presentation, the Minister touted the lack of new taxes as an achievement, ignoring the broader, more complex challenges that face our nation today, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this illustrates a troubling lack of imagination and vision in the halls of power—

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

**Mr. R. Paray:**—in Trinidad and Tobago. The *Express* newspaper, Madam Speaker, aptly termed this budget as lacking:

“…imagination, innovation, and respect…”

The keyword, Madam Speaker, to me, was respect. They have disrespected the intelligence of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**4.30 p.m.**

**Mr. R. Paray:** It was a disorganized approach with no clear objectives or accountability. No plans for poverty alleviation, crime reduction or business improvement were provided. In essence, Madam Speaker, this is a budget without purpose or vision, reminding us of the biblical warning that where there is no vision, the people perish.

Madam Speaker, allow me an opportunity now to make a few comments on some items that were raised by Members on the other side who presented, and I wish to just raise some issues on some of the comments that were made. The Member for San Fernando East has two opening batsmen, in terms of pieces of commentary that I have heard the hon. Member use on a number of occasions. The first one being that Trinidad and Tobago continues to be the best and one of the only investment grade countries in the Caribbean. Now, I have no argument with that position but I will ask the question, if we are so, where is the line-up of
investors waiting to come into Trinidad and Tobago?

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** And the investors that I am asking about are the ones who can invest serious foreign direct income into this country. Where are they?

Madam Speaker, the second batsman that the Member for San Fernando East puts out on the pitch is the fact that Trinidad and Tobago is one of the only countries that has not gone into the IMF’s hands, and that is a good thing. I do not argue with that point. But, Madam Speaker, if one were to read the Article IV report of May 2023, there is a section in fine print, not the headlines. I like to read the fine prints.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** And the fine print identifies certain things that the Government must address if they wish to accomplish the projections that have been made in that IMF Article IV report.

Madam Speaker, these are the things that they are asking the Government to do: deal with your revenue authority, that is an IMF suggestion; deal with your utility rates, that is an IMF suggestion; deal with property tax, that is an IMF suggestion; deal with the reorganization of WASA, that is an IMF suggestion; deal with NIB reform, that is an IMF suggestion. So while we have not signed on the line for the IMF, these are the precursors that they are following.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** “So we eh there across de line, but we in front de door”. Madam Speaker, this is the only Government that I have heard prefers to beat their chest by borrowing money. They borrow money and beat their chest “that we get money at good rate”. But I have not heard any chest-beating for any business opportunity that would put us back on the map of the early 2010/2015—
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray:—when Trinidad and Tobago was described by The New York Times as a:

“Tiger in a Sea of Pussy Cats…”

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, when we are looking at the NIB, which is a very contentious issue, Madam Speaker, one just has to look at what is happening in Europe, in France more so, with this very same issue of the adjustment to the retirement age. I have to ask the hon. Ministers of Finance if they had looked at options rather than moving the retirement age. Have we looked at increasing the contribution system in the NIB?

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray: Because, Madam Speaker, for years there has been a call to bring in domestic workers inside of that catchment. There are over 50,000 young men and young women who serve as domestic assistants throughout homes, throughout the country. Can the NIB look at bringing a classification to bring those people on board? Madam Speaker, what about the option of bringing small business owners—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray:—have a classification for them that we can bring in more contributions into the NIB system? And, Madam Speaker, the numbers, in terms of the Venezuelans who are in this country, it is well known, it is well far beyond the 17 or 18,000 that is registered, can we not find a mechanism of bringing on what we determine or what most of these agencies determine is close to 80, 90 or even 100,000 Venezuelans on this island, get them into the productive sectors, get them into the national insurance contribution system and let us see if we can bridge
that gap, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry spoke a little while ago, and I want to address one or two items. The Minister used the opportunity to outline a number of improvements throughout the sector. And I have no argument with that data, Madam Speaker. I am happy for the pace of growth, albeit a little slow, I am happy for the improvements throughout the sector. But, Madam Speaker, we must not lose the sight that with all the 5 per cent and 2 per cent and 6 per cent scattered all over, our economy is 17.5 per cent shrunk in GDP from 2015 to today. So, we have a lot of catching up to do. The hon. Minister, I know, is a hard-working Minister and she will continue to work with all the players in the sector to drive the system forward, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the contribution by the hon. Minister, which was led off by the Minister of Finance in his highlighted component under the trade sector, really was more what I would determine as a wash, rinse and repeat, because there was nothing new, there was nothing innovative, nothing inspirational. It was a continuation of a lot of projects and programmes that have been issued and continuing over the last couple of years, and nothing is wrong with that. Nothing is wrong with that. But when we are coming to a budget in a critical time that we are in here Trinidad and Tobago, and the desire of a population who wants to be lifted, there was nothing lifting the population there, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister indicated that there was good percentage growth in certain sectors, 17 per cent in some, 21 per cent in some, 18 per cent in some. But one only has to take note that the data is from 2021 to now. I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that I believe that that increase that the Minister was responding to had very little to do with government policy. It had more to do with the sectors that were in slumber post-COVID.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray: So these industries woke up in 2021, and when you are at the bottom the only place that you can go is up. So we expect these industries to perform well, and we are glad that they are performing well, hon. Minister, and again we look forward to see their continued growth as the months and the years proceed.

Madam Speaker, the Minister spoke about the diversification drive in several sectors and hon. Minister queried the Leader of the Opposition’s remark that very little was done, in terms of the diversification drive, in her delivery last Friday. But it begs to wonder, Madam Speaker, if, according to hon. Minister, there is fair amount of diversification in our economy, which the hon. Minister is satisfied with, then why is it in every international report, be it the IMF Article VI, World Bank report, ECLAC, why is it every single one is saying and suggesting to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago that we ought to be doing more, in terms our diversification drives, Madam Speaker? If, according to the Minister, we are doing reasonably well, why are these international agencies pressing in order for us to maintain what they believe is our growth trajectory, we must address these things in terms of our diversification?

Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister spoke about $60 billion, in terms of private sector borrowing. I could not recall if he said $60 million or $60 billion, but I suspect there would have been a fair amount of private sector borrowing, Madam Speaker, for the mere reason that this Government has held on to $7 billion in VAT refunds. Madam Speaker, you know what VAT refund is? VAT refund is your working capital from your overdraft sitting in the Government’s coffers. So what you as a business have to do now, if you want to drive your growth plans or your growth policy, you now have to fill that gap, in terms of getting that money
that was supposed to be in your working capital, so you now have to go to the commercial banks and borrow money if you want to achieve that.

So, Madam Speaker, I am not saying all of it would have been for that, but $7 billion in working capital, not in your bank account, it is a big hit and if you want to continue your business, you would have had to go find that money somewhere, more than likely in the commercial banking system. So, Madam Speaker, despite a litany of promises, this Government has continually failed to implement meaningful changes, be it the—

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

**Mr. R. Paray:**—gambling commission, the agricultural sector or the National Insurance Board, as I now referred to. The Minister’s budget presentation titled: Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth conspicuously lacked any discussion in the Minister of Finance’s delivery on Friday about key areas of diversification, a glaring omission given our depleting hydrocarbon resources. One would have thought since the budget was named Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth, one would have thought that that would have been the key focus or the key anchor point that all other measures would have been hooked onto for the entire four hours and seven-minute presentation, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, international lending agencies like the IMF and the World Bank have urged and continues to urge economic transformation, but the Government has not acted seriously on these calls. Madam Speaker, this lack of action extends to sectors like tourism, agriculture, which have been discussed for years, year after year after year, with no tangible steps. I am not saying baby steps are not happening, but nothing that really changes your line and length as a country to move into some transformational way, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the tourism sector, in particular, it remains stymied by
international travel warnings due to crime. Our agricultural sector, that could significantly reduce our $7.3 billion food import bill, Madam Speaker, if you juxtapose that to the $5.1 billion projected budget deficit, the Government has been equally inert, reversing previous gains made in the food production and farmer support.

4.45 p.m.

Madam Speaker, this is a governance marked by a lack of political will, initiative and enabling the investment environment. Madam Speaker, I thus challenge the Government to set clear measurable targets for domestic food production and import reduction.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray: We cannot afford to continue with the lack of specificity and accountability. Madam Speaker, let me just turn quickly to manufacturing, I know the hon. Minister who spoke before me went and said quite a bit on manufacturing. We in the Opposition here, we commend the non-energy manufacturing sector for its resilience and growth, its quick recovery post-COVID-19 and its increased export from $2.1 billion to $2.4 billion within a year is very commendable. But, Madam Speaker, they do have an ambitious goal to doubling their exports by 2025, and the Government’s intervention or their continued intervention will be essential. Madam Speaker, the key areas for support should include incentivizing the sector further, pushing the trade agreements which the hon. Minister spoke to shortly a while ago, ensuring equitable foreign exchange supply, and cutting the bureaucratic red tape—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray:—furthermore, Madam Speaker, to the manufacturing sector. This $7 billion VAT refund, and every time this matter is raised and it comes up and we
pay a billion and we pay a $2 billion, by the time the cycle comes around and the payments are made, it goes back up again. So like we are in this never ending catchment of this $6 or $7 billion VAT refund issue. I do believe, Madam Speaker, that the reforming of the VAT system into a sales tax system is overdue, and I know many of the business chambers have asked the Minister to take a serious look at that matter.

Madam Speaker, another issue that the Minister of Trade and Industry touched on very, very briefly was the issue around the illicit trade in terms of counterfeit products coming into the island. Madam Speaker, that is a severe issue, and it is helped along by the inefficiency in the port operations, the lack of adequate scanning technology. I know the Minister of Finance has indicated a $90 million input into some new scanners. Again, I have heard that scanner issue for the last two or three years. I do hope and I pray that we get the scanners this time and we could deal with those issues. Madam Speaker, just on the point of the illicit trade. One of the biggest financing for terrorist organizations worldwide is counterfeit items, Madam Speaker. Having spent a month at the Marshall centre in Germany, in 2017, I was amazed at how simple purchasing counterfeit CDs, shoes, handbags, how that money ends up in the financing of terrorist organizations. So it will be imperative not only to help our local businesses who have agencies for these products in the country that we will be doing a lot more to arrest the issue of terrorist financing globally, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, SMEs, the Minister mentioned SMEs, that she would—sorry, that the hon. Minister will deal with when Minister goes to the Upper House. But they are indeed powerful houses of economic growth and innovation, but they continue to struggle under this administration. Again, Madam Speaker, what we are asking on this side for is for targeted support, and this targeted support is
necessary to overcome the financial challenges and to spur employment. Madam Speaker, in this country we need to put people to work. We need to get people to work. I do not think that 3.7 per cent in terms of unemployment figure is real. I do not know how the data is arrived at, but we feel it differently in the constituencies which we operate in. I do believe the Government needs to step up its game to fully harness the potential of our non-manufacturing sector, energy manufacturing sector.

Madam Speaker, ease of doing business. I know, again, hon. Minister said she would address this in the Upper House, but I have been hearing these promises since 2020, when the Minister of Finance himself came to this House and he identified key critical issues in the ease of doing business, such as the three-and-a-half-year wait to enforce contracts and a 254 days to a secure construction permit. These actions, Madam Speaker, remains unfulfilled up to today. Trinidad and Tobago’s global ranking as cited in the World Bank 2020 report remains a sticking point for our investors, our foreign investors.

Madam Speaker, the World Bank report of 2020 identified five significant challenges that the country must address going forward. The issue of corruption, foreign exchange controls, crime, low productivity and Government bureaucracy. Madam Speaker, they continue to remain unaddressed as of today. Meanwhile, Madam Speaker, the “onliest” ranking where Trinidad and Tobago is rising under this Government seems to be crime, and I understand that we are in number six per capita.

Madam Speaker, recently Dr. Thackwray “Dax” Driver, the CEO of the Energy Chamber of Commerce, he shed some light on the regulatory hurdles. Madam Speaker, he confirmed that there are 33 sequential approvals that are needed from eight Ministries just to proceed from a bid to first gas production. Dr.
Driver, August 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2023 in the \textit{Express} newspaper, he called out the system for its inefficiency stating we need to get to the bottom of why things are taking so long. So if we cannot address those issues, Madam Speaker, how are we going to push for our energy sector to go forward, and if these are issues by any other investor, that is going to be challenging for the country in the long term. Madam Speaker, he also highlights the outdated paper-based decision-making process lamenting that there are missing files and bureaucratic delays. And when we are having this in the energy sector I can only imagine what is happening outside of that.

Madam Speaker, I want to ask a question concerning foreign currency repatriation. And, Madam Speaker, this is a key issue that was made by the Minister of Finance in his delivery last Friday. And if I were to draw your attention, Madam Speaker, to page 37 of the budget statement which reads:

“We intend to move aggressively to develop strategies to increase the repatriation of foreign exchange earned overseas by local and foreign businesses operating in Trinidad and Tobago…”

Madam Speaker, I have not heard the Minister explain exactly what that means, so I would ask, and I am asking perhaps when the Minister is winding up, if he could answer one question from my contribution, if he can answer this one: By this move is the Minister signalling a shift towards State control on capital movement? Madam Speaker, this is a concerning development given that it has been 30 years since the TT dollar was floated and those types of controls were lifted.

In essence, this means both organizations and individuals may lose autonomy over their rightfully earned US currency. Now while the Minister may view this as a solution to increasing foreign exchange supplies, there are those who
feel that that approach is just forex gun talk. But, Madam Speaker, I want the Minister to be very clear on what he means by that. Does he mean that when my supplier or my customer in the United States wires funds to my US account here the Trinidad will I have control on my US currency to decide what I do with it? Or, does the Minister mean that when the US currency comes in to the Central Bank it is held and then I will get the TT value and I have no access to my US currency? I want the Minister to be very, very clear on that particular issue.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** Madam Speaker, very quickly on the issue of Foreign Direct Investment, the Minister claims that Trinidad and Tobago stands as an investment haven in the Caribbean, it contradicts the stark reality of dwindling Foreign Direct Investments under this PNM administration, and I have the data for that. Madam Speaker, until 2015 our country was the regional FDI magnet. We peaked in 2014 at US $1.5 billion. However the situation has dramatically reversed. Data from micro-trends, Madam Speaker, which is an online platform which provides in depth analysis into various global economic and business trends, they have put us on a downward trend, Madam Speaker. In July 2023, a report from the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean revealed that the net FDI outflow of US $914 million in 2022 worsened to a net outflow of US $778 million in the year after.

Madam Speaker, that showed a 174 per cent decline from 2020. But you know the Minister continued to boast about growth in the Gross Domestic Product. But he did not indicate that Trinidad and Tobago is moving at the slowest pace in the Caribbean. And why do I say that, Madam Speaker? The latest ECLAC report projects our GDP to expand by 3.2 per cent this year and the 2.2 per cent next year. And those two projections are primarily based on our energy product. The very
same report, Madam Speaker, indicates that Suriname is the only Caribbean country that would grow slower than Trinidad and Tobago. Every other country, including Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, all of them according to this ECLAC report is expected to have higher GDP growth this year according to ECLAC. How we are—we were the tiger in a sea of pussy cats and now we are running at the back of the lane. All of this means, Madam Speaker, is that the Trinidad and Tobago economy is sputtering like an old motorcycle. The economy that once stood head and shoulders above all else in the region is now lagging behind.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Trade and Industry spoke about market access, and I just want to mention quickly this issue on market access. The Minister mentioned the partial scope agreements with Chile and Curacao, but Minister failed to elucidate on the tangible benefits accrued from prior trade accords with Panama, Cuba, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. What measurable outcomes have all of these agreements yielded? So it is one thing to come to House and talk about all these trade agreements but not place on the record how it has benefited Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, perhaps hon. Minister will spend some time on that in the other place.

Madam Speaker, procurement: The Minister's portrayal, this is the Finance Minister, of the Government’s procurement legislation as pioneering an effective stands in stark contrast to the empirical reality, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in 2015 election manifesto of the People’s National Movement they committed to properly addressing the pressing issues by instituting a modern, fair, equitable and transparent procurement system. But contrary to this pledge, Madam Speaker, the Government had to basically be forced into getting this procurement legislation into action. But, you know what is the peeve for me, Madam Speaker? With the
number of issues, and I think the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government referred to it today with the issue surrounding the stagnation of the workflow because of the procurement legislation.

The Minister, the local government Minister today, Madam Speaker, attempted to throw blame on the Procurement Regulator, and said that it was he who advised them that everything was ready. Everything was ready. Now, Madam Speaker, this is “how I does operate” in my business. I have some of the smartest people working for me, but when we have to make a decision I want the report, and I want to read the report myself before we make a decision. How come—and this is why I feel a bit disturbed that the contracting environment in the public service is around 35,000 contractors.

Who in their real mind and real sense would tell their boss—in this term it is the Minister of Finance, “that we ready”, when only 1,100 contractors were registered in the depository?

5.00 p.m.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, that in itself was illogical. I do not know who will actually turn a lever knowing fully well that you cannot have less than 1 per cent of your contractors in the repository registered, but then you will go and you will execute and proclaim the legislation and then when everything runs to a standstill we cry and we come and we write up negative and positive resolutions which we brought to the Parliament and then now today we blame the Procurement Regulator himself.

Madam Speaker, an editorial in the Express dated July 15, 2023, pointedly noted that the diluted legislation is virtually:

“…unrecognisable from the law initially”—presented—“to Parliament.”
Madam Speaker, this too aligns with the observation that we have made here on this side of the House looking at the fact that the law was being altered to facilitate increased expenditure, devoid of procurement standards effectively creating yet another conduit to evade accountability and that is where we pass legislation to remove work under the value of $1 million from the eyes of the procurement office, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I want to touch quickly on another issue that the Minister spoke on in his delivery on Friday on city redevelopment.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member for Mayaro, your original time is now spent. You have 10 more minutes to continue with your contribution if you so wish.

Mr. R. Paray: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Please proceed.

Mr. R. Paray: Yes, Madam Speaker. And the reason why I want to touch on city redevelopment is because of the impact it has on business and the issue that crime is having on business, Madam Speaker. While the Minister talked about the redevelopment of Port of Spain he sidestepped the grim reality that the city itself, our capital city, is grappling with escalating crime. This surge in lawlessness is compelling, long lasting and it has caused multi-generational businesses to abandon Port of Spain.

Madam Speaker, to emphasize the gravity of the situation Gregory Aboud, the President of the Downtown Owners and Merchants Association, DOMA, he himself is at epicenter of this crisis. In a newspaper article dated 30th of July, 2022, Mr. Aboud is quoted as saying:

“…the high level of…crime in the country’s capital is causing businesses to flee Port of Spain…”

He further added that aside from a handful of major establishments’ most
businesses in Port of Spain are also situated elsewhere and many buildings within the city are up for sale.

Madam Speaker, we do not dispute the value of modernizing our capital city, however the safety of those businesses and the investors, their owners, their customers and the tourists alike must be very important to the State in making a safe environment that will augur well for our city development.

Madam Speaker, I will use the last few minutes I have to deal with some of the issues that the constituency of Mayaro continues to be affected with. It is no different from what my colleagues would have said earlier on. Madam Speaker, we continue in the Mayaro constituency to be hampered by water distribution issues; we continue to be hampered by a damaged road network infrastructure, both at the major highways and the secondary road level; we continue to be having to grapple with issues of flooding every time that the rain falls and it could be for a very quick high intensity shower on a morning and within two hours there are reports of heavy flooding causing damages to people homes.

But, Madam Speaker, there are some other issues that I want to raise that, you know, I think it is important that we talk about. Madam Speaker, I have in the constituency, and we did a table of our requests that we submit for grants and so on, for our constituents. And, Madam Speaker, as of today we have 372 Self-Help applications that have not been addressed as of today. A large amount of that is for fire victims; a large amount is for homes that are sitting on the verge of landslips that we are trying to do remedial work for some of these families, and these applications have not been attended. For NSDP we have 154 applications not attended to; for REAP we have 100 applications not attended to; for HIG 63 applications not attended to; for HCS 15 applications not attended to; for HDC 491 applications that are not being attended to; for ESR 25 applications; public
lighting, 110 applications. Madam Speaker, sometimes I wonder if it is because of the distance that Mayaro is, the grants seem to be taking a lot longer to get to Mayaro than some of my colleagues opposite.

Madam Speaker, one of the challenges, and I know and I want to put this on record, that while we do have some serious challenges with water I want to say that the hon. Minister of Public Utilities has been very active with myself and WASA in trying to determine some key permanent fixes that over time should resolve the problem. I would like to ask the hon. Minister to help us in the short-term by lifting the water trucking facilities so that we can bridge some of that deficit as we go along. During the Standing Finance Committee meeting Minister I will raise some of those matters, and hope I will get the responses at that point in time. But water is critical, and by the time that the resources that are there in Mayaro or that are dispatched to Mayaro, by the time they make their rounds to government buildings, schools, the hospital, it really puts people who are off the cycle in a very desperate position. Sometimes I have WhatsApp messages, Madam Speaker, from public officers, nurses and so on, complaining that they cannot wash their uniforms to get to work. And those are real challenges.

We have homes with people taking care of elderly parents and for some time a week, two weeks no water, and the challenge to go through St. Joseph to get their numbers and so on, it creates a problem and now the office of the MP and this MP has now become the 1-800 number for WASA. So people are calling me directly, that is why I tend to not want to frustrate the team at WASA, but I have no choice but to do that at the end of the day. So hon. Minister I look forward to see some improvement in that as we go along.

I have had several complaints lately, Madam Speaker, from constituents who go to the welfare office in Rio Claro and while there are procedures to full out for
different grants and so on, I have several people coming back to the office to speak about the attitude of some of those officers. And sometimes I want to remind these officers in these public offices that people who are coming to your office, the welfare office, they are not in a good state of mind, they are not in a good place, they need help and your body language, your tone, it really adds more pressure. And if there is one wish that I could have is that our public officers be a little more empathetic, sympathetic with some of the constituents when they go to the office to make the applications for various grants and so on, because strangely sometimes, Madam Speaker, I am amazed that the public officers in the welfare office send them to the MP for me to get a food card and for me to get a grant for them.

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

**Mr. R. Paray:** And I am saying but you are the Ministry, you are the Ministry. Madam Speaker. In critical times, in critical conditions we will go out of the way to help. Madam Speaker, at times I pay for water trucking services for pensioners, I pay for medication that is not available in CDAP when these old pensioners come to the office and say MP I cannot get the CDAP and I am running out of the medication. So the MP office does make an effort but we cannot be the office of last resort at the end of the day when you have Ministries that are designed to deal with those matters.

Madam Speaker, with regard to the housing issue, with 400-plus applications, I know I have been working I have been asking the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, well the previous Minister of Housing and Urban Development, we have written the HDC, to consider another—perhaps a housing development in Rio Claro/Mayaro area. We do have a large middle income pool of professionals, teachers, police officers and so on, who are living in
the community and having them housed in the community it augers well for the predisposition of those services.

Madam Speaker, I can tell you police officers who are living in the eastern division when they live in the communities that they serve we get better work from these police officers. And it is evident when you see the statistics coming out of eastern division—and as we are on that I just want to commend the Rio Claro police and eastern division for the work they done in terms of capturing the killer of the Lallan family, the young lady and her father and the quick time that it took to get them to the court system. So they must be congratulated for that.

So, Madam Speaker, we continue to live in hope; we continue to look after the best interest of our constituents; we will continue to bring the issues up to the parliamentary level; we will continue to work with all the Ministers; I will continue to work with my colleagues across the floor as we continue to serve the people in the best interest of Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

The Minister in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Lisa Morris-Julian): Madam Speaker, thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this debate and, Madam Speaker, may I say on behalf of the Government side you deserve an award. I want to thank the hon. Prime Minister and also my colleague the hon. Minister of Education for their continued confidence in me. I also want to thank, Madam Speaker, my beloved constituents of D’Abadie/O’Meara for allowing me the opportunity to continue to represent them and to represent them well. I am truly happy and proud to be part of a PNM administration that truly cares about people.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Evidence of this can be seen in this budget, Madam Speaker. I have sat and I have listened whilst Opposition Members heap praises upon the Member of Parliament for Siparia each one of them saying the same thing over and over again. The MP for Siparia is the best thing since slice bread according to them. In fact, I wondered at times if the MP for Siparia wrote her own accolades and gave her MPs to read while she sat there smiling and blushing as they enunciated she is a perfect individual. But you see, Madam Speaker, we on this side must burst that bubble, that la-la-land which they occupy. The reality is they do not have a clue on the operations on how to run a country.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. L. Morris-Julien: The Member for San Fernando East I had to tell him stop casting your pearls because they do not understand, they do not have a clue about business investments; they do not have a clue on matters of national importance; they do not even have a clue how to build a party headquarters.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: How can they tell us to run the country? The Minister of Finance during his budget presentation laid out fiscal measures to the country during the coming year, and I must say, it was a people-centered budget given the challenges that we have faced. And I have to I agree with my colleague, the Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and Member of Parliament for Laventille East/Morvant that even those on the other side were pleased with some of the measures announced in the budget but they did not want to admit it. And I want to say to them, confession is good for the soul. It is okay. You can admit in your constituencies there are single mothers, single fathers, aunties, uncles, grandparents with the responsibility of the role of parent or guardian, who simply could not make and they could not afford to purchase all
school supplies, and now they are breathing a collective sigh of relief that they will be able to access a $1,000 book grant from 2024. And, Madam Speaker, because we do not want a repeat of the past where Mastercards were used it will be based on a means test.

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

5.15 p.m.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Madam Speaker, I must thank my colleague, the Minister of Education, for also ensuring that the textbook system is also fixed, because year after year by simply changing one word, a new textbook was demanded. I must also say the minimum wage increase will allow those on the lower end of the income scale to put a little extra in the shopping carts at the end of the month or the week. That is $480, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, under this administration, the Ministry of Education has developed and implemented a series of concepts designed to fully equip and digitalize schools within Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I have heard it. I sat here in amazement and shock. I said, “There is no way possible they could bring up laptops in 2010”, but they did. When I heard that the Member for Siparia said that the People’s Partnership were world leaders in ICT in education, I laughed. If their version of an ICT plan is dropping laptops in the hands of students now entering secondary school, well, maybe they are correct.

Every year, like a broken record, they sing the same song about laptops, but, Madam Speaker, while it seemed attractive at first glance, it was ill-designed, it was impractical and ineffective, and it led to millions of dollars in wastage of taxpayers’ dollars. So many of the laptops became gaming tools to students. Some did not even last a year because of the poor quality and all the technical problems, and I would always recall in my particular school, Madam Speaker,
some were used as doorstops. You see, they gave laptops but no Wi-Fi access. They gave laptops to Form 1s, but nothing for the CSEC students. They gave laptops to the students and nothing for the teachers, and they also made sure there were no ICT teachers or technical officers in these same schools.

I would like the Leader of the Opposition to tell this country how many of those hundred thousand dollar-plus laptops distributed to students during her tenure were actually used in the classroom by teachers and students alike. I would like to know because I know there was no access to Wi-Fi at the time. Aside from filling the pockets of suppliers, there was no tangible benefit. Their laptop programme was a failure. But I am happy and proud to say under this Minister of Education, we do not do things vaille-que-vaille.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping].

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: As the Member for Tobago West said, we are into generational planning. We are streamlined, structured, and we do things that make long-term sense.

Under this Ministry of Education the laptop programme was revamped. We ensure that the laptop devices are placed into the hands of our neediest students. If you need it, you will get it, and if you do not need it, then you already have it. What is so difficult to follow with that, Madam Speaker? This PNM administration has a top class digital transformation plan, and in our Ministry of Education a total of 71,000 laptops and tablets have been distributed to students and teachers since 2020—Form 1, Form 2, Form 3, Form 4, Form 5, Form 6.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: That is 71,000 laptops in the hands of the students who need it the most. The Ministry of Education continues to procure laptops for the distribution for staff, students of government and government-assisted schools
because we are facilitating blended instruction, online classes and e-Testing, and, Madam Speaker, here I would like to thank our PS Meyer and the PS Mr. Belfon in the Ministry of Digital Transformation.

You see, Madam Speaker, this is an investment into the future of learning. This will bring benefits to the future of Trinidad and Tobago. We are allowing students to contribute to the formation of a knowledge-based and diversified society in the very near future. Our district and head office staff are also facilitated via this programme. During the fiscal 2022 to 2023, the Ministry of Education worked towards acquiring 8,000 laptops devices for the MOE staff and teachers.

You see, Madam Speaker, in addition to this, 2,476 high performance laptops are being acquired to facilitate specific speciality subjects because in CXC we are now moving towards e-Testing. We also know the importance of having Wi-Fi in schools. Our students and teachers are equipped with laptop devices so now we have to make sure they have reliable Internet access. The majority of our schools are now Wi-Fi capable. Forty-nine primary schools have been provided with Internet connectivity under the TT Wi-Fi programme. This is being executed in collaboration with Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. A further 19 primary schools are outstanding and will soon be completed by the first quarter of 2024. Upon completion of this major project, all primary schools would have a reliable Internet connection.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** The Ministry of Education is currently conducting the procurement process to install the solution which comprises of switches, routers, access points, structured cabling. Efforts are well on the way to upgrade the Internet services in secondary schools. This project is being executed in collaboration with iGovTT. The upgrade of the Internet bandwidth of all
secondary schools is currently ongoing and the scheduled date of completion being November 2023. You see, Madam Speaker, our Ministry is always working.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** When this is completed, the wireless solution for secondary schools will facilitate e-testing, access to the Ministry’s digital platforms and other ongoing digitization efforts.

Madam Speaker, we cannot underscore the importance of information and communications in the 21st Century, especially in the education sector. Our Ministry’s digital transformation range of programmes has not only made learning and life easier for our students, but also for our teaching staff. The Integrated Human Resource Information System, IHRIS, is one such initiative. This prototype was developed to digitalize the application processing and approval of leave for teaching staff. As a former teacher I am aware of the hassle of having to commute to the Ministry of Education district office to submit paperwork, ask for the clerk for your school, and waiting for weeks, even months for them to be approved.

Madam Speaker, no more, because thanks to our Minister’s vision, our PS, you can now apply and instantly get a reply. Human resource managers and other decision makers require up to date and accurate data for instance, and the current number of workers. Madam Speaker, very often a teacher would retire and find out the hard way that they did not apply for X amount of days and then it is reflected on their pension plan. What we have now is that you would know immediately how many days you have inside and how many days you have to apply for.

They will also get to know what their salaries are as well as information on vacant posts. Currently at the Ministry of Education this information is stored in a
combination of paper files and electronic databases that do not link together. This make it extremely difficult to locate employee records or to combine all this data for analysis. Bear in mind, Madam Speaker, the size of the education workforce is tremendous. The high probability of records taking a long time to reach to that one clerk is high. This is why the Ministry took a decision to leverage unutilized modules of the IHRIS system to increase our HR effectiveness. Now teachers can leave approval within a day or even minutes of submitting their applications.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** In 2022/2023, 14 human resource processors were automated and implemented via a pilot project in 187 primary and 26 secondary schools.

The IHRIS absence management module was activated and used to record and maintain leave, accessed by 1,741 teachers. These teachers submitted 4,026 online leave applications for processing and approval. Over 56,000 human resource transaction entries were inputted on IHRIS; 17,676 employee records were amended or updated; 11,949 leave applications were processed. Madam Speaker, this would normally take years and it took days, and for that we thank our digital transformation team.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** The Ministry of Education is moving full speed ahead to develop a more resilient, robust, and scalable IHRIS platform that would meet all users’ requirements. This upgraded system will process all forms of leave, all categories of staff. It will provide a complete digital end-to-end solution that does not require manual paper-based processing.

Moving away from the manual record-keeping system to a digital system is critical to modernizing the education system. In our 2023 to 2024 fiscal year, the
Ministry will continue to work towards digitalizing all employee records using the IHRIS modules and on board all the staff on a phased basis. In addition to this, employee discipline, performance management, leave management, time and attendance modules will be activated. The Ministry’s EPortal will be so integrated at the click of a button, monthly paid staff can access items such as payslips and job letters. So, Madam Speaker, they will not even have to call the Ministry. It will come straight to their laptop at home.

Madam Speaker, over 18,000 Ministry of Education employees have accessed the EPortal since it came on stream, and we have issued 15,000 job letters and 24,000 payslips.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Again, the EPortal is user friendly, it is efficient, and it completes all requests in seconds. In fact, the Ministry of Education is doing so well, a number of other Ministries and Government departments have shown interest in acquiring the platform. And as the Minister of Education will say, “They are more than welcome to join us”.

Madam Speaker, there is also the Student Management System, SMS. Through SMS for instance, school and Ministry staff are able to access real-time data on how often students are attending school, student performance in examinations, overall performance, biodata, and even disciplinary records. This system will also feature portals that parents can easily access their children’s awards reports. I am sure all parents will know whenever their child hides the report book it will be nice to be able to access it on your own. Three hundred and ninety-five schools have currently been on board to the system, this includes student and teacher records for each school.

Given the large data set that was generated, SMS will act as a primary
source of data for downstream applications such as the national child registry system and other social interventions, because that is how our government works. Each Ministry is connected. It can provide insightful, high quality and real-time information to executive management to facilitate data-driven decision-making. We now will have digital records of all our students spanning their entire academic history. Madam Speaker, you can imagine seeing a child’s progress or fall-back simply by accessing their records, and this way we can work on our interventions earlier.

We will see the diverse forms of analysis, the trends that can be undertaken to facilitate early intervention if required in a school and an individual. It is projected, Madam Speaker, that in the fiscal year 2023 to 2024, all remaining primary and secondary schools will be added to the system. The system will be upgraded as required, student discipline and teacher modules will be added.

5.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to electronic textbooks platform solution. We are in the digital age of education. Across the world, students are accessing all the knowledge they need right in the palm of their hands. The Ministry of Education is keeping apace with this technological advancement. Our e-book project provides electronic tech support for teachers and students that matches the content and skills to be taught in a non-traditional classroom as well the traditional classroom. The use of e-textbooks will better prepare our students for life in digital age, as our students will learn to use different electronic tools and develop critical thinking skills.

Madam Speaker, this system is currently subject to procurement exercise, jointly facilitated by iGovTT and the Ministry of Education. During the fiscal year of 2022 to 2023, tenders to the e-book platform were issued and closed, and the

UNREVISED
valuation process is ongoing. Madam Speaker, again, we progress because we have a School Learning Management System. This is yet another pillar of the Ministry of Education’s digital transformation drive.

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust our education system into a new reality, which was online learning. We had to keep and we had to ensure that our children were not left behind. Throughout the world, different countries also implemented similar learning systems. The Ministry’s School Learning Management System is an online portal, which allows teachers to live-stream classes and students to access education material. Our teachers and educators continue to add content to the SLMS. So there is a full online repository of accessible content for all students, from the early childhood care and education, primary and secondary school levels. This project is constantly being upgraded to facilitate the establishment, development and management of four main subcomponents that are meant to work together.

You see, if we have all these four components, we will form a supportive and resilient framework that will enable citizens to not only access educational opportunities but to also participate meaningfully in the education process, and these components are:

1. E-Classrooms to each teacher at the ECCE, primary and secondary levels that will be used to facilitate teaching, learning and assessment.

2. An e-platform for the National Open School through which the Ministry of Education’s continuation classes can be facilitated and other educational opportunities can be provided.

Madam Speaker, imagine at any point, you can access this platform. So you can work an entire day and come home at night and take part in our math class while preparing your children for school tomorrow morning.

UNREVISED
3. An online repository through which all MOE stakeholders can access developmentally, contextually appropriate educational resources.

4. Forums through which MOE stakeholders can access and provide support.

Over the fiscal year 2022/2023, the SLMS was transferred to a new single virtual machine, along with over 4,400 primary school courses. This was done for us to realize cost savings, benefit from increased flexibility and improve security. The Ministry conducted live and face-to-face tutorial sessions for over 283 staff members and completed the first draft of a self-pace tutorial for teaching staff. Additionally, we at the Ministry completed the set-up of e-classrooms and the SLMS for all 70 phase one schools as other site preparations. Madam Speaker, the Ministry is going forward.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** We also made sure there is a digital calendar. This system grants the real-time immediate access to educators, offering access to all professional development opportunities hosted by the Ministry of Education. By the end of last year, we had over 42,000 interactions. These are our pages viewed, clicks on links, as well as all the participants throughout the Caribbean. We had a new teacher orientation, a nine-month programme which equipped new teachers with skills and modern teacher schools. This was held virtually, with the ICT development as a key component.

Virtual learning spaces and learning communities: all groups who participated in professional development had the opportunity to join and contribute to relevant groups.

**Collaborations with the TTSCC:** Partnerships with TTSCC to enrich teaching resources through financial literacy online, as well as with videos, our
Professional Development Toolkit, as well as we allow the teachers to share their lesson plans so that each one teaches one.

Madam Speaker, I also want to just—before I move on to my constituency, I want to speak about the scholarship selection system. Our digital platform is now to automate the selection process of the scholars based on the Ministry’s defined criteria. This was successfully used for the first time in the 2022/2023 academic year. It reduced the administrative overhead and the time taken to identify and select eligible scholars. Ongoing maintenance and code-based upgrades are scheduled for 2024.

The special concessions platform for primary and secondary school enables parents to apply for special concessions online. It eliminates the need to physically deliver documents to the Ministry. In 2024, we will be working on the processing and investigative process so the platform will be fully digitalized.

The School Infrastructure Management System, SIMS: a digital platform to report and track infrastructure-related issues at all schools. Ongoing maintenance and updates are scheduled for 2024. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Education would start at 5.00 a.m. every morning going through SIMS and making sure that it is tracked online with our team right on WhatsApp because we are definitely using the technology for good.

The upgrade of the ICT infrastructure at the educational district offices to facilitate secure and reliable Internet connectivity. The upgrade of the Ministry of Education’s corporate core networking devices which comprises of switches, firewalls and servers to remove any single point of failure.

We have a new PBX solution, which added softphone features to lower operating costs in the Ministry of Education. We are also implementing a backup and data protection server. Tender evaluations have been completed and it will be
executed in the first quarter of 2024.

Finally, Madam Speaker, the implementation of a disaster recovery solution for the Ministry of Education corporate network. This will allow increased resiliency, availability and security. This project will be executed in collaboration with the Ministry of Digital Transformation. It begins in the first quarter of 2024.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Madam Speaker, this is how the Ministry of Education plans and will continue spending taxpayers’ hard-earned dollars. We are investing it in our children.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** This is what a real ICT plan for the education sector looks like. This is performance. This is performance under a PNM Government. This is performance under the astute leadership of the Prime Minister. Madam Speaker, we at the Ministry of Education have been directed by our Prime Minister to put the children first and with my senior Minister, I can say we are definitely doing that.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Just recently, Madam Speaker, we had a family day with our neighbouring constituency, La Horquetta/Talparo, where I had to teach the Member a couple things about All Fours but unfortunately, the Member taught me a few things about cricket. And we had a family day without any “matics”, without anything being lit, and simply we had a good time with persons who understood that in the PNM, it is family first.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** And because the Member for Diego Martin North/East is so very kind, Madam Speaker, the constituents of D’Abadie/O’Meara asked me to
express their excitement about the soon-to-be commissioned $11 million pool, the D’Abadie/Malabar community swimming pool. And the Minister for Sport and Community Development, we would like to thank her also because that pool is to be commissioned next month, in November 2023, and I would like to invite my neighbours for a swim.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** You see, the hon. Minister of Finance indicated in his budget presentation that the swimming pool:

“…will provide new recreational activities to the surrounding communities.”

Madam Speaker, after LifeSport, “we taking what we could get”. It is so wonderful to have something that is positive in my community.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Another project that we are looking forward to is the O’Meara Road Upgrade Project, and I would like to thank the Minister of Works and Transport. I was very proud to join His Worship Baliram Maharaj, Mayor of Arima, to officially turn the sod for this project. Madam Speaker, if you know Arima and you know O’Meara Road, you know that this project is a long time in coming and I am so very happy to say, it is not stopping there, we are also going to get a new road network plan for Tumpuna that I will be sharing with the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo and also in Andrew Lane. You see, Madam Speaker, good things come to those who wait, and after the gentleman from the other place, D’Abadie/O’Meara deserves some good things.

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

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** As I close, it would be remiss of me not to address other matters raised by my colleagues in the Opposition. Madam Speaker, we listened while Member after Member praised the Member for Siparia. I must confess,
Madam Speaker, I was not surprised, I was impressed that each one parroted the same thing with a straight face, attributing wisdom to someone who left out the “Y” in bullying. You see—

**Madam Speaker:** Okay, so—

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member, I will ask you to just sort of—

**Hon. Members:** *Crosstalk and laughter*

**Madam Speaker:** You know, I am just asking you to watch where you are going with that. Okay? Please.

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Sure. I could spell. So perhaps the letter Y reminds her of questions posed to ensure accountability. Why, Madam Opposition Leader, would you call on your MPs to put party before country? We all saw it.

**Hon. Members:** *Desk thumping*

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** Why place party before country? Why can you not acknowledge the sheer brilliance of the Member for Diego Martin North/East—

**Hon. Members:** *Desk thumping*

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:**—as well as the Prime Minister who in his wisdom decided it took an engineer to fix what they broke?

**Hon. Members:** *Desk thumping*

**Hon. L. Morris-Julian:** You see, when you talk about patriotism, you have to back up with proof that you have love for this beautiful country. You must not oppose for opposing sake and you must not, when you cannot get your way, become a petulant child. You must not make a mockery of independent institutions. You see, this is not “ah eat ah food, hook-up or cook-up government”. You see, this is not a government tinged with corruption. It is ingrained corruption, it is saturated corruption. It is drenched corruption. It is E-M-B-D—

**UNREVISED**
Hon. L. Morris-Julian (cont’d)

oh, sorry, I did not spell it correctly. It is E-M-B-E-D-D-E-D, embedded in the UNC.

Hon. Members:  [Desk thumping]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: I could not believe the audacity that someone brought up the Children’s Life Fund. How could you forget the thousands of dollars that went missing from the fund that was supposed to help children? Madam Speaker, on July 07, 2015, an article in the Trinidad Guardian newspaper written by the reporter, Radhica Sookraj, says:

“Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar has admitted that she and the Health Minister Dr. Fuad Khan were notified by letter that thousands of US dollars had allegedly been embezzled out of the Children’s Life Fund last year.”

—2014.

“Speaking to reporters after touring the $1.3 billion Couva Children’s Hospital yesterday, Persad-Bissessar said the alleged theft was now being investigated by the Fraud Squad.”

5:45 p.m.

When—

“…asked…whether she was concerned about the allegations…Persad-Bissessar directed questions to Khan. She said, however, that she was heartened that the lives of 221 children were saved under the fund, which received $25 million in donations…”

This is what the Opposition leader does, and this is the message that is out there. It is okay to be corrupt if some people are being helped.

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker 48(6) please.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Was that the message?
Mr. Lee: 48(6), the Member is imputing improper—

Madam Speaker: Okay.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Anyone who finds comfort in seeing the good in corruption by attempting to justify such, cannot and should not be trusted with governance or near a treasury.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: And any general secretary that does not have headquarters for their party should not discuss finance.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, I am proud to be part of a government that truly cares and even when we think, Madam Speaker, that persons are not paying attention, I know there are persons who are. There are children watching us and the way we behave, and just also, Madam Speaker, I have listened to Opposition Member, after Opposition Member complain about what they did not get, I would like to ask what did they do? In D'Abadie/O’Meara we have a theatre arts group, in D'Abadie/O’Meara we have a children's choir, in D'Abadie/O’Meara we have youth night every single Friday, in D'Abadie/O’Meara we have movie nights, and in D'Abadie/O’Meara we are developing our sports men and women. And also, again let me thank the Minister of Sports and Community Development, because she forgot to mention YoungStars FC from Malabar, which for the first time was able to access government funding and it has made a very strong team even better, and the Minister of Public Utilities for giving them lights in a place that was once filled with darkness.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: And if you ask, and if you wonder why these things are necessary, Madam Speaker, it is necessary because of the damage that they did to
my constituency, but thank you for my colleagues because we are fixing D'Abadie/O’Meara, and very soon, Madam Speaker, D'Abadie/ O’Meara will see to the excellence that it deserves. Thank you very much.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Member for Tabaquite.

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

**Mrs. Anita Haynes-Alleyne (Tabaquite):** Thank you, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me and giving me the opportunity to contribute in this very important debate, and discuss the affairs—the significant affairs—of our country, as we discuss, not just our policies and the money that we are allocating for 2024, but the overall development of Trinidad and Tobago, that within two years will see a decade of PNM governance. Madam Speaker, you would not have understood the importance of the debate if the only speaker you heard was the speaker that just proceeded me. The MP for—

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:**—D'Abadie/Omeara, who is one of our two Ministers of Education, has—that sector has been give the largest allocation by the Minister of Finance and that contribution was the least substantive contribution we have had here today.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** And I will explain why—and I will explain why, Madam Speaker, as I go through exactly what the Member presented. And I will have to come back to my introduction because I find it almost offensive that for $8.022 billion, we can get an opening remark about a laptop programme, and how dare the Members of the Opposition bring up a laptop programme in 2023. And, you know, it reminded me of a quote, somebody here said, ‘yuh big and yuh have
sense’. And clearly not everybody has sense in this House, Madam Speaker. Clearly not everybody has sense.

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

**5.50 p.m.**

When they were elected into office in 2015, they met a laptop programme. According to the Member for Diego Martin Central, and now according to the Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara, the laptop programme, according to them, was rife with issues. Problems abounded and I think they referenced whether or not the laptops were properly utilized, et cetera; rife with issues. What would a responsible administration do? What would a responsible administration who believes in a knowledge-driven economy, who believes in including technology in school, who believes and understands the difference between getting past the digital divide and moving from an analog world into a digital world; what would a responsible administration do?

They would then take what they found, refine it, optimize it and make it work. What did the PNM administration do? They scrapped it altogether, and then expect us to believe that “dey big and dey have sense”, but it could never be like that. It could never be true that you could find students in 2015--there is laptop programme that says what the UNC administration, People’s Partnership administration believes in. We believe in equitable access to education. We believe that in 2010 to 2015, in 2010, you could have recognized the importance of ensuring that every student in Trinidad and Tobago, once you are entering Form 1, must have access to technology.

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

**Ms. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** It does not matter if you are from a rural community, if you are from any space in Trinidad and Tobago, that you have a right, a human
right, to be able to access quality education. You see that and you say: You know what? We do not want this. We do not want this for our children. We do not want this for our country, because at the end of the day, according to them, the laptops were not good enough. You could not find some? “Ent” you found them now? “Ent” you found them in 2020 during the pandemic?

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. A. Haynes-Alleyne: And so, Madam Speaker, as I come into this debate--and we are coming to the end of day three of the debate. It is on a very rare occasion that I enter the debate this far along. So I have had the distinct pleasure now of listening to several government speakers, several government speakers, and the irony of D’Abadie/O’Meara referencing a script for Members of the Opposition, when I could give you the opening for every Government Member right now. It starts off, we thank our constituency. Very good, happy that you have recognized that you are a Member of the House of Representatives. It is followed by congratulations to Diego Martin North/East, congratulations to the Prime Minister. One after the other, right, well done. And I understand the importance of a narrative shift. I understand the importance of a rebrand and a makeover for this PNM Government. I get it, right, because, what you have is 2015 to 2018, we saw a particular type of narrative. In 2015, we were told things are very bad, terrible, tighten “yuh” belt, problems. We were then told that based on our work things are getting a little bit better.

Madam Speaker, I entered public life, active politics, in the other place, in 2017. And at that time, my maiden contribution on October 24, 2017, it was in response to a budget called Changing the Paradigm. We were promised by same Member for Diego Martin North/East, same person that they are congratulating ad nauseam at this point in time, that the paradigm was going to change in 2017.
Then, we were told in 2018, same Diego Martin North/East, that there is a Turnaround. I remember it very clearly, because that was the year Diego Martin North/East told us he could see clearly now. That was the year. He said the dark days were done, things great. We could see clearly now, perfect.

By 2019, we were told there would be stability, strength and growth. At this point in time, some of my colleagues here, the Member for Barataria/San Juan and myself, we were in another place, very young, very enthusiastic, in a space contributing to a conversation on national development, contributing to the conversations on appropriations; on what this money that we are talking about, in the people’s house, in the Parliament, what would that do, what would that mean for the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. So we went through the paradigm shift. And I recall then in 2017, in another place, talking about the cuts to GATE, talking about the fact that when you practise cuts, and you consider it savings, and you take money out of the education sector, that what you will reap in the future is—you would face the consequences for your actions then. And I warned the Members of the Government, this is in 2017, and the *Hansard* would play out the contribution that I made then. I said if you practise slash and burn economics on the education sector, within the next five-plus years, you would face more problems than solutions by trying to save this money then.

Here we are now discussing an education sector and discussing a space that is facing the consequences of ill-conceived, poorly-considered policy decisions by a PNM administration.

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

**Ms. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** Here we are today, when we are discussing what is happening in every sector: national security, health, social services. Every sector, we are seeing persons now try to make excuses for the consequences of their
actions.

In 2020, when we were looking at the fiscal 2021, we were given Resilience in the Face of a Global Pandemic. And last year we were told Tenacity and Stability in the Face of Global Challenges. So they had the pandemic years. And in the pandemic years for an administration that is so comfortable in its incompetence, so, easy to give the population excuses instead of actions, the pandemic years served to be a gift to an administration that is incapable of acting in the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And so what we got in those years is that anything that happened, anything that we faced, we blamed it on the pandemic, right.

And so, I sat here last Monday and I listened to the Minister of Finance, and the Minister of Finance says we are building the capacity for diversifications. Sounds good, right. Now, mind you, if you listen, you could listen to people talk about building capacity for diversification, what you are going to think is that these persons that are talking to you, that they have now found themselves here, that it is not almost nine years of governance, plus decades altogether of PNM Administrations in a post-independent Trinidad and Tobago. You would believe that the last eight years was the only eight years they had to make a contribution and that it was not enough. But, all right. So, here we are, Madam Speaker. We are told now that they are going to put more money into things, $8.22 billion in the education sector. And I have said it time and time again, that what we have been facing in the education sector is not a resource problem, because the Minister of Education herself who, I guess in this debate, will shadow me, because she has yet to come into the debate.

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

**Ms. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** But in this case now, has said in the contribution in the
last fiscal, that the education sector has, for the past seven years, been in the top five in terms of allocations, and listing that meant that it is a priority for this Administration.

But, putting money into the space but not measuring or seeing, or having any actual results, that does not make it a priority. So, we do not have a resource problem, you know. We have a management problem in the education sector.

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

**Ms. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** So that, you could put $8 billion, you could put $10 billion, you could put $15 billion, if you do not put innovation ideas, creativity, and political will in the education sector to act on behalf of the teachers and the students, you are going to get the same thing.

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

**Ms. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** You are going to get the same thing. So, as I look through the budget documents, the Minister of Finance said to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that we are now living in a knowledge-based economy, and that we are pursuing an education system that is modern, relevant, technology-driven and accessible to all. This is a discovery that the Minister of Finance made in 2023.

And I would like to read into the *Hansard*—budget time, when you are in the budget debate it is a very reflective moment. You think about Trinidad and Tobago over the years and what we could have done had we had proper management over time. And something, I said to myself as I prepared; we look back. We usually look back a couple years, and whatnot. I said: Let me see what was the discussion 20 years ago in Trinidad and Tobago. So, that is 2002—in 2003, as they discussed fiscal 2004. And at that time, different persons would have sat here and the then Opposition Leader would have been one Mr. Basdeo Panday,
a former Prime Minister. And in his response to the budget for fiscal 2004, he spoke about the United National Congress, the years that the UNC would have been in government before, that is the 1995 years. And Mr. Basdeo Panday, at that time, would have said:

“When the UNC was in government, we presented seven national budgets. Each budget was an overall plan for the economic development of Trinidad and Tobago. Each budget is but on its predecessor and laid the foundation for its successor. There was a continuity from budget to budget. Each”—UNC budget—“was informed and based on a clear vision that the UNC had for Trinidad and Tobago. That vision”—this is 2003; October 14, 2003—“was to transform Trinidad and Tobago into a knowledge-based society with a globally competitive, technologically driven, diversified economy that will sustain full employment, growing prosperity, equal opportunity, a secure life, social cohesion and the highest standard of living for all of our citizens. I emphasize all.”

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. A. Haynes-Alleyne: Members on the other side like to pretend that 2010 to 2015—and I think the Prime Minister at some point in time called it lost years—but if you look at the reality of Trinidad and Tobago, and if they could come out of their delusion, they would realize the lost years are the PNM years. The lost years are the PNM years.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Ms. A. Haynes-Alleyne: Because in 2003, October 14, 2003, a person could say—very delusional, a person could sit in this House and say to a PNM Government in 2003: Let us do the work then, 20 years ago. If I tell you, in 2002, Ms. Deputy Speaker, I was in my uniform in secondary school. In 2003, I was
preparing to choose my subjects for CXC. “Ah come and meet”—Diego Martin North/East was in the Parliament. He heard this speech. Diego Martin North/East heard the knowledge-based society in 2002, and thought it was not a good idea. But come in 2023 now, to tell us something that had the foresight 20 years ago.

6.05 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I encourage every right-thinking citizen of Trinidad and Tobago to take a look at the discussions that have obtained in Parliament that we have gone through here, and realize that there are years for action and there are years for rhetoric, and the years for action are all the years the PNM are out of office.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: All of the years that they are out of office. And so that what you have is a constant need for a reset. And so, while I sat here and I listened to my colleagues, and I listened to some of the younger members of the PNM bench contribute to this debate, I am going to tell you the truth, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It broke my heart to hear the contribution from the Member for Laventille East/Morvant and I will tell you why.

As the Member contributed there was a sense of a genuine desire to help the people, a genuine desire to help the people of the community. And so the problem was not the desire, the problem was the execution, in that, the people of Trinidad and Tobago—the people of Trinidad and Tobago deserve more than parliamentarians coming to them and saying, “Let us be happy that we getting $1,000 for school books”. “Let us be happy for the Latrine Eradication Programme. Let us be happy for subsidized spaces where we can try to make life a little bit easier for you.” And I will tell you why. Because what the people of Trinidad and Tobago want and deserve is an opportunity to make a life for
Appropriation (Financial Year 2024), Bill, 2023

Mrs. Haynes-Alleyne (cont’d)

yourself—

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** An opportunity to succeed and to strive, and that the idea that the policies that the Government has implemented over the past nine years at least, but certainly the 46 years overall that they have been in office, that those policies have created a dependent Trinidad and Tobago citizen in an independent nation, it breaks my heart, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It breaks my heart because the thinking, the political philosophy across the floor is that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago must be happy with us giving them $1,000 as opposed to giving them the opportunity to never need that $1,000.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** To never need that $1,000.

**Ms. Mohit:** Sustainability.

**Hon. Member:** You want them to lose their vote base?

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you take a look overall and you listen overall across the board, speaker after speaker, we as citizens of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago are being told to say thank you for measures that are digging us out of a hole that the PNM created, and that is not what we are supposed to be doing.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** It is not what we are supposed to be doing. We are not supposed to be saying thank you for back pay, that is money you have earned. You are not supposed to have to be saying thank you for a market food box. You are not supposed to be saying thank you for food support. You as the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, you are supposed to tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago, in the last nine years we have done this to put us on the path
for success, this is where we are at now, this is where we are going. Where we are
going is nowhere fast with you, and you must know that, and you must know that,
and stop coming here and telling us time and time again, that we are painting a
negative picture of Trinidad and Tobago. If you live in Trinidad and Tobago, if
you exist in Trinidad and Tobago, you know the reality.

One of my friends, a very good friend of mine who works in the marketing
space has always said to me, a lot of people, a lot of advertisers or the persons who
work in PR and marketing, the ones who are not very good, they believe that the
trick is to fool the consumer, say something over and over and over. Say things are
good, that the Opposition is trying to be negative and we are creating this
impression, and so that if you say it over and over, somebody will believe you.

But the people of Trinidad and Tobago are the people of Trinidad and
Tobago, they know exactly what exists here. They know what the issues we are
facing are. We cannot come here and tell anybody anything that they do not
already know. And so what you are doing, instead of using the opportunity, using
the resources of the country to make the lives of citizens easier, you have instead
decided that you will take a propaganda campaign and you will tell people that the
Opposition is negative rather than you have been incompetent. That is the strategy.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: And so I want to get to the education sector looking
clinically at some of the things that we would have been promised, some of the
things that would have been discussed over time, and certainly some of the things
that we have not seen. Very amazingly, in the budget statement by the Minister of
Finance, the Minister of Finance stated to the public that the SEA examination
data, that the:

“…data from the SEA Examination from 2010 to the present…even
—this is a quote from the Minister of Finance:

“…reveals a consistent and troubling percentage of students who do not achieve 50 per cent or more in the exam.”

The question of success rates at the SEA level has been one that has plagued us for the last few years. But this blatant attempt at revisionist history for information that is publicly available, easily accessible, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is insulting to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** I have and I would like to put on the record very clearly that if you look at the statistical data and you look at SEA results in particular, that you saw massive improvement between the years 2012 to 2016 and that is as a direct result of interventions made by the People’s Partnership administration.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** That when the People’s Partnership entered office in 2010, you were looking at the percentage of persons scoring below 30 per cent was somewhere around 11.6 per cent, persons scoring above 50 were 67.5 per cent. This is 2010, so I am using it as a baseline because that is a change in administration. By 2014, and I am using 2014 but we can look at the other years because that is where you start to see the results of policy changes, logic will take you from point A to point B, because I hear the Member for San Fernando East suggesting that things may not be—but by 2014 you see the students scoring below 30 per cent reached 4.4 per cent that is from meeting it at 11.6 per cent. Students scoring above 50, 70.7 per cent, that is after meeting it at 67.5 per cent. Students scoring above 90 per cent in the highest percentile, 8.9 per cent in 2014. That is after meeting it at 5.9 per cent. The SEA results for 2015, the last year the
People’s Partnership was in office, the SEA results is before the entrance of the PNM administration in 2015, you had the percentage of persons scoring below 30 per cent was 1.1 per cent, with 91 per cent scoring above 50.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** And I want now to be very clear. By 2017, this is two years of a PNM administration, just two, you had scoring below 30 per cent, 11.9 per cent. Scoring above 50, 68.5 per cent. You got to 2018, all of this is before the pandemic, before the pandemic. You had persons scoring below 30, 13.6 per cent. By 2019 you had 13.7 per cent, and then you get to the pandemic years you saw the result of the learning loss. But what can be demonstrated clearly by these figures is that the problem was not COVID, the problem was the PNM policy.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** And so to come in and say data from the SEA exam suggests that from 2010 things were not looking so good and that we must now do what we must to increase the level of student achievement, that I think is disingenuous, I think it is the PNM trying to make another excuse for what their failed policies have done to our children, and that you coming in now to use the Vacation Remedial Programme, and to use different interventions to fix a problem that you created is problematic, because you cannot be the problem and the solution at the same time. It just does not make sense.

I want to get to the very important point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of school infrastructure, and this is a situation that is near and dear to my heart. At the close of the last session in Parliament, which is just September of this year, last month. I came to this House to ask an Urgent Question; the Urgent Question was on the state of the Gasparillo Secondary School. I came from meeting with parents and students of the school. I came having looked at photos and the state of dilapidation
in the school. The school is about five minutes if so much, away from my office. I came here and with all the goodness in my heart, I asked the question to the Minister of Education so that it could be on the record to the parents that this is the timeline for the issue to be fixed. What I actually got was I was told that there was no issue and I was wrong. That there was no issue and that block B had been fixed. So now I was wondering, “Well, I hadda be mad because I just came from there, right”. I have seen the state of affairs going on in the Gasparillo Secondary School.

So then you come in and I said right, then I started to get messages, a slew of messages from parents of students in Princes Town West Secondary School, from students in a school in Barataria, that these students are without furniture. And this is from a Ministry that has a billion-dollar allocation, $8 billion, and that we are facing the students of our country and we cannot fix infrastructure concerns. So if you cannot fix small problems, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you cannot fix basic level problems, brick and mortar problems, you cannot tell me anything about digitization—

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:**—you cannot tell me anything about the curriculum. You cannot tell me anything about carrying our students forward, because brick and mortar is stumping you. Brick and mortar is troubling this PNM administration.

And so I want to go to the budget debate for the appropriation—because again, the Minister of Education is yet to speak in the debate, so I cannot assess the statements given at this point in time. So I will assess the statements given last year and we will see where we came to it, right, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So in 2022, as we discussed the financial year that just ended, we were told,
and I am going to directly quote the Minister of Education here:

“So, school repair is always ongoing…”

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Just quote the source, just identify the source for the records right, yeah—

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** The *Hansard*, correct.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:**—just for the records.

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** The *Hansard*, Appropriations (Financial Year 2023), the date is September 30, 2022, it is on page 177, yes, and the speaker is the Minister of Education.

“So, school repair is always ongoing every day. Every single day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have an average of five schools where we have emergencies that need attending to: plumbing, sewer, electrical.”

Et cetera—

“But the time has come for us to sink some capital expenditure into school repairs and therefore, you will see in this budget allocation an increased allocation for school repair, so that we can take care of more of our schools.”

**6.20 p.m.**

So I hope, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that if in 2022, September 30, you are telling us in the budget debate that we are giving more money to school infrastructure and school repairs, and then I could come at the end of that financial year, September 2023, after having inexplicably trusted you the year before to fulfil this promise of ongoing emergency school infrastructure needs, and I could come here and tell you that a school, one, and I will go to the others, but one of the schools in my constituency has dilapidated conditions—I am talking about railings falling down, the whiteboards peeling, severe dilapidation, Mr. Deputy Speaker,
and that it was not fixed in one year, in a full year, then I am telling you, that is why we feel sometimes like we are wasting our time in this budget debate.

Because if you could stand up in 2022 and say it will be done, and then in 2023, you still stand up and say something else, I mean, at what point in time are we going to call a spade a spade and say this, you are not making sense because you will come and say the same thing? I could also identify the repeated speeches, eh. I could identify who came and said the same thing last year, and brought it back this year. I can identify it.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** But as I stand here as the representative for the constituency of Tabaquite, as it stands right now, the students of the Gasparillo Secondary School have had to embark on a shift system because despite what the Minister would have said in answer to my question in September, the very next day, a letter was sent to the PTA advising them that the students have to come to school on a shift basis because of repairs to the school; that I have the Happy Hill Hindu School that is currently—they are not in physical school because of repairs to the school, because the roof fell down during the repairs, and that is in my constituency. Everybody here on this side and on that side—

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:**—despite what they are going to present, can tell you about issues with school infrastructure. And I started with school infrastructure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because if you had listened to the Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara, who spoke about what was coming online, and what records they were digitizing, and what spaces—and patted themselves on their back and said congratulations to themselves when they know for a fact, if you look at photos, if you just open your eyes, you will see what our students are going
through, and you cannot be pleased with that. And that is not a question of being negative, it is a question of being absolutely factual.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, every Member has gotten up thus far and praised the $1,000 grant. They have said, this is a great thing, that they have almost anointed, given Diego Martin North/East sainthood for $1,000 for students and persons who would in the future qualify via a means test for this $1,000. We are all Members of Parliament here. A number of persons have acknowledged that they do book drives and back-to-school drives et cetera.

I want to know from the Diego Martin North/East, what was the data, what was the calculation you used to arrive at $1,000 being what is required to maintain that social safety net to get our students out to school? I want to know—because I feel—I have a feeling that their polling data, their insights show that they have negative feelings from the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and somebody across there—because thinking is a little hard. They say, you know what? If we give them a $1,000—if we say, okay, $1,000 for needy students, everybody will feel good and we will get some accolades and they cannot say we are an uncaring government.

But if you calculate the actual cost of back to school, if you calculate—and if you know the realities parents are facing, in particular low income parents, in particular parents of students—parents who are from a rural community, when you take a look at textbooks, stationary, school uniforms, and the cost of school transportation, I will tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a lot of people will be hard-pressed to understand how you came up with $1,000.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: And so I want to raise the issue of school transportation in the context of what our citizens are facing every year. Every year, without fail, I bring it up. It is something that plagues persons in my constituency, and I am sure several others.

Increasing fuel prices over the past few years, the dilapidated state of our infrastructure has taken the cost of school—physically getting your children to school, where they can go if the school is open. Physically getting your children to school has become onerous for people. It has become out of the reach for some ordinary citizens, and people will think we are making this up, eh.

But if you have to pay $70, one way, for one student to get to school, and then the school transportation buses that were provided before have now gone away without explanation, and that every year when I asked about it in standing finance, I am told it is happening when it is not really happening, what are our citizens to do? What are they actually supposed to face? What are persons in rural communities supposed to do if there are no PTSC buses where the children can come for free? If there are no school transportation options, what are people expected to do? And then they supposed to say thank you for a $1,000? That, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think is an indefensible space to stand from. And I cannot congratulate the Diego Martin North/East for doing something, the barest minimum, to help our children stay in school.

The Member for Chaguanas East in her contribution today has said that in looking at the school dropout rates—and in her contribution she was asking about this all-of-government approach that we keep hearing. She was asking about whether or not the Minister for Social Development and Family Services, and the Minister of Education, if anybody is working together to figure out where our children are going if they drop out of school, or why they are dropping out of
school, or how many students are dropping out of school now to help out their families with meeting economic circumstances facing Trinidad and Tobago. Can you believe that is a conversation we are having in 2023? In 2023, we have to accept that there are persons who have to choose between their education and being alive and feeding yourself, and so that you have children going out to work.

You had a Minister of Labour talking about child labour policy and you have the Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara coming here to talk about all manner—“ah” sports day, right?—about “ah” sports day” and All Fours and cricket, and could never tell us of the 46,000 students who never accessed online learning, and then in the information coming from the FOIA of the 2,800 students who have dropped out of primary and secondary school; cannot tell us anything about these children but comes to tell me about “ah” sports day after receiving $8.02 billion. It is unacceptable, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: We have yet to hear from the Minister of Works and Transport. I do not know what difference that would make—

Hon. Members: [Laughter]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:—but at the end of the day, there are schools within my constituency, the Caratal RC School, that remains inaccessible based on the road network. And every time I asked about it, we are told, okay, it is a secondary road. When we wrote to the Rural Development Company—and I will come to the Member for San Fernando West, Minister of Rural Development and Local Government shortly. But when we wrote and we said, okay, it is a secondary road, but the cost of the road cannot be met by the corporation, and therefore somebody in this billion-dollar Government could find something to do to make sure that these communities remain connected and accessible, and then we get no answer.
But then the Minister for Rural Development here came today to tell me about value for money, when I have students breaking their foot going to school in Caratal RC. I mean, it is unbelievable.

**Hon. Member:** Shame.

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** And so when I say we are existing in a space of absolute delusion, I am being very serious, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** And when we look all across this budget, every space within his budget, every Member of the Opposition would have shown you different pockets of the same delusion. But I was going through the budget documents, and I looked at the space under agriculture, and they were talking about that they:

“…are rehabilitating 240 km of access roads;”

And that—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, you just have approximately two more minutes of your initial speaking time. You have an additional 10 minutes, you care to avail yourself?

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** Thank you. On the very next page—after we are rehabilitating the 240 kilometres of access roads, on the very next page in the budget document, the Minister of Finance told the people of Trinidad and Tobago that:

“We are revitalizing the cocoa industry, which is already employing almost 2,000 persons from production to value-added activities;”
In my constituency, Mr. Deputy Speaker, exists the Montserrat farmers—the Cocoa Farmers Association in Montserrat, in the Gran Couva area. In November of 2022, the rains at the end of November of 2022, led to the collapse of the Gran Couva Road; the absolute collapse of the Gran Couva Road. In December of 2022, the Prime Minister announced $100-plus million emergency allocation for the roads and spaces that were damaged in November of 2022.

I am standing here in October of 2023, the road is the same. The road is in the same state. It is probably worse right now. And then they stood up in the budget that said we are “building capacity for diversification and growth”, and we are supposed to believe this? But the cocoa farmers—in your budget, the cocoa industry that you are revitalizing, they cannot access their spaces because of the destruction of the roadway in money you promised in 2022, and we supposed to believe anything that is going on here?

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: And you are talking about agriculture and creating space—and we are discussing the spaces that you are going to look to diversify—and I can tell you how I know for a fact it is a mamagu; I know for a fact.

Existing within the Tabaquite constituency, there are a number of very profitable farmers. They have kept Trinidad and Tobago fed during the pandemic years. You have the TPD farmers, you have the Lightbourne farmers, you have Caratal farmers, you have the farmers in Gran Couva, in the Central Range where the Tabaquite constituency lies there. There is arable land. There are places that produce hundreds and thousands of tonnage in crops, and that we would be asking for years now; years, in the same Market Box that we are told to say thank you for and congratulate them for, the farmers that are carrying the produce for the Market Box are literally begging for a bridge in the Bacchus Trace, the farmers in Tortuga
had their produced tipped over because of the state of the roadways, and that you are talking about diversification, but in reality the persons who are doing the hard work of diversifying, the hard work of bringing in agriculture into the productive sector that you have—they are not being brought into the development of Trinidad and Tobago, because you cannot fix brick and mortar problems like roads?

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

**6.35 p.m.**

And so that when you have to consider things, like curriculum development, knowledge-based society, et cetera, and things like how to patch and pave a road stumps a government for nine years, you understand exactly why we are facing what we are facing. That you understand that when we talk about the interventions, the things that we are told to say thank you for—so the Social Safety Net, the $1,000, the governance by grants that we are seeing right now, that what we have had is a lack of acknowledgement by the People’s National Movement. That all of these expanded social programmes that you have to put in place, all of the grants that we are seeing, that they are symptoms, they are as a result of failed policies that have created a nation that is more dependent than independent in 2023. That what you have created in the last eight years, with your last eight budgets, are not citizens that are more resilient.

You have not helped the entrepreneurial spirit. You have not created any of the things to grow and create a nation that will thrive. You have made us more dependent and expanded the facilities of the Government to say that, “We will give you and we will help you”. That is not what your job is. Your job is to create an enabling environment so that we can help ourselves.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** And so when the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo
spoke very earlier on in this debate—very, very earlier on, talking about all of the things, the opportunities that we are providing, the skills training, et cetera, and the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre pointed out that several of these things existed before. You know what was in the things that have been scrapped, Mr. Deputy Speaker? In Trinidad and Tobago, again, it is very important for politicians, persons who do policy, who set policy to be in touch with the realities that people of Trinidad and Tobago face.

In communities in Trinidad and Tobago, we have a large apprenticeship culture. So if you live in certain communities and you know the mechanic, you could become a trained mechanic without the certification because you have served as an apprentice. The same thing with air conditioning, refrigeration, et cetera. We have a large expansion, a whole conversation on tech/voc and the importance of reintroducing tech/voc. You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what this PNM administration met in 2015 when they entered, was a workforce assessment centre.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: And I am bringing this up because under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education, if you had the skill set, you had the competency, and you could demonstrate the skill set via the examination and the prior learning assessment, recognition process, you were able to get the certification and put yourself into the world of work as an entrepreneur, as a person who can enter the service industry as a mechanic, as a mason, and all of these important things that they are now trying to reinvent the wheel like they did not scrap this programme in 2015.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne: And then the Minister of Finance came in and said, you know, they are looking at spaces to train more TVET, more technical/vocational,
because the fact of the matter is, all of these programmes depend on there being instructors, and they met a programme that had a training system for technical/vocational educators.

They met an expanded tech/voc and CVQ system. They met all of that and they destroyed it completely—

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:**—so much so—it was so far advanced that by 2014 the Ministry of Tertiary Education had a TVET masters at UWI, that UWI launched the master’s in Technical Vocational Education and Training programme, because we were so advanced with having instructors that had they just kept—had they just not been “bad mind” and petty, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** The conversation that we could have been having today would have been remarkably different. And so I listened to different Members come here and talk about programmes to expand tech/voc, programmes to expand digital education, the e-book system, et cetera, and I wonder when you came in, in 2015, and you saw the programmes and you saw the policy documents, did you decide that you would rather shelve it, see if you could come up with something slightly better or better, and then come 2023, between 2022—2023, we realize nothing is coming to you, so you take it back out the shelf, dust it off and trying to reinvent it and put it as PNM policy. Is that what you are doing now?

**Hon. Member:** That is what they are doing.

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I conclude, in—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** You just have over two minutes.

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:** Yes.

As I conclude, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 1983, a PNM government led by
George Chambers, they got a report, “Imperatives of Adjustment”, that discussed all of these things, the recommendations to remedy the problems that Trinidad and Tobago could face, that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, over the years what we have seen is a PNM administration that has been unwilling to fix the issues facing Trinidad and Tobago, that a functioning, equitable education sector that produces world-class innovators as it does not benefit a PNM administration. And so that we will keep repeating these problems. We will keep facing these issues, because what we are facing is not, as I said before, a resource problem. It is a management problem. It is a political philosophy problem.

It is an issue that the People’s National Movement, this is the type of Trinidad and Tobago that they enjoy seeing. They enjoy seeing a Trinidad and Tobago where people are hoping that the Government is the saviour. Nobody wants a government to be their saviour. What they want is a government to be functional, to create an enabling environment—

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

**Mrs. A. Haynes-Alleyne:**—to do your job. Do your basic job and we will be okay. Right? So that until the PNM understands that your role here is to create a Trinidad and Tobago that allows our citizens to strive, we are not ever going to come out of this hole until the PNM changes its political philosophy for you or finds itself out of office completely, and I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the Member for Port of Spain South.

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

**Mr. Keith Scotland** (*Port of Spain South*): Mr. Deputy Speaker, after listening to the hon. Member for Tabaquite, I am convinced that the hon. Members on the other side, they do not care about the people of Trinidad and Tobago.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: They are out of touch with reality.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members, Members, please, please. All right. The previous Member would have spoken in silence so let us keep it that way. Let us keep it that way. Proceed.

Mr. K. Scotland: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The truth offends.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: Imagine, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member, the hon. Member for Tabaquite, had the temerity to lecture this Government about technical/vocational schools.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: I ask Trinidad and Tobago, under which government was John Donaldson Technical Institute started?

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: Under which government was San Fernando Technical Institute started? Speak to Justin Paul and you would know. And it is now transformed into the University of Trinidad and Tobago, yet they have the gall to speak to us about technical/vocational schools. They are out of touch and they do not care.

Three things I would like to address relative to the contribution of the hon. Member. The first thing, all the Members on this side apparently were derided, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for when they commenced their speech, saying thank you to the constituents. Since when is saying thanks to be derided? My understanding is that saying thanks is a manifestation of gratitude, and if you are properly brought up the first thing you say when you are grateful is, thank you.

UNREvised
Mr. K. Scotland: So if everybody here says thank you, it means that “manners maketh man and manners maketh the PNM”. That is what we do when we say “thank you”, and we say thank you to the constituents.

The second, the hon. Member said that in 2002—

Mr. K. Scotland: In 2002, the hon. Member was in school uniform. What she did not tell the country, because she wants to say that the PNM years were the dark years, that in 2002 in order for her to be in a uniform it came from a PNM policy from 1956.

Mr. K. Scotland: In 2002, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me edify the hon. Member, I was now setting up a shingle in 112-114 Duke Street, the product of a PNM-driven education—

Mr. K. Scotland:—that enabled a single parent domestic worker to send her son, not to one but two university degrees.

Mr. K. Scotland: And that is the product of PNM policy, from 1956 to now. Those are the golden years of this country.

Mr. K. Scotland: But, thirdly, and this was the most—the unkindest cut of all, the unkindest cut of all, most egregious snub, the hon. Member proceeded to snub the grant, the school grant, the book supply grant of $1,000. Firstly, convoluting it
with transportation. The $1,000 is not for transportation. It is a grant to purchase uniforms and school supplies, and it is not for all, but it is for those who are qualified under a system that has a criteria, a means test.

The hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East is not saying the $1,000 will cover all but in some cases it will, but it will cover most and it certainly will fill a hole.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: To snub that and not say, “Well done”, that is something that we on this side cannot do. But I wish—

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence, Members. Silence. Proceed.

Mr. K. Scotland: It is a grant, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is provided for those in need and in every country in the world, including Trinidad and Tobago, there are those who are in need. And what the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East has done is to make a provision for those who are in need to ensure that their children are able to go to school and come in this Parliament—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland:—as the hon. Member for Tabaquite, and make a contribution, because without that education and without that assistance it may not be possible. So I would ask, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would ask, are they really in touch with reality? Do they really care about the people of Trinidad and Tobago? Pinch yourself.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this year as a nation we have celebrated 61 years as an independent country, 47 years as a republic. This is undoubtedly a proud achievement but this journey as we continue cannot be successful without a collective effort from all of us as a people. That is why the theme and the

UNREVISED
budgetary theme this year is, “Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth”, because as a Government we recognize and appreciate that the importance of partnering with our citizens is paramount.

We recognize that we are here at the behest of the people and I am here at the behest of the people of Port of Spain South, and I say, thank you. We are the stewards of the people and the concerns of the country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are the concerns of this Government, and this budget demonstrates that the Government understands that your aspirations, your goals are our aspirations and our goals, and the call to build capacity and diversify for growth is an action call, a call to action, to deliver. It is a call to devise and implement policies and continue policies that leads improvement in your standard of living, your security and the security of your children and their future.

6.50 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, through you, I say to Trinidad and Tobago together, let us build on this budget. Let us build on preceding budgets in order to have a safe nation, a sophisticated nation, a nation that has technological and entrepreneurial skills which is well endowed to me the challenges of this generation and beyond. That is the vision that I have gleaned from this budget, so I say, join with this Government in building capacity for diversification and growth.

This budget recognizes that the only way to achieve that goal is through our people. The hon. Members on the other side do not have that history or that tradition of putting people first. The only persons they put first are their cohorts.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: So they had the audacity to coin an acronym for the People’s National Movement, one of the longest existing institutions in the Western Hemisphere. But I have an acronym for the UNC, under no circumstances.
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: Under no circumstances, should the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, take sanity and sobriety out of their consciousness and put the hon. Members opposite back to rule or to lead this country. Under no circumstances will we tolerate Reshmi. Under no circumstances, will we tolerate Section 34. Every Monday morning, when they were in government is some embroilment.

Hon. Member: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: Every Monday morning you are scared, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to open up your newspaper and read. So we say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, in the coming months remember the name of the UNC, under no circumstances.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: When they come to your door in the next—

Mr. Ratiram:—three months.

Mr. K. Scotland:—months, years, say to them, no one lives here. We said that already. Under no circumstances will we have you.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in crafting the budget for fiscal 2023/2024—

Mr. Ratiram: [Inaudible]

Mr. K. Scotland:—in crafting—Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Couva North is really being you know, “un-collegiate”—

Mr. Ratiram: [Inaudible]

Mr. K. Scotland: I may have to coin—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. Members, please. Again, nothing was
heard on my end here. Again, you all know the necessary Standing Orders.

Mr. Young: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(6), and I ask that we ask Hansard whether they recorded what the Member for Couva North just—

Mr. Al-Rawi: It was vile.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Again, Members, please. I need no follow-up information.

Mr. Ram: [Inaudible]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Kindly leave the Chamber please Caroni—

Mr. Al-Rawi:—Couva North.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Who just made the remark?

Hon. Members: Caroni Central.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Who just made the remark?

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Caroni East.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Just now, hold on one second. Caroni Central, kindly exit the Chamber, please. And again, proceed.

[Member exits the Chamber].

6.55 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, hon. Members, whatever was said and has been mentioned by the Member for Port of Spain West/St. Ann’s—Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West, did not reach the ear of the Chair. It has been said that it is the Member for Couva North. So, again, as directed, right?—Hansard will be asked to produce the necessary information and we will take it from there, unless the Member for Couva North has anything to say. Do you have anything to say?
Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Hold on. Based on what was said by—with regard to the Standing Order, yea or nay?

Mr. Ratiram: I will seek your guidance.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: So, we will wait on the information from the *Hansard*.

Mr. Ratiram: I will seek your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I can repeat and—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Fine. Well, we will wait on the information from *Hansard*.

Mr. Ratiram:—and you can advise accordingly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Again, it was not heard by the Chair, so I will have to depend on *Hansard* whether it was said or not. Right? So, I am asking you, I am giving you the opportunity in order to say whether you made a statement and you want to retract, you want to—even if it’s wrong. Other than that, we will wait on the *Hansard* and we will proceed accordingly. Fair enough?

Mr. Ratiram: I await your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Sure. Thank you. All right? Port of Spain South, continue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland: Obliged. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in crafting the national budget for the fiscal year 2023/2024, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has made a resounding recommitment to its people continuing to emphasize the principles of inclusivity and social and economic progress. At the forefront of this budget we find a steadfast dedication to inspiring the youth to explore and realize their full potential and ensuring that those who face seemingly insurmountable challenges in their daily lives can have readily access to resources that can help them to combat and thereafter elevate themselves.
As we embark on this journey it is clear that the theme of “Putting People First: Nurturing Our Greatest Asset” outlined in our Vision 2030 development plan is just not words but is something that is tangible and it is being worked on by this Government and it will be fulfilled. In a world, Mr. Deputy Speaker, where there are economic challenges and uncertainties persisting, this Government recognizes that the pivotal role of our young people will continue to be integral in re-engineering the future of our nation. Hence the budget stands as a testament to our commitment to partnering with the entire of Trinidad and Tobago but particularly our youth by providing opportunities and support for these young citizens.

Simultaneously, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it underscores our unwavering pledge to uplift and empower those who find themselves in vulnerable circumstances as we delve into the details of this budget, it becomes evident that this is not merely an exercise in fiscal management but a reflection of the core belief that the true measure of our nation’s success lies in how we take care of and treat our people. This budget is a reflection that this Government cares and will continue to care for all of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have listened to the hon. Member who contributed before, the hon. Member for Tabaquite. And I would like now to engage the young people of Trinidad and Tobago to show them, to demonstrate that the tangible benefits available in this budget and I would want to implore them to take advantage of these benefits and not listen to any naysayers who do not have their best interest at heart. The young people, we cannot just go to them anymore, you know. You have to engage them and they tell you things in different ways. “Wha yuh go do for meh now?” “Tell meh what to do”. You cannot just tell them
to do something and they do it. So I want them to listen carefully because this Government recognizes that the engine room of this country and the engine room for Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth lies with the young people of Trinidad and Tobago. And for that reason there is a lion’s share of the budget for the hon. Minister of Education, the Ministry of Education. And I want to say to the hon. Member for Tabaquite, “she soon come”. “She soon come.”

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

**Mr. K. Scotland:** The youth development, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government has shown its resolute belief in the potential of our young people. And this is exemplified through the bold actions taken by this Government to invest in their future. Let us be granular, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is estimated that our young people, that is those who are like me ages zero to 35, account for 40 per cent of our population, some—

**Hon. Members:** [Interruption]

**Mr. K. Scotland:**—436,000 persons of our national population, almost half a million. As such, from the outset of our term in office, the hon. Prime Minister astutely established the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. This demonstrated the Government’s commitment to holistic growth and the empowerment of our young population. Since its inception in 2020, this Ministry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has been at the forefront of transformation, channelling over $1 billion into a plethora of initiatives designed to create opportunities and to nurture the young talents amongst us.

The driving force behind that success was first started by the indefatigable hon. Member for Laventille West Fitzgerald Hinds and continued under the capable hands of the hon. Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, who, and both of them, their outstanding leadership have paved the way for countless individuals to

**UNREVISED**
show success in Trinidad and Tobago and to realize their aspirations. And for that I wish to commend the hon. Prime Minister for his vision and the two Ministers, particularly the incumbent for their tenacity in this Ministry. This is an important Ministry in Trinidad and Tobago—first time.

Under the guidance and under the policies in this Ministry, the fiscal year the Minister of Finance in alignment with Government’s unwavering drive has continued to bolster the prospect of our young people through an array, Mr. Deputy Speaker, an array of initiatives that were outlined in the budget. This was not old talk. Why did the hon. Member for Tabaquite not take up the budget and go through those programmes? These endeavours not only reflect our belief in the capabilities of the younger generation, but it also highlights our determination to shape a society where every young person is equipped with the tools and opportunities that they need to thrive and contribute meaningfully to our nation’s progress.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland:** Meaningfully. Instead of encouraging them, what the hon. Member for Tabaquite has done is to try to discourage them. I say to the young people, carry on!

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

**Mr. K. Scotland:** Carry on and ignore those who do not have your best interest at heart.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland:** Through the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service this Government is taking strides towards creating avenues for employment amongst young people and empowering them to become their own bosses and business leaders. I want to pause here because in direct response to the
hon. Member for Tabaquite, this is not a hand out. This is a policy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is geared towards empowerment. People who will be able to stand on their own feet and have their own businesses and not go knocking at a door seeking employment. Is that not independence? Is that not paving the road for a greater and better future for our young people?

One noteworthy initiative is the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme which is set to launch its second cohort in February 2024. The Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme. This programme offers both part time and full time participation options and it equips young individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in the agricultural sector. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I pause on this. What it means is this. That the young people of Trinidad and Tobago are now getting an opportunity to go into agriculture and develop their own business, to be employed by themselves. They can do it full time if they are not employed now, or they can do it part time. But what it does, it equips them for the future whilst enabling them to contribute to the food basket of Trinidad and Tobago. How could anybody say that this did not have a plan? How could anyone say that this was not well thought out, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

More so, in June this year 2023, the figures show that 168 young persons were awarded certificates for successful completion of level one of this programme. That means that there are 168 would-be farmers who have a long life span who would be able to contribute to the food basket of Trinidad and Tobago. Why is the good news not being said to the nation? Why are the young people not being encouraged to access that programme instead of being discouraged?

In addition, the Government is introducing the Youth Aquaculture Project, a year-long aquaculture training programme targeted for nationals aged 16 to 35. News flash, young people aged 16 to 35 who are not employed and not doing
anything at this time, take the opportunity, seize the moment. Sign up for the youth aquaculture project which will enable you to be a meaningful contributor to the aquaculture in Trinidad and Tobago. Ages 16 to 35. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is two.

Three, the youth agricultural Shade House Project further enhances opportunities for young entrepreneurs because it is dedicated to youth entrepreneurial hubs and it signifies the commitment to nurturing innovative retail activities among the young people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have moved from traditional agriculture to aquaculture. Now, we are going into the establishment of an entrepreneurial hub exclusively designed for the young people. To support the budding entrepreneurs, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service is developing the young Business Incubator programme. This offers valuable resources such as guidance on intellectual property, product development, marketing and legal services. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the young people, they are becoming more creative.

7.10 p.m.

The access to the World Wide Web and to devices and to technology is creating a generation whose creativity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is being accentuated. What this project does is that it puts at their feet resources in intellectual property. In other words, if you come up with an idea that has some worth, you can guard your idea so it is not manipulated or you are not in any way taken advantage of by others.

Product development: You will be getting guidance as to how to develop your product in a business-like manner. Marketing: If you have the best product and it is not marketed, then your product remains not known to the world at large. Marketing is important. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my pet peeve, legal services,
you must have the lawyer on board in order to guide you as to the quagmire of legal challenges that young businessmen will face. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we want to commend, on this side, this project to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland:** And more importantly, they say to us, put your money where your mouth is. Well, I tell them, this proactive approach is underlined by an allocation of $6 million geared towards this programme alone; $6 million.

Furthermore, the Government envisions the creation of youth business parks, where young people can engage in light manufacturing and trade-related activities. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if we started with traditional agriculture, we expanded to aquaculture, we then moved on to the Homestead Programme, and now the Shade House Project, and the business incubator. It means that this Government has a plan for every young person in Trinidad and Tobago, once you are willing to get up and get. You have a choice. And the choices, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are very attractive. This youth business park, which helps light manufacturing and trade-related activities, that is for persons who may not be inclined to do agriculture, they may not be inclined to be artistic and creative, but they may have practical skills in trade and manufacturing. And by developing these spaces, the Government is not only fostering entrepreneurship, but is providing employment opportunities to enable the young people to become self-reliant. When the young people are self-reliant, they will contribute to the nation’s economic growth. That is why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the budgetary theme is: “Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth”.

Let me break it down for the hon. Member for Tabaquite. When you talk diversification, you say agriculture. But if you do not want agriculture, we say aquaculture. If you do not want aquaculture, we say let us go into trade and
industry. If you do not want trade and industry, we say let us go into creative exercises. If you do not want that, we say let us do a combination. Is that not diversification?

Mr. Leonce: Yes.

Mr. K. Scotland: And what would the diversification do? When you are able to be diversifying, when you utilize the projects outlined and paid for by this Government, you will build your capacity. Having built your capacity, having had all the things put in place to allow you so to do, to develop your business, to be self-reliant, you will then contribute to the nation’s economy, and that will lead to growth. Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that not budget 2023/2024 101?

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Scotland: Therefore, this Government is committed. When we say diversification, a synonym for diversification is multifaceted, and this Government is committed to a multifaceted approach that showcases our commitment to creating thriving young entrepreneurs in an ecosystem that ensures their economic empowerment. And once they are economically empowered, this country will see growth. Let no one tell you different, young people. Therefore, the Government says that we are steadfast in our commitment to empowering the youth through the myriad—Mr. Deputy Speaker, a synonym for myriad? Diversification, plenty—the myriad training programmes through the Ministry of Youth and National Service, and these initiatives ranging from the national leadership programme to the bridging the gap programme.

The bridging the gap programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me spend a little time on that. It provides courses in areas such as refrigeration, air conditioning, auto mechanics, social medium management awareness. Let me repeat the range, the diversity of programmes that are being sponsored and paid for by in this
budget: Refrigeration, air conditioning, auto mechanics, social medium management and awareness. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that respectfully reflects the Government’s dedication to diversified avenues for skilled development for our young people. That is why the budget is themed as it is, Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth.

The Government is just not satisfied with having the potential of the young restricted to being job seekers, as the hon. Member for Tabaquite wanted to peddle. We are saying, empower yourselves and become business persons in your own rights. We envisioned the young people as more talented, more bold, and we want to channel and challenge them towards becoming Gen Z entrepreneurs. That is what this budget is all about as it relates to the young people of Trinidad and Tobago. In fostering these diverse skillsets we are nurturing a generation of innovators, a generation of thinkers. We are channelling their energies, which they show now. They show it. We are channelling it to make them dynamic professionals.

The intention behind these programmes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, goes beyond mere training. It is about cultivating a mindset of entrepreneurship, of self-reliance, and most importantly, of adaptability. By exposing our young people to various technical fields and alternative career paths, we are not only emboldening them for the demands of the modern workforce and the economy, but by doing so we will also bolster the nation’s economy by nurturing more talents in all the sectors. Therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is my respectful submission to you that this is an integral part for the growth of Trinidad and Tobago, and it will bolster our economy with respect to the world economy, and make us more competitive in the world economy. It will make us more competitive in the financial market. It will make us more competitive in the creative market. It will make us more competitive in the competitive market.
Appropriation (Financial Year 2024), Bill, 2023

Mr. K. Scotland (cont’d)

competitive in the trade and industry. This is what this budget is all about for the young people. It is a comprehensive approach that ensures that every young person, regardless of their academic inclination, has an opportunity to excel and contribute meaningfully to society.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland:** How could anyone not recognize this? Finally, in the upcoming fiscal 2024, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service is continuing its thrust towards the enhancement of the youth development centres through a comprehensive and concerted strategy. The Government will persist in the refurbishing of these centres. The locations: Malick, Point Fortin, the one closest to me, Basilon Street. Furthermore, there are ambitions to expand the footprint by constructing new youth development centres strategically placed in areas such as La Horquetta, Enterprise, Belmont, Sangre Grande, and I will speak to the hon. Minister to ask for St. James because we must have one in the capital city. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is an investment in the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland:** And just to cap it off, so that the nation will know that the Government is putting the resources where its plan are, $20 million was allocated and has been allocated in fiscal 2024 for this project. Hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East, thank you.

I now turn to the most vulnerable. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a fact of life that in every society there are those who are vulnerable. In every country in the world, there are the vulnerable. And a nation’s—the yardstick, the barometer of measuring a country’s, a government’s commitment to its people is how it treats the most vulnerable. In this year’s budget, the Government remains committed to support the most vulnerable segments of our society. We recognize the importance
of being inclusive. We recognize the importance of social justice. We recognize that the budget must allocate resources to address the need of those who require assistance. What is wrong with that, Mr. Deputy Speaker? That is sober policy. These measures reflect—the measures that I am going to go into—the Government’s unwavering dedication to creating a more equitable and caring society. How could anyone snub that, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Is it that you were saying that there are no vulnerable persons in Trinidad and Tobago? There are, and we are not burying our heads in the sand. We are taking them out of that situation by tiding them over.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland:** One key initiative in this year’s budget is the proposed school supplies and book grant for a $1,000. When I heard the hon. Member for Tabaquite—obviously, she does not go to her constituency office. Because all the Members on this side will know that come August into September, we have to assist some of our constituents who cannot afford to send all their children back to school. That is what we do on this side. And if we are getting help from the hon. Minister of Finance, we say, thank you and we will utilize it.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland:** And we do not want the families to stay in that position. What we want them to do is to send the children to school, so that when the children get educated, when they access the government programmes, they will be able the lift themselves and to lift their families out of the vulnerable category. That is the philosophy behind this.

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

And this is the key, it may potentially affect 6,500 homes, 6,500 families.
7.25 p.m.

Hon. Members: [Crosstalk]

Hon. K. Scotland: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 65,000—65,000 will benefit from this. I hope that the hon. Member for Tabaquite will take the magnanimity of this Government, the caring Government and assist her constituents who are vulnerable.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. K. Scotland: It underscores the commitment of this Government to partnering with families, providing opportunities for these families’ children. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is not a heuristic creation that is dealt with in some ethereal sphere with metaphysical subtleties, you know. This is real. This is real. This is families who may not be able to afford shoes, books, food, they balancing and the help of $1,000 will go a long way, it will full up a hole.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. K. Scotland: And it is per child, it is per child. It means that we are providing opportunities just not for families but we are providing opportunities for the future, for the education of the children in those families.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. K. Scotland: When these children go to school you know what will happen, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they will be able to build capacity and when they become contributing members to society they will contribute to the growth of Trinidad and Tobago, hence the budgetary theme: Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth. This initiative—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, please, you have just about two minutes in your initial speaking time. You have an additional 10 minutes. Care to avail yourself?

Hon. K. Scotland: May I please have my additional 10 minutes and the time
mortgaged—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Proceed Member, just 10 minutes.

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter*]

**Hon. K. Scotland:** This initiative demonstrates the Government’s understanding of the financial challenges that many families face when preparing their children for school. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this real, it is a real challenge. By offering this grant the Government is not only easing the financial burden on parents and guardians but ensuring that students have access to the necessary supplies and textbook in order to go back to school. It reflects a caring and inclusive approach by this Government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the market box initiative, the success of that is it multiplied, because what it does it encourages agriculture, it gives the farmers a ready market to sell their crops and most importantly it provides for those who are unable to provide for themselves. The issue of street dwellers in the capital city it is a thorny issue, it is not an issue for simple minds because you are balancing constitutional rights with those of the rights of persons to have access to the city freely without being impeded. And the $23.2 million allocated for the assessment centre and temporary shelter facility which will be in Port of Spain at the bottom of old St. Joseph Road, it has started to be built. Come journey with me in the city. It has started to be built, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And this will establish transitional living facilities for socially displaced persons, and more importantly it will just not be headquarters but there will be a plan for $8 million allocated to other shelters throughout Trinidad and Tobago. This Government is working for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. K. Scotland:** The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. I want to
thank the hon. Minister for the 196 units at Citrus Green I attended the meeting this week. Yes, Citrus Growers. Where Citrus Growers used to be, we are building 196 units with local content.

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

**Hon. K. Scotland:** And we do not deal with ghost gangs, we deal with people. I was at the meeting, hon. Member for—well Arouca/Maloney at first and also hon. Member Leonce, we attended the meeting with the stakeholders and may I say, may I announce now—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Just for the records we are using proper titles.

**Hon. K. Scotland:** Laventille East/Morvant, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we signed document, the contract has been signed and sealed and it will begin in 2024.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Adult Literacy Programme. What I want to say about this programme—

**Hon. Member:** [Interruption]

**Hon. K. Scotland:** Yes, yes, I have to move on, my time is limited. The Adult Literacy Programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That programme now has been expanded to include persons who may not be fully, normally and traditionally educated, CPEP workers, URP workers and those, the like, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What it brings to the table is an ability, an opportunity for persons who may not, in their formative years, have achieved a traditional education because they have common sense and we appreciate that, but it will enable them to have literacy skills. And that is something that must be lauded, this is something that must be applauded by this Government. Thank you hon. Minister.

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

**Hon. K. Scotland:** I now move, I now move—there is one other issue, one of the hon. Members said that there is no digitalization and there is nothing for AI, that is
not so. There is the establishment of 30 ICT access centres by the end of quarter four in 2023. How is that not AI? Come on, come on.

Port of Spain South, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The revitalization project spearheaded by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development has paramount significance in the rejuvenation of the city of Port of Spain. The development of the community assets along Ariapita Avenue. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you drive along Ariapita you will see the new terra cotta tiles. I chose the colours. There is terra cotta and grey. We are developing our capital city. This project marks a significant milestone.

The Piccadilly Street Urban Regeneration Project represents a commitment to providing housing solutions to low and middle income households. The construction of 61 apartment units at Piccadilly Street in Port of Spain serves as a testament to this and it will be at a cost of over $53 million. It underscores the investment and the Government’s intention of bringing the capital city into a rejuvenated state.

The Port of Spain Shopping Complex is actively engaged in the transformation of key commercial spaces, Eastside Plaza, New City Mall, many an entrepreneur wet—they wet their feet and those areas and they are now contributing to society. They are building capacity and growth in Trinidad and Tobago. We recognize the importance of these spaces and we will take them and we will modernize them and we will empower people.

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

**Hon. K. Scotland:** Not to mention the 11th of August when we celebrated World Pan Day. It recognizes the talent of the Steelpan Day. Listen, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was a moment of just great, it was just great—

**Hon. Member:** [Interruption]
Hon. K. Scotland: Yeah, they will claim it as bad but do not worry—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence, please.

Hon. K. Scotland: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I say to you this when the Desperadoes Pan Theatre was opened, there was a—I could not tell you the immense feeling of pride and achievement that I had for Port of Spain South, and on the 02 August, 2023, when we welcomed King of the Asantehene, Otumfuo Osei Tutu V, you had to be there. We were transformed into something that was out of this world. It was as if you would not say that you were in the heart of the city, it was like you were elsewhere. The spirit of the city is lifted by that project, it is lifted by that.

In 2022/2023, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we concentrated on having a conscious decision to improve the road works in Port of Spain. It is 80 per cent completed. From Despelie Crescent, Independent Square, George Street, the Western Main Road, you can drive now and you can see that the roads have been repaired. This is what we have been doing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in concluding, I say to the people of Port of Spain South, stay with the PNM Government, partner with us as we continue to build a nation together. Port of Spain South is a labyrinth of tapestry that more than any other constituency represents a microcosm of Trinidad and Tobago. From Beverly Hills in the east to the top on Picton, you overflow with people with vigour and enthusiasm like Sister Levi—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. K. Scotland: Beverly Hills we are repairing your roads, Desperlie Crescent, one by one. To the heart of the city of Port of Spain: St. Paul Street, Duncan Street, Nelson Street, George Street, East Dry River, Sea Lots, Pioneer Drive, Production Drive and Katanga. They do not like you to call them Katanga, they like you to call them Sea Lots by the Light House.
Hon. Members: [Laughter]

Hon. K. Scotland: There is the epitome of hard work and resilience and it is embodied in somebody—Thunderbolt Williams, a citizen there. Thunderbolt Williams.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. K. Scotland: We will provide you with opportunities for employment as we have done—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member you have two minutes.

Hon. K. Scotland:—in the last three to four months, we will continue to provide employment opportunity, that is the middle.

St. James, it represents, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the area that demonstrates the diversity of our culture St. James East, St. James West, from Hosay to Mandela Park. We recognized the contribution Mr. Rishi Lakhan, a recipient of our Chaconia Award from Port of Spain South, a former councillor.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. K. Scotland: Pelham Goddard on Agra Street, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and then Woodbrook. Woodbrook, we are attacking the noise. We have a memorandum of understanding coming with its rich historical site, like Siegert Square which on the 01 November, 2020, will celebrate 112 years in existence. Work out where Siegert Square is, you have to be in Port of Spain South to know that. And the talented people Mr. Deputy Speaker, Len Boogsie Sharpe, Ray Hallman, Carl “Beaver” Henderson—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Hon. K. Scotland: —that is what we produced in Port of Spain South and that is what we want to bring to this nation. So I say to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, here is what I say, these last three years have been challenging, “good friends we had,
goods friends we lost along the way, but in this great future” with a PNM Government, do not forget under no circumstances. So I say to all those mothers, we are tackling and we are conquering crime. It is a curse, and with the will of this Government we will conquer it. So no woman, no cry. What we say to you is that “in this great future we will not forget the past, and I end by saying, everything is going to be alright, Mr. Deputy Speaker, everything is going to be alright. In Trinidad and Tobago, with a PNM Government, everything is going to be alright. I thank Port of Spain South and I thank you.

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

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I recognize the Member for Chaguanas West.

**Mr. Dinesh Rambally (Chaguanas West):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to contribute in this debate at this critical time in our country. I want to begin by congratulating first of all, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Siparia for her thorough and clinical analysis in her contribution.

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

**Mr. D. Rambally:** The hon. Leader of the Opposition spoke truth to power when she said inter-alia, that there can be no prosperity without safety and security. I wish to also commend my colleagues who have contributed thus in this debate for their thoughtful and well-presented arguments, Mr. Deputy Speaker. On this side we all represent the people and we are the voice of the people.

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

**Mr. D. Rambally:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, listening to the Minister’s speech, comprising some 139 pages, something that the hon. Prime Minister might consider a voluminous document, like many of my colleagues, I found myself drifting away at times into never-never Land or that magical place, Mr. Deputy Speaker, described during his four hours-plus presentation.

**UNREVISED**
Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Prime Minister once said that Trinidad and Tobago being referenced in certain proceedings could not be a real place. We share the same view when we consider the instant budget. But before I return to Never-Never Land let me rebut a few statements made by previous speakers as well as the last speaker.

7.40 p.m.

I start with the last speaker, Member for Port of Spain South first, and I want to say that you really know when the PNM administration has accomplished absolutely nothing in the last year and has no real drive or purpose for the upcoming year when they can go back and start referencing success of John Donaldson Institute, and they can start talking about Sando Tech, institutions of decades ago. So if you are coming here today to talk about that, to say that that is the mission moving forward for the next year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, please. I heard an acronym for UNC. The acronym for the PNM is, please, no more.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: Please, no more. And if I want to be as graphic as the Member for Port of Spain South, Mr. Deputy Speaker, please, no more. Please, no more. Mr. Deputy Speaker, really, what I heard from Member for Port of Spain South—and he seemed to be going on, on this very vociferously and vigorously, trying to lecture our young brilliant Member for Tabaquite. Really and truly, is this the same Member who in the last budget, his substantive contribution was to come riding down the road in “ah” cocoa Benz—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally:—and telling people to roast breadfruit in a coal pot? Is that the same Member really lecturing the young brilliant Member for Tabaquite who has her fingers on the pulse in terms of her own constituents and what is taking place
in the education sector in this country?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to say that after taking away laptops, taking away school feeding, refusing to open certain schools, allowed certain schools to run dilapidated, you have issues with the school feeding programme in the last couple years, you come here to talk about, Port of Spain South, a $1,000 one-off grant? That is what you come here to boast about? We are not saying no to it, you know. I will not advise my constituents to refuse that. But that is what you come to boast about and want to lecture us on this side about that?

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and this is really for Member for Port of Spain South—this is the problem with the PNM education that he received, and the problem with that PNM education, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that this is the problem with Member for Port of Spain South and his colleagues. They love to take credit, but they never take responsibility.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: Every day, every week—and it is not a matter of us saying that you are the fault on the other side, Members are the fault on the other side, but Members have a duty to perform. They have a duty to ensure that Ministries are running effectively. They have a duty to ensure that what the Ministries have been established for, that they are functioning properly and the services are trickling down to those who need it the most.

You have schools being disrupted. One particular college in my constituency, they have had over nine bomb scares. I was told yesterday to mention that in the Parliament, that they have had over nine bomb scares in the last week alone disrupting the school, something that I will have to raise with the hon. Minister of Education.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: [Inaudible]
Mr. Rambally (cont’d)

Mr. D. Rambally: Yes. And I was told in our—no disrespect to the Chair, of course, and to other colleagues, but I am sure the Minister of Education is aware of it. I am making the point that these disruptions are really matters. When you look at the discipline in schools, all of these are matters that we have to see that whatever initiatives are being promulgated in this fiscal package that it can actually deal with those types of situations. Otherwise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the school system itself, we are going to see the society falling apart. We have already been dealing with, and I will be treating with it, the issue of crime involving youth. That is something that I will be going to.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just prior to the Member for Port of Spain South, we had the Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara—and if I may just reference something that I heard San Fernando West say this morning, “don’t mind the irrelevance of Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara, that is part of the democracy.”

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: That is simply part of the democracy. But what I would add to that is that the incompetence of a lot of the Members on the other side, that is where we on this side must stand for democracy.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: Now I want to go very quickly to the hon. Minister of National Security, and as I seek to do so one of the previous speakers, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the Government, said that we have to look to the future. But I have seen successive Members on that side focus their entire contribution or almost their entire contribution on the period 2010 to 2015. This seems to be the common theme running through speakers’ contributions on that side, blame the UNC with reference to those years. They do not seem to think that the last eight years of indecision and incompetence at the helm of our nation’s Ministries has anything to

UNREVISED
do with successive budget deficits we have been enduring.

And when I go quickly to the Minister of National Security, my colleague, Member for Naparima, and also today, Member for Couva South, spoke to certain aspects of the failings of the budget insofar as national security is concerned and also they responded to certain aspects of the Minister of National Security, Member for Laventille West. I will not be threading on what they have said before. I will be referencing other aspects which they have not mentioned. So I want to say that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we heard what was offered as an apology by the Minister of National Security in this House yesterday. Maybe I am wrong, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Maybe the Minister’s apology is part of a master plan. Maybe he thinks that by apologizing on behalf of the criminals, the criminals will give up crime because they will not want to be associated with the Minister. Maybe that is real plan behind the apology.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know he referenced border security, and one of the things that he said is how the Ministry had now completed a policy for consideration of Cabinet. Now in 2021 budget the Government promised, Mr. Deputy Speaker, upgrade of coastal radar system; in 2022, they promised upgrade to coastal radar system with improved surveillance equipment; in 2023, the Government promised electrical upgrade to coast guard facilities, upgrade sure power system in Tobago. Now here we are again with most of these promises, if not all, remaining unfulfilled. The Minister of National Security mentioned scanners. He promised to deliver scanners to ports, something we have been hearing for some time. We will recall a former police commissioner curiously and suddenly having to leave office after telling the nation that scanners were not operating at the ports. They were not being used at the ports.

Human trafficking initiatives. The Minister spoke about partnering with the
Judiciary and that now someone is actually being prosecuted. Is this the same Minister of National Security who, at a commemorative outreach event held by the Ministry of National Security, he made some empty pronouncements on what different countries understand of the definition of prosecute under the human trafficking legislation? The Minister stated that this was the reason why we, Trinidad and Tobago, continue to be under Tier 2 category of successive US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Reports. Has that definition now be resolved by the Minister, unilaterally resolved? Because that is what he told us before.

[Madam Speaker in the Chair]

Madam Speaker, you see that the Minister gave no assurance that we would soon be taking off the Tier 2 list. But referencing certain things very quickly in his contribution, we are left to wonder whether we are moving forward in terms of national security. The fact remains, Madam Speaker, we have received a failing grade from the Americans for our obvious lack of progress in bringing appropriate legislation, and the existing legislation has ground to a halt. Let us be real, Madam Speaker, no amount of backtalk will whitewash this Government’s failure to make a dent in human trafficking.

Madam Speaker, we also heard about CCTV cameras. The Minister still has not owned up to the country as to just how many functioning CCTV cameras there are. We have the issue of repatriation. Minister of National Security spoke about returning nationals who are presently in conflict zones. The Government sounds—very respectfully I say this—but the Government sounds like a stuck recording when it comes to this issue. The fact is that in 2018 the Government established a repatriation and reintegration committee call the Nightingale Committee to develop policy, legislative framework, operational plans for repatriation, and reintegration
of people returning to Trinidad and Tobago coming from conflict zones.

An official of the Ministry of National Security stated on affidavit in 2020, in court proceedings, that a policy and draft legislation were at an advanced stage. We also had major reporting in January of 2023 that the Government was drafting a returning Bill. I myself asked questions of the hon. Prime Minister earlier this year during a Prime Minister’s question session. We have, on this side, encouraged all families who are seeking return of their relatives from conflict zones to provide their information and cooperate with this three-member repatriation committee. But this, Madam Speaker, has proven to be an exercise in futility and the Government still delays, and/or refuses, and/or simply fails in its duties to get on top of this situation. In the meantime, Madam Speaker, we have some 70-plus children languishing in the conflict zones, running greater risks of becoming hardened by extremist behaviour. Now we have yesterday, the Minister comes to offer an apology. He seems to have partially shed his previous arrogant tone, but it is too little too late.

I want to say, on behalf of Chaguanas West, a constituency which I am not saying it is special and it is in any way being overridden over and above any other constituency, but I can say on their behalf that they have been victim to an optic in home invasions. You have had murders, you have had other crimes being committed, and I am saying that, on behalf of those constituents, I say that the Minister of National Security’s apology is an insincere one, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. D. Rambally:** I detected no remorse, no regrets. What we heard from the hon Minister is actually likely to lead to further resentment and anger, and worse, distrust by my constituents and I fear other citizens in the society. And I now want to endorse what Member for Couva South said, that the best apology would be his
Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: And I want to put it on the record you know. I want to put this on the record, Madam Speaker. I want to make it abundantly clear that we on this side, we are willing to work together with the Members of the Government to combat crime. We have to regroup. We have to refocus, rethink and re-strategize to deal with the runaway crimes scourge. But, Madam Speaker, however, in laying the critical foundation, the critical groundwork for moving forward, we cannot afford to put square pegs in wrong holes.

We cannot have incompetent personnel being a part of now forming this new plan moving forward. And that is why we hold strong to saying that no apology will suffice. Minister of National Security must offer his resignation. I want to say that on that note we on this side commend the police service and all personnel belonging to police service. I want to say that I have seen myself where members of the police service, they know that they are going out there in the line of duty, in the line of fire—and it is not rubber bullets coming in their direction—and they are holding their ground, they are standing their ground against the criminal elements and I want to commend them.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: I want to say that what I have seen for myself, Madam Speaker, is that you have members of the police service that they themselves are networking in a way where you have one policeman or one policewoman with her family actually being the godparents for another police family, and it is like this that they operate.

7.55 p.m.

They check in on each other, they text, they have their own network where
they communicate to ensure that when off duty or coming off duty, they are actually checking in on the other person to make sure that they are safe, and that is something that we have to foster in the communities. I want to commend the police service again, members of the police service, members of the armed forces because when I saw this, it really, it is something that encouraged me, it inspired me to see that level of comradery, that level of unity in the police service. I am not saying that they are 100 per cent perfect but for what I saw, Madam Speaker, I must say full commendations to members of the police force who are battling the criminal elements. So we say that from this side.

I want to say that in terms of the prison service, we heard absolutely nothing from the Minister of National Security when it comes to prison service. We have—and there are reports, numerous newspaper reports coming during the month of July into August where we had reports of daily drone drop-offs of contraband, of pieces that could be utilized to fabricate weapons. We had a situation where it was said that approximately seven drones flying into the Maximum Security Prison day and night. A Tobago businessman Gerry MacFarlane has described the prisons as “a ‘mecca’ of criminal activity”. We have been hearing about the jammers again, not functioning. Issues of drone-tracking technology and cell jammers is something that we thought we would have heard from the Minister of National Security.

You will recall, Madam Speaker, that there was also a report of one Frank “Fishie” Bartholomew being attacked in his jail cell at Maximum Security. We did not hear about countermeasures to ensure that these things do not happen. He was someone in Maximum Security where he was stabbed several times. So these are things that we would have liked to hear from the Minister of National Security as to whether steps have already been taken and if not, well, what steps are being
proposed and therefore where that funding, how does the budget assist in this regard.

We also have if we move away from that, we also have the Prison Officers’ Association President Gerard Gordon. He said prison officers are being neglected. He compared the relationship between prison officers and the State to that of a battered wife, noting that they had nowhere to go for protection and were forced to endure abuse. One newspaper article of 21 September, 2023 reported and I quote:

Officers are baking. Prison Officers’ Association complained about the electrical supply issues in the Maximum Security Prison building. They had no AC.

So, Madam Speaker, these are matters which we thought that we would have heard and it is against this backdrop that I maintain that we do not accept the apology offered by the Minister of National Security. We view it as an insincere one. Too little too late.

You see budget 2024, Madam Speaker, should have had comprehensive plans that address the root causes of violent crime. It should provide adequate resources to our law enforcement agencies, that is something we need to be convinced of, especially when you are battling what is taking place out there. It should engage in community-based initiatives to build trust and cooperation between the police and the public. So instead, what we have, budget 2024 is a virtual waste plan devoid of ideas, devoid of plans, devoid of any hope that this Government intends to restore safety and stability to our nation.

I want to put it on the record that the people of Chaguanas West and the entire nation are looking for leadership, action and hope. They are looking on the Government to provide these factors or these qualities. Any government, Madam Speaker, that can wilfully ignore or negligently ignore the cries of the vulnerable,
has forfeited any right to be called a responsible government.

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

**Mr. D. Rambally:** The fact that budget 2024 fails to make the safety and security of our citizens the cornerstone of its agenda, is itself a moral failing so big, it should be considered itself as a national crime.

So, Madam Speaker, I make those references to deal with the former speakers who I felt I should respond to and I would like to, as I indicated earlier, quickly return to “never-never land” as described by the Minister of Finance. And according to him, this is a place where the economy’s growth rate is now 2.7 per cent; per capita GDP has gone up; where unemployment is 3.7 per cent and the labour force participation has increased; where inflation is declining; where the non-energy sector’s contribution to the economy has increased; where astonishingly, crime rates or at least reports of crime have declined from last year with the exception of murder; and where we are moving towards a cashless society and the widespread use of electronic payments and new technologies.

This never-never land, Madam Speaker, which was described again by the Minister of Finance, is where the Government had implemented the IMF data access framework and the new statistical institute was coming. Unfortunately, we say that place could not be Trinidad and Tobago. None of what the hon. Minister said is evident to even a prima facie inspection. Neither is it evident upon deeper inspection, assuming you could inspect more deeply using government provided data. But as the Minister himself admits, such a society is just a figment of his fevered mind because as he talks about a connected cashless society, in the next breath, he tells us that 72 per cent of businesses do not have a bank account, 88 per cent of businesses do not accept digital payments and half of the population do not have the ability to use the technology these platforms use.
Madam Speaker, is this an example of what George Orwell called “doublethink” in his book called 1984? That is the ability to hold two contradictory positions in your mind simultaneously. You see, in 1984, Orwell writes that people are conditioned to believe that, “war is peace, freedom is slavery, ignorance is strength”. This budget wants us to think that burdensome debt is prosperity, that payment of outstanding wages is a gift and not an obligation on the Government and that handing out food boxes is food security.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: If Members of the Government have never read Orwell’s 1984, I recommend that they to do so, Madam Speaker, but first I would recommend that they read another paper which was released in 1983, entitled “The Imperatives of Adjustment” by which the then PNM Cabinet-appointed task force formulated a multi-sectoral development plan for Trinidad and Tobago. The heart of that plan included elements of economic diversification which the PNM is still talking about today, some 40 years later. The PNM administration by ignoring “The Imperatives of Adjustment” kicked the can further down the road, leaving it up to other political entities to fix the problem. No doubt, Madam Speaker, it will be left up to the UNC to substantively implement diversification measures and strategies.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: But let me follow the Minister and continue on the theme of magical places. Allow me to take this House to a land far away in a time long ago. Let us visit a place, the Greek philosopher Plato called The Republic. Of course, this is a book and a long one which I wonder if my colleagues on other side have read, but to return to the present, Madam Speaker, Plato proposed a continuum of four types of government in the life of a state. One, aristocracy; two, oligarchy;
three democracy; and four, tyranny, in that order, Madam Speaker. His statement on oligarchy, a form of government designed to allow a few rich people to become yet richer, is of interest to us here. I believe this might be of particular interest to the hon. Prime Minister. He is on record as saying that the rich becoming richer is a pursuit of his government and as the many recusals of Members of his Cabinet and the many contracts awarded attest, his government is also eager to bring the politically ambitious into the ranks of the rich. But what about the rest of us, Madam Speaker? And this is what Plato says in Book VIII of *The Republic*:

“…States…grow out of human characters.”

And:

“…as the dispositions of…”—human—“minds…” the States will be.

Oligarchy comprises:

“A government resting on a valuation of property, in which the rich have power and the poor man is deprived of it.”

It is a state where:

“The accumulation of gold in the treasury of private individuals…” is paramount.

I know the Member for St Joseph appreciates this type of contribution. It may not—and he is reading *Daily Creative*. There are other parts of *The Republic* which go on to, you know, people’s foot being cut off and things like that but for now, I will leave that part. I am dealing with the aristocracy, the oligarchy and the continuum.

Madam Speaker, those individuals in control of the State, according to Plato:

“…invent illegal modes of expenditure…”

And I say note the phrase “illegal modes of expenditure”, Madam Speaker. Plato said it first. In such an oligarchic state as the rich:

**UNREVISED**
“...grow richer and richer...the more they think of making a fortune the less they think of virtue; for when riches and virtue are placed together in the scales of the balance, the one always rises as the other falls.”

In other words, Madam Speaker, you can have a society where the rich get richer or you can have a moral society but you cannot have both and such a state of the rich getting richer then becomes not one, but two states. The one of the poor, the other of the rich men—

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

**Mr. D. Rambally:**—and they are living on the same spot and always conspiring against one another. Madam Speaker, oligarchies have both extremes of great wealth and utter poverty, but there is more to it than mere poverty and wealth. Plato continues:

“...whenever you see paupers in a State, somewhere in that neighborhood there are hidden away thieves, and cut-purses and robbers of temples, and all sorts of malefactors.”

Madam Speaker, let me repeat. This was about 2,500 years ago, yet, he has described our present predicament perfectly. I put it to this House, Madam Speaker, this is the Trinidad and Tobago PNM economic policies have created, a state, well, let me quote Plato one final time:

In such a state, “...nearly everybody who is not a ruler is a pauper.”

Such are the dangers of oligarchy, Madam Speaker, but we in Trinidad and Tobago know that, we live it every day and the question is: Can such a state be fixed? Of course it can but not by the make-the-rich-richer policies which this budget continues to promote. My colleagues have dealt with the policies and will do so after me.

Today, I want to make a contribution to this debate here, one concerned with
the human factor of the economy. Last year, in responding to a budget which sounded much like this one, except a tad bit shorter, I spoke at length about the components of effective reform. I spoke of the creation of social capital, of the use of state resources to build trust and amity among our citizens, of lessening economic inequality and the strategy of using small potent interventions to create big change. Of course, this bounced off the PNM Government money machine which has just kept rolling on. So this year, Madam Speaker, rather that reiterating theoretical and macroeconomic interventions, my friends across the aisle will probably not want to hear or hardly understand, much less implement, let us go the other way.

From the Government’s budget statement with delusionary plans for tourism and cultural industries, agriculture, the electronic transformation of society and improving the ease of doing business, I want to focus on a single issue at this time which affects all other issues.

And this issue is the economic effects and social cost of crime.

8:10 p.m.

You see, the Minister repeated the same platitudes we hear every year about National Security. In particular, we hear, over and over, how much money the Government is spending on fighting crime. What we do not hear from the Member for Diego Martin North/East, and the Minister of National Security, is voluminous number 600, the 600-plus persons who were murdered in what was the bloodiest year in our nation’s history. Madam Speaker, what we do not hear is what crime is costing us in economic terms, in dollar amounts, and the dollar value in itself is useless unless it is connected to a human value. And this is my intention here this evening, to bring more of the human cost of crime alongside the economic.

Currently, Madam Speaker, there are 455 murders, I believe, reported for the
first nine months of 2023. This is an increase from about 436 murders for the same period last year. This means 2023 is on track to be an even bloodier year than our worst year on record. And, Madam Speaker, why is that important to this debate? It goes without saying that crime is the single largest impediment to the economic and social progress of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. The hon. Leader of the Opposition said it first when she said that there can be no prosperity without safety and security, whether it be home invasions, brazen daylight robberies, attacks on women and children, or gang killings, violent crime has metastasized under this Government to become a malignant tumour, threatening every part of our society.

And returning to the human cost of crime, Madam Speaker, calculating the economic impacts of crime has been of special importance to economists all over the world—maybe not in Trinidad—but all over the world, especially within the last 20 years. And of interest to us here, the Inter-American Development Bank, the IDB, produced a report in 2017 titled:

“The Costs of Crime and Violence…in Latin America and the Caribbean.”

The British Home Office, one year later, in 2018 produced a report titled:

“The economic and social cost of crime…”—for the UK.

And several organizations, like the Institute for Economics and Peace, and the US Government have produced similar reports. The RAND Corporation has a Cost of Crime Calculator. While the circumstances in different jurisdictions may vary, these reports have several things in common, as I will get to, in a moment.

But before I get into the generalities first of all, Madam Speaker, what is the actual cost of crime in Trinidad? The British Home Office report tells us the costs of crime:

“…include costs incurred in anticipation of crime, as a consequence of crime and in response to crime…”

UNREVISED
This means money spent by government and businesses, the loss of earnings by victims or the incarcerated, and the medical, psychological consequences on the victims, and how they manifest socially.

These costs in Trinidad and Tobago, according to the IDB, Madam Speaker—the IDB report—come to 3.52 per cent of the GDP, with a GDP of approximately US $29 billion, or TT $200 billion, this means crime costs us about $7 billion per year. Madam Speaker, last year’s allocation to National Security was approximately $5.78 billion, this means that for every dollar we spend in security, it still costs us more in crime losses. And I ask the question, how do you like that, in terms of the Minister’s economics? Clearly, our money is being spent in a fashion that feeds rather than solves the problem.

You see, Madam Speaker, per capita, crime costs each citizen of Trinidad and Tobago approximately US $1,189, which is about TT $8,000. The cost of homicides is 0.25 per cent of GDP. These are, of course, 2014 figures, going back to the IDB report. I do not imagine they have declined in the interim, given the dramatic increase in crime under this administration since 2015. But, Madam Speaker, these figures do not show the full extent of the cost to society.

8.15 p.m.

They hide another massive price that we pay every day without even recognizing it, the trauma of victims and the behavioural changes in their everyday lives in business, family and social context. Let me repeat a casual almost throwaway line the Minister included in his presentation in addressing social development. The Minister said: We seek to ensure the population can reach the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health, quality of life, and productivity at every age.

The good Minister, and everyone in his Government, Madam Speaker, has

UNREVISED
no idea what this means, or perhaps not. I recall this Government saying in desperation that crime was a public health issue, some time ago. All of a sudden, you heard towards the tail end of the pandemic, and then more recently, which led to a symposium. So, it is, but what they did not say was that the PNM Government is the source of the public health malaise.

The late Professor Selwyn Ryan’s report, No Time to Quit, published on the Parliament’s website revealed as much. Professor Ryan revealed what all knew at the time was happening. Government policy was directly fueling increasing crime. And he made mention of the URP programme, which I would not get into, Madam Speaker. But what it said was that you had where crime was being fueled. The source of our criminal malaise, Madam Speaker is where we have the administration of the day funding activities, which go to some of these increased criminal activities.

And we are seeing it again. I have just outlined, Madam Speaker, the financial costs, but not the complete cost. Certainly, crime has helped consequences, but the physical injuries are probably the easiest to treat. You see, Madam Speaker, it the mental harm done by crime that are by far the most serious, which result in a slow degeneration of our collective lives and the economy.

Madam Speaker, mental health—and I do believe either yesterday or today is Mental Health Day—is one of those categories of everyday life, which has become prominent in the last few years. It has become almost fashionable to talk about wellness. I heard the Minister of Health talking about wellness yesterday, albeit in a different context, and we support those kinds of initiatives. And we have a number of small cottage industries, which have arisen to provide these services, from yoga to massage, and even motivational speakers. But this interpretation, Madam Speaker, makes light of the very real mental health
problems faced by an increasing number of our population, the victims and survivors of crime.

These social costs of crime, Madam Speaker, are not broached in the IDB Report, but have been outlined in other studies on the issue. And according, again, to the British Home Office report in 2018, Madam Speaker, violent crimes make up the largest proportion of the total cost of individual crime, almost three-quarters, but only one-third of the number of crimes. This is mainly due to the higher physical and emotional cost to the victims of the violent offences. These costs are particularly high for crimes that are more likely to result in emotional injury such as rape and violence with injury. The offence with the highest estimated unit cost is homicide. Rape has the highest estimated unit cost of non-fatal offences.

So, Madam Speaker, according to the UK estimate, each murder has an economic cost in excess of £3.2 million, of which the emotional component is £2.08 million. Each rape has a cost of £40,000. And this is the point I want to make, Madam Speaker, an interesting difference between the UK and Trinidad and Tobago is that since 2004, the number of violent crimes in the UK lowered. Whereas ours rose here at home. It started to rise, Madam Speaker. So, this is where we reach an important point of our economic malaise.

The very nature of this society, which initiatives, or lack thereof in these budgets, successive budgets of this PNM administration has created is one where noise, violence, and I daresay in local parlance, “stink and dutty” have replaced the watchwords of Discipline, Tolerance, and Production. Madam Speaker, it creates a situation where crimes are longer crimes of prosperity, or what some people call the Robin Hood-type equalization. What we see are crimes of revenge and rage, and these actions have heavy consequences and economic costs.
Appropriation (Financial Year 2024), Bill, 2023

Mr. Rambally (cont’d)

Madam Speaker, I make final reference to the British Home Office Report, which gives a general outline what these costs entail, which is physical and emotional harm to the victim, lost output, health services. These include, you have the reduction in the quality of life of the victims from the physical and emotional harm suffered as a result of the crime. You have lost output estimates, the lost productivity from time off work, and reduced productivity whilst at work, for victims of crime. The health costs include ambulance costs, medical procedure costs, counselling costs associated with emotional harms. And this, Madam Speaker, is now becoming the norm in our society. So, we have the human factor, Madam Speaker, and we have what is the social cost of crime.

Madam Speaker, I want to turn to the Criminal Injuries Benefit Scheme. Madam Speaker, the amount of moneys, which persons affected by crime, are able to access under our laws, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Act, suffered at the hands of criminals is a maximum of $25,000, regardless of the egregious nature of and the heinousness of the type of crime. So this only needs to be stated to make the case that these moneys can hardly compensate victims of crime. Perhaps, Madam Speaker, the time has come for a reconsideration of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Act to review the awards upwards, which the compensation board can actually determine in favour of victims of crime. Madam Speaker, I do believe that under the Act, you can have where the Cabinet can actually increase that 25,000 in certain instances they deem fit to 50,000. But under the Act itself, the normal position is that you would have $25,000 being the maximum award.

I unwillingly point, Madam Speaker, Members of this House to confront the growing number of home invasions, which involve the assault of the female members of the family; the crimes against children, the particularly horrific ones, and the ones of statutory rape, which have become normalized in the horror story a
lot of people live in. From the studies, Madam Speaker, I have cited, these crimes have an enormous financial cost, but an uncalculated cost, an emotional state, which slowly strangles any type of progress, be it social or economic, the victims are trapped in their own private hells, endlessly reliving the brutality. The rest of us become inured, Madam Speaker, and lose even the capacity for outrage, something that my colleague, Member for Oropouche East had mentioned. Where is the outrage?

Madam Speaker, children who have seen their parents brutalized and who have lost their parents now have trauma from which they will never recover, which they will carry all their lives, and which, like a contagious disease, whose symptoms they will spread. Need I remind everyone, Madam Speaker, that most victims in Trinidad and Tobago have little or no access to any form of intervention or care? So these poor broken victims, these women, mainly who are our wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, have to face the rest of their lives carrying this trauma, their families have their own trauma of helplessness and rage, watching their loved ones suffer and being unable to help.

Permit me, Madam Speaker, to make a rough estimate of how many people we are dealing with here. These are my own estimates, of course for each. But I heard the Minister of Health did give an analogy as well, in the health sector, in another the context. You have, Madam Speaker, a shock radius of five to 10 people, and comprising children, spouses, siblings, and parents. You also have a secondary radius of friends, relatives and business associates, which could number about 20 people or more. So, for the 500 average, I use that as average murders per year, you have 10,000 people affected, Madam Speaker. This has been going on for 20 years, since 2003. This is 200,000 people. Madam Speaker, if we do the same for rape, violent assault, and other crimes of violence, imagine the number of
people, hundreds of thousands walking among us every day, with these open wounds. These poor souls, Madam Speaker, are in constant pain. They are less productive, less trusting of others. They are more prone to violence themselves, in myriad ways, directed towards those subordinate to them, or even in contact with them. Naturally, Madam Speaker, this malaise, when it spreads through the society, leads to a decline in productivity, a decline in the service industry, a weakening of the intangible bonds which hold our society and the economy together.

The poet, Madam Speaker, WB Yeats describes it perfectly:

“Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,”

In such a state, Madam Speaker, the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member, your ordinary time is now expired. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to complete your contribution.

**Mr. D. Rambally:** Yes please. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. D. Rambally:** Madam Speaker, the point I am making is this is the life that we have, and most people live every day. Madam Speaker, if I achieve nothing else today, I hope that I can force the Minister of National Security, I can force the Minister of Finance and his Government to stare directly into the face of the misery they have wrought and feel a little bit ashamed.

But the question that confronts us then, Madam Speaker, is simple: What to do? Madam Speaker, this is a question which has bedeviled the best and brightest of humanity for millennia. Plato himself, which I quoted very early in my contribution, change his mind more than once. First, he contemplated a class of
persons to be trained as guardians. But then in his old age, Madam Speaker, as he became more jaded about human beings, he turned to religion. But that is not the answer, Madam Speaker. We have plenty religion in Trinidad and Tobago, and it is has done us no good so far. The situation has become so dire, that even our esteemed Police Commissioner has been compelled to ask citizens to pray. Ironically, there has been a recent spate of incidents where temples, churches, and other places of worship have been vandalized and desecrated. So budget 2024, Madam Speaker, might be asking us to live on a prayer, but even the act of congregating to pray in Trinidad and Tobago is dangerous.

Madam Speaker, recently in Chaguanas West constituency, we have had a series of robberies even in the schools. We have had Munroe Road Hindu School, Munroe Road ECCE Centre—Munroe Road Government ECCE Centre. In all schools, when they were broken in, you had valuable items being taken away. And outside Munroe Road Hindu School, you actually had a person who was gunned down. So, Madam Speaker, the point I am making is that if we do not deal with this situation now, Madam Speaker, it will be too late. He will not be able to turn back the clock, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker we have in this country where you had a lot of talk coming from Members of Government. First, we heard that it is an all of society approach. We are agree. We heard that if you see something, say something. We agree. The population agrees. When we had the record-breaking number or murders last year, what did we have? We had the hon. Prime Minister saying we will have to have some discussion. That was in December; talks are to be held. And then now we have an invitation to meet and treat, as the case may be. Madam Speaker, we need to get serious about this situation of crime. Everything that we have heard in this budget debate so far, and we are yet to hear, will be of no purpose, of no use. It
will be of no developmental value to this country if we do not arrest the crime situation, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, hence the reason why I went the other route, rather than the normal route, in my contribution today. We must ask ourselves: Where is the Government’s commitment in this budget to safeguarding our citizens and protecting our cultural and religious institutions?

8.30 p.m.

Our people deserve to live in an environment where they can go about their daily lives without fear of violence or intimidation, and our religious spaces must be respected and guarded. Madam Speaker, I ask this question, how can a national budget, which should serve as the national blueprint, completely ignore the reality of what everyone in our nation is facing today? Madam Speaker, as I conclude, the simple answer is that we do what we can, and to paraphrase Samuel Beckett, you must go on, I cannot go on, I will go on.

Madam Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago, to merely get up and go out into the world every day is achieving the impossible for many people. I am pointing out that these cynical statements made by the Minister of Finance in what has been presented as a fiscal package for 2024, made by the Minister of Finance, are merely lubricants greasing the slide to perdition. I wait with hope, Madam Speaker, for the next election when the population will have their one chance in five years to change their own destinies.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, may I ask how many minutes again?

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Your time ends at 8.34.
Mr. D. Rambally: Yes. Madam Speaker, I want to just ask a couple questions in crunching the numbers. I will want to say that, Madam Speaker, when I have looked at all these glossy booklets that we have received, what I saw—and I will ask just very few questions. Madam Speaker, I saw adjusted general government debt will increase by 6.4 per cent by the end of fiscal 2023. That is $137,209.6 million from $128,986.7 million.

The population, Madam Speaker—and this is specific reference to the Review of the Economy booklet, page 18—I am saying, Madam Speaker, what it suggests, the population is therefore saddled with increasing debt and what would happen at the end of fiscal 2024 with more borrowings? Is it getting any better in the 2024 revenue projection estimated at $54.012 billion, the following amount are included. And this is what is critical as I end, Madam Speaker, $2 billion repayment loan by UDeCOTT, I refer to page 36, $1.75 million, sale of government assets, page 31. This the revenue projection booklet. Profit from public financial institution increased from $594 million to $1.394 million.

And I say, Madam Speaker, that the Minister needs to explain what government asset is to be sold apart from CLICO. Where is the $2 billion coming from UDeCOTT? that is page 36 of the Draft Estimates of Revenue document. If these revenues, expectations, Madam Speaker, are tinkered with or manipulated, the population will suffer even more, just using those items or figures.

Madam Speaker, I end by of course saying to all of my colleagues that the population is becoming desensitized but that desensitized state that they are in will soon reveal itself into a bald anger, and it is all going to turn on each and every one of us. And that is where the society will break down, Madam Speaker, I cannot say it better than that, Madam Speaker, thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]
Madam Speaker: Member for Point Fortin.

Mr. Kennedy Richards (Point Fortin): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I was of the belief that I was the only pilot in the House, but today the Member for Chaguanas West took us to Neverland and to Ancient Greece, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, while we were in Ancient Greece we heard a lot about Plato, a lot about his teaching on oligarchy and all that the Member would have said, but I want to correct him on one point that he would have made where he erroneously quoted our hon. Prime Minister, and he said that the hon. Prime Minister—that the People’s National Movement is interested only in getting the rich richer. The PM’s actual statement was that:

While there is nothing wrong with the rich getting richer, the poor must come out of poverty, and one does not have to go down—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards:—for the other to come up.

And Madam Speaker, he also went on to say:

That there is a target of ensuring that no one is left behind and that everyone has an opportunity to move up.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards: So when we are getting it, we must get it right, Madam Speaker. Also, the hon. Member went on to heap and throw water on the boxes, on the food boxes that will be provided to the constituents of this entire country, Madam Speaker. And I would remind the UNC that despite their claims as a rural and agricultural party, it was the PNM who introduced agricultural programmes for the youth, ensuring future sustainability of this sector. The UNC has failed the
farmers who supported them in the past, while the PNM has continued to make a positive contribution to the farmers, especially their income by the introduction of these vegetable boxes.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. Prime Minister for the opportunity to speak on this fiscal appropriation Bill 2023/2024. And firstly, it must be said that the Minister of Finance was in extraordinary form, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** For four hours-plus he gave us great substance and we say that class is permanent and he is indeed a man of class.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** As he delivered this budget, Madam Speaker, to the theme - Building Capacity for Diversity and Growth, and as I dive into the contribution, I would indicate a few of the many areas that show growth and diversity.

Madam Speaker, before I delve into the contribution, I must reiterate that out of the $59.2 billion budget, the focus of this Government based on the allocations is: Education and Training, $8.022 billion, Health, $7.409 billion, National Security at $6.912 billion. And this can only mean that the Government is invested and investing in the safety, security of all its citizens, education and training for the youth, as well as those who are seeking training opportunities, and, Madam Speaker, the health and well-being of all its citizens.

That Madam Speaker, does not mean that the Government is not invested in agriculture, local government, housing, public utilities. What that says is that as a nation we are building capacity for development and for diversification, which is the mantra of this Government. Madam Speaker, we have been treated to a
plethora of PNM Ministers and MPs who have given this country a good account of themselves and their stewardship over the last year in government.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** And we also heard of the implementation policy and upcoming projects. Madam Speaker, I sat and I listened to both the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the Minister of National Security, and was very encouraged as I believe that we would bear fruit with the policies that have been outlined by both Ministers, from the Gun Retrieval Programme, to increasing the police recruitment exercise from 300 a year to 1,000 per year. Madam Speaker, the Government is doing what it has to do to rid this nation of crime and criminality. However, the support of every man, woman, and child is necessary on this journey if we are to make a significant dent in crime and criminality.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Only recently, Madam Speaker, in Point Fortin, we saw the injury of one man and the death of two others. One who is said to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And, Madam Speaker, I dare say after the Minister of National Security that they would have been alive if someone had said to the police that there was a presence of an illegal weapon.

Madam Speaker, we acknowledge that we have a long way to go, but the Minister cannot do it alone. Crime is everybody’s business. And the Member for Chaguanas West also said that they are willing to work with the Government, and I say let us put that talk into action and let us get to work for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Madam Speaker, the record of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries speaks for itself. He has been getting results for this country
time and time again.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards: Imagine after a senior union official said to the people, “Take your platform and go”, causing hundreds of jobs to be lost in the southwestern peninsula, our Minister of Energy and Energy Industries had to go to negotiate with the same people in various boardrooms of multinational companies. And, Madam Speaker, he was still getting the job done. I am saying this afternoon that he has done this country proud.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, the property tax. No one wants to hear about taxes or wants any increase in taxes, but as a former practitioner of local government, and for the implementation of local government reform we need the property taxes. And these taxes, as outlined in the budget, for an annual rental value of $24,000 the taxes generated on that property would be just $54 per month. So we have other Members opposite fear-mongering and riling up our country as to no property tax, no property tax, when this is actually going to benefit each and every citizen in this country.

Madam Speaker, for Point Fortin we will have a lot of properties above and below that benchmark figure, and when that money is given to the 14 municipal bodies it will then be used to enhance goods and services offered by that corporation.

And Madam Speaker, even as the Member of Parliament, I get complaints about many local government issues and we can all acknowledge that the system does not work. Some of the many complaints include roads, drainage, whether it be built or drainage to be cleaned, recreation grounds, play parks or the lack of it. And the message the clear, Madam Speaker, that whether you live within the
Borough of Point Fortin, Warden Road, Cap-de-Ville, Egypt on the right-hand side, which is now the Borough of Siparia, goods, service, and reliability would be afforded to all as the required resources would be available once we collect those property taxes.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** No longer, Madam Speaker, would you be given a run around after you submit a building plan because it is too much work for one building inspector. The resources will be there to hire the required staff. Madam Speaker, the Member for Naparima raised a point about the average response time for fire tenders, and in response to that, when the local government reform is fully implemented and the trend of progressive development continues, not only will the time of response get better, but we would be able to expand and have fire substations in more rural areas to assist those main stations.

And as a constituency Point Fortin is poised during this fiscal year to receive a state-of-the-art fire station, and as Member of Parliament, I am already in discussions to have a substation placed in Bonasse, Cedros, some 33 kilometres away from the main station.

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

**8.45 p.m.**

So you see, Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Naparima does not understand that vision precedes strategy and hence, he could not see what was clearly defined in the budgetary allocations.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Via the Ministry of Health, the new Point Fortin Hospital continues to provide necessary service to the people of the southwestern peninsula. Some even as far as Port of Spain to Point come seeking health care. Additionally,
we are also seeing the improvements of infrastructure where the Insect Vector Control unit is housed which would mean physically we are in good stead and we are seeing that the South-West Regional Health Authority rolling out many programmes in terms of health and wellness for the entire family, which would help us live a stress-free and healthy lifestyle.

Agriculture, Madam Speaker, has been given an allocation of $1.442 billion and for the constituency of Point Fortin we have a few agro communities, namely in Erin, Buenos Ayres, Chatham, Cedros—with this, Madam Speaker, we can look forward to the upgrade for agricultural access roads, upgrades of some of our fishing depots so that the constituents of Point Fortin can look out for a considerable improvement in our agricultural infrastructure.

Public Utilities, Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of Public Utilities, had a tour with my office staff and I, sometime in 2022. And coming out of this tour, we were able to map out the water challenges and come up with strategies to treat with these challenges. Since that visit, Madam Speaker, we can say that over six kilometres of pipeline is being laid in the Cap-de-Ville area, which would benefit over 8,000 people within the network. And, Madam Speaker, added to that, we had improvement in La Fortune Water Treatment Plant, which was recommissioned, new wells will come on stream very shortly and alleviate some of the water issues that we have been having.

If you look at the daily news, Madam Speaker, a couple of days ago, you would see some protest in the Cedros area, Granville to be exact, the junction. And that protest is being led by the councillor and a few of his cohorts because he has a protesting team. And he gathers the protesting team every time he feels as though there is some political benefit to it. So imagine they are burning tyres and rubble in the road, but there is no water to out the same fire that they are burning.
Madam Speaker, what is even worse, is that coming out of the visit with the Minister of Public Utilities, we actually set up a WhatsApp group and the councillor is on the WhatsApp group and he gets daily updates from the officials at WASA as to what is taking place with regard to the water situation. Yes, there are challenges in that area, but the challenges are being managed and with the management of that, Madam Speaker, we have water trucks that are trying to meet the demand of those areas that are not receiving the adequate supply of water and his problem and the problem of those residents, is that they want a 24-hour supply of water which they had, and they do not want WASA to meter the water into other areas that are been affected. And that, Madam Speaker, is very, very, very unfortunate. And that is just the UNC and how they deal with issues and how to treat with things in this country. Nothing is fair, Madam Speaker, but I want to read out a list of things that the Minister and the Ministry of Public Utilities is executing at present in Point Fortin.

This is a slight brief. So far we have over six kilometres of eight-inch PVC main along the Guapo Cap-de-Ville Main Road from KFC all the way to the Cap-de-Ville Junction. At present, the second phase is broken up into four packages, packages one, two, three and four, and those packages were to take 90 days to complete, Madam Speaker. And right now we are ahead of time, we have no issues reporting and we are getting road restoration done immediately after we speak and we have no complaints whatsoever on those packages.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards: No inconvenience, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the impact of that is that it will benefit over 10,000 people within the direct area and indirectly more than 15,000 people would be affected positively. We would have a reduction in the loss of the distribution network as leaks and disruptions will be
minimized. We will be upgrading the aged pipeline infrastructure within the Cap-de-Ville community, the improved reliability of the potable water supply to customers of course, leading to better road conditions. Customers will receive an improved water supply as long as the service connections will be removed and the mains installed to facilitate connections. The pressure management within the Cap-de-Ville area will be better monitored via the use of PRVs, so it is pressure relief valves. This will further prevent disruptions in the pipeline network and customers within the lower areas are receiving a 24-hour supply of water, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Madam Speaker, this is no small feat, this is no small feat. So while some want to burn tyres and create mayhem we are working the plan in Point Fortin and I dare say today for all those in Point Fortin who are listening in a couple of months, once you turn on that pipe you are getting water.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Madam Speaker, to add to that there are a couple of wells that are going to come on stream, rehabilitation of well no. 7 in Chatham, rehabilitation well No. 14 in Chatham, the drilling of new wells, Granville well No. 18, Granville well No. 19, the refurbishment of the Chatham Water Treatment Plant, the drilling and development of Chatham well No. 15, the development of 10 new wells within the catchment area, Madam Speaker. Plus, Madam Speaker, some modular plants that will go on to ensure that that entire area is serviced well, and I dare say that, Madam Speaker, that the Minister of Public Utilities is a man of action and that is PNM in action, Madam Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [Desk thumping]
Mr. K. Richards: We do not protest, we act. Madam Speaker, further to that, some of the affected areas that I would have called out already, Cedros, the Southern Gardens Warden Road, East Street and New Village, all these areas are sure on the commencement of this project, that their water supply is going to be affected in a positive manner.

In Techier Village, Madam Speaker, when we did the site visit in 2022, there was a wastewater treatment plant that was covered in bush and the Minister said that is unacceptable. And I could report today to the House, Madam Speaker, that that wastewater treatment plant is up and running and servicing the people at Techier as we speak, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards: The work does not stop here, Madam Speaker. We are going to continue changing out the worn water lines and improve the water content and quality with the aim that, all the troubled areas could have 24-hour access. That is our aim, that everybody could have water seven days a week, Madam Speaker. But we are going to improve it slowly but surely. This coupled with the Utilities Assistance Programme, one of which some constituents can receive a free water tank from the Government, could go hand-in-hand and totally alleviating the water situation, Madam Speaker.

Additionally, under the same Ministry, we intend to use provisions provided for in the budget, to electrify those constituents who are not close to the electric grid, utilizing solar power. Assisting these constituents with basic human needs, and allowing them and their children an opportunity to take advantage of what a PNM government has put in place for them.

Madam Speaker, I turn to sport and community development within the constituency of Point Fortin. And we all know that some of the biggest and
brightest stars hail from Point Fortin when we talk about sports, Madam Speaker. We have the Jereem Richards, we have Machel Cedenio. Basketball; we have Victor “Voot” O’Garro; Alvin Daniel, Warren Archibald, Steve David, Leroy DeLeon, Doyle Griffith, Tony Douglas, Wilfred “Bound to Score” Cave. Madam Speaker, and the list could goes on, and on, and on, and on, and all of them were cultured generally in Mahaica Oval. And what did the PNM Government do, Madam Speaker? The PNM Government delivered Mahaica Oval to the people of Point Fortin on October 08, 2022.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards: PNM in action, Madam Speaker. And today, Madam Speaker, we can be the beneficiary of numerous professional league games playing at the establishment. Now we are in talks to upgrade our professional team, have a women’s team and have various youth teams that will be the feeder to the professional team, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, a strong footballing community in Point Fortin, means a stable and robust national team. Because we all know that once we have four, or five, or six, footballers from Point Fortin on the national team, it means that the national team is going places and is going to win. We are leading both regionally and internationally.

We can look forward, Madam Speaker, in this upcoming fiscal year, the development of Coronation Park, as we turn that area in Point Fortin into a regional complex where athletics, football, tennis, swimming will take major focus. And the ability to hold national and international games right in the sporting and cultural capital of the world, Point Fortin, is something that we look forward to, Madam Speaker, and I say thanks before to the Minister of Sport and Community Development for continued work and presence in the constituency of Point Fortin.
Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, presently, after 40 years wait, the people of Buenos Ayres are going to finally receive their long awaited community centre. Thank you again, Minister, it is PNM in action.

Madam Speaker, in the Ministry of Education, the constituency of Point Fortin was the beneficiary of four schools with the Minister of Education now turning emphasis on the Point Fortin East, Guapo Government, the Cedros Composite and consideration for a new school within the constituency as we have been growing at a rapid rate. Education has always been the bedrock and foundation upon which our twin-island Republic was built and I must say, Madam Speaker, that both our Ministers of Education are doing great service to the people of this country.

Mr. K. Richards: Further to that, Madam Speaker, we have seen the establishment of our Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. This Ministry came in, Madam Speaker, and placed youth programmes that were on life support, in full focus.

Mr. K. Richards: Now we have a plethora of courses available to young people, they can choose HYPE, MUST, NESC, and all other training programmes. And many of those programmes come with a stipend and there are many new programmes, where young people can participate in and execute a productive career once completed. Everything is happening right here in this country right now, under the leadership of Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley for hon. Prime Minister.
Not to leave out the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme, we are going to be the beneficiary of this programme where our food stock would be increased internally, as our young farmers would have the tools necessary to take on not the country, but to take on the entire world.

9.00 p.m.

Permit me, Madam Speaker, to list a few projects that I have been executing, alongside my office and in conjunction with the several constituency groups and Ministries. In Point Fortin, we hosted the first annual Kennedy Richards basketball and netball competition, and one might think that this is just a competition where people come together and throw a ball to each other and score, and stuff like that, but it is more than that, Madam Speaker. This assists, in terms of our community development, this assists us in turning the minds of young people to something productive, and this was indeed a success, and we look forward to the second phase of that at the ending of this year—in the fourth quarter of this year.

We have several community outreach programmes where we bring services from various Ministries, from the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service; the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development; the Ministry of Sports and Community Development, and all the other Ministries—the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, very close to the doorstop of the constituency. You could walk out your house and you could apply for a grant. You could walk out your house and sign up for a youth programme.

We have done many hamper distributions, drives. The adopt-a-child initiative, something that I am extremely proud about, Madam Speaker. This adopt-a-child initiative, we literally fill booklists for a child, whether primary school, whether secondary school, your booklist. And with the Government’s
thrust to assist with $1,000 per child, once they pass the means test, we can now expand our adopt-a-child initiative, because some of the other children fall under the ambit of the Government. And I say thanks to our Minister of Finance for seeing it necessary to ensure that our young people are well taken care of.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Madam Speaker, I was also involved with a group of ladies, very, very creative, and the programme was the Hunters’ Nest: Adam you are a man. And that programme, Madam Speaker, really dealt with young men and how they carry about themselves. That programme is for young men and how they should behave in society, for young men to express their feelings in words, for young men to be able to know how to treat a lady, Madam Speaker. And those elder ladies in our society, I was glad to be a speaker at that programme and, you know, I look forward to subsequent programmes where we could actually teach young man how to behave, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Madam Speaker, another project I am indeed proud about is the Housing and Village Improvement Programme. We have been touching the lives of the most vulnerable in Point Fortin, and I say thanks to both Ministers of Housing and Urban Development for ensuring that we get houses under the HVIP programme that would assist our constituents in their living conditions, Madam Speaker, and that is no small feat.

Some other projects—some of the completed projects, as I said before, was the Mahaica Sports Complex. We have paving done at Warden Road, paving of the box drains, E Street, A Street, G Street paving; the Chatham landslip. There were about 19 landslips in that area going down there. We were able to do about four. The north trace bridge is done paving; the Fanny Village School; Cedros

**UNREVISED**
Anglican Primary School; Chatham Primary School; Southern Central Anglican Primary School, which is in Coromandel; the Bailey bridge at Chin Yuen Kee Street; Chatham landslip is another one, that project is still ongoing; the Buenos Ayres Community Centre; the fire station; the Guapo River drainage; Granville pump station renovation; the perifocal building; WASA pipeline projects, and the many other projects that WASA is having. And we having some other pending projects that we should have coming on stream pretty soon: civic centre, the Point Fortin academy, Coronation Park, Egypt and Warden Road Community Centres, the upgrade to the fishing facilities that I spoke about. And one I am indeed proud about, and I am hoping that we get that going pretty soon, is the administrative building were we put all government services in one building. So you could get in—

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards: You go into one door, Madam Speaker, you come out with a passport, an ID card, a driver’s permit. You could come out with everything that the Government—all the services that the Government offers in that one building, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, we propose also to put a TTPost in Cedros and an ATM in that TTPost as well. The building of the Guapo Government Primary School, refurbishment of various community centres and lighting of the Guapo play park. Madam Speaker, we are poised for development in Point Fortin, and I say under the People’s National Movement Government, Madam Speaker, we are indeed—and we are not the children of a lesser God in Point Fortin, we are well taken care of and we will continue to be taken care of, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [Desk thumping]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, there is a say that goes, they say, leave the
best for last, you know. The Point Fortin to San Fernando highway project, a long-awaited project, Madam Speaker, that was completed by sheer brilliance of our Prime Minister and our Minister of Works and Transport.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Sometime in 2016, Madam Speaker, they made the decision to split the highway into packages, where the local contractors could have an opportunity to build this nation, where money could stay within this country, Madam Speaker, and I dare say today, that the local contractors did yeoman service and they developed—

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

**Mr. K. Richards:**—and they delivered quality befitting the greatness that is Point Fortin, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, the PNM has delivered yet again, and will continue to deliver into 2020, Madam Speaker, our development plans to ensure that every citizen in this country is well taken care of.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** With that being said, Madam Speaker, on Saturday, this Saturday, Saturday the 14th, we are opening the highway at 11.00a.m., and I take the opportunity to invite every constituent in the south-western peninsula, or anyone who wants to be a part of history on Saturday. And if you want to witness greatness, come to Point Fortin, Madam Speaker.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Madam Speaker, I dare say that the Point Fortin you see today under the PNM and my stewardship would be further advanced in the very near future. This highway will be the catalyst for development, and I thank every Member of Parliament who went before me, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Works and Transport, and most importantly, Madam Speaker, in this equation, I
thank the Prime Minister for his astute leadership.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** The extreme benefit of this highway would continue into generations and, Madam Speaker, the only thing I can say that the PNM has done sometimes to its own detriment is that it makes governance look easy.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** In this multicultural and multiethnic society, governance is very sophisticated, but under the stewardship of our Prime Minister, even in tough times, it looks easy, Madam Speaker.

Now, Madam Speaker, I look around this Parliament, and whether it be the hon. Members on any side of the divide, the clerks, police officers, the architecture, Madam Speaker, I see the presence of PNM policy, whether one might agree of not.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** I, Madam Speaker, am a proud product of the People’s National Movement.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** I, Madam Speaker, used to work on a construction site for $60 a day. I, Madam Speaker, made a conscious decision to take the opportunity provided by a PNM Government. I, Madam Speaker, am a living PNM success story.

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

**Mr. K. Richards:** Today, I dare say, Madam Speaker, without a PNM Government in this country, we would be the model of chaos and confusion. I urge every young person in this country, regardless of your financial situation, your geographic location to grab hold of the opportunity that this Government is
providing. Today you walk, tomorrow you will run, and under the PNM Government, like the Member Parliament for Point Fortin, the opportunity will be yours to fly. I thank you.

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

**Madam Speaker:** Leader of the House.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Wednesday, the 11th day of October, 2023, at 1.30p.m.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 9.10 p.m.*