

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, October 11th, 2023

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**Verification of Hansard
(Standing Order 48(6) Breach)**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, at the sitting of the House yesterday the Deputy Speaker's attention was called by a Member who raised Standing Order 48(6) and requested that the Deputy Speaker review the *Hansard* to ascertain whether the Member for Couva North made a statement imputing improper motives to a Member of the House. The Deputy Speaker indicated to this House that although he had not heard the statement the *Hansard* would be reviewed for verification of the alleged remark.

Learning from David MaGee's, *Parliamentary Practice in New Zealand*, has confirmed that, and I quote:

“As for comments by a member to a neighbour, it does not matter that it was not intended that the Chair should hear what was said (or another member, if another member objects and brings it to the Chair's attention). If it is heard, it is within the jurisdiction of the Speaker, and if it is offensive or disorderly it must be withdrawn.”

Hon. Members, I can confirm that the *Hansard* has been reviewed and the alleged remark was inaudible over the din in the Chamber. Hon. Members, I take this opportunity to remind you of the behaviour expected in this august Chamber.

Whilst I acknowledge that in the robustness of the debate, a quiet level of banter may take place across the aisles, we must all be careful to ensure that we maintain order and decorum and to not descend into statements which undermine

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the dignity of the House.

It is for this reason that the Standing Orders require Members to maintain silence during the presentation of another Member, and refrain from excessive crosstalk and disturbing the proceedings. I am perfectly confident that as we proceed with the business before the House, Members will heed this guidance and strictly observe the Standing Orders. I so rule.

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2024) BILL, 2023

[Fifth 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 Deyalsingh, MP; Dr. Lackram Bodoie, 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; hon. Faris Al-Rawi, MP; Ms. Khadijah Ameen, MP; Sen. the hon. Donna Cox; Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP; hon. Shamfa Cudjoe-Lewis, MP; Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP; Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon; Mr. Rushton Paray, MP; hon. Lisa Morris-Julian, MP; Mrs. Anita Haynes-Alleyne, MP; Mr. Keith Scotland, MP; Mr. Dinesh Rambally, MP; Mr. Kennedy Richards, MP.

Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I feel truly honoured to stand before this august Chamber to make my contribution as Member of Parliament for the constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West, as well as in my capacity as Minister of Public Utilities. Madam Speaker, let me first start by commending the hon. Minister of Finance and the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—for such a fantastic contribution and economic blueprint for the continued development of Trinidad and Tobago. Let me thank as well the hon. Prime Minister for leading a government for over eight years, and during the eight years of coming to this Parliament and guiding this country that not even up to today the Opposition can present any evidence of wrongdoing on the part of this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And, Madam Speaker, one can recall that during the dark days of 2010 and 2015, that by 2015 the UNC had collapsed in government under the weight of corruption.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: So as a Member of Parliament representing the constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West, Madam Speaker, and Minister of Public Utilities, I feel truly honoured to be part of a team that represents what we aspire in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and even today, there is no alternative to the PNM. As a matter of fact, what we continue to witness on a daily basis that the words of Dr. Eric Williams remain true, that the alternative to the PNM continues to be chaos and confusion—chaos and confusion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, it has not been an easy time for Trinidad and Tobago as any country in the world over the last five or eight years. The collapse in our revenue position as a result of depressed oil and gas prices around the world. The COVID pandemic that impacted every single country in the world costing the lives of so many of our citizens and the world citizens.

Madam Speaker, as the PNM navigated this very difficult and turbulent time, we were able to deliver a budget in 2023 where we can now lay the foundation to provide good leadership and guidance and to grow our economy and to increase prosperity for all our citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: I heard during this budget debate, the Opposition tried to throw cold water as we seek to protect the weak and vulnerable citizens in the country by improving our social safety net. The food grants, the assistance given to our parents by affording them the opportunity to purchase books and uniforms for their students, and so many other good measures in this budget to protect the weak and the vulnerable, Madam Speaker. The only reason that this Government can do that it is because we were able to manage in difficult circumstances that even today, whilst we manage in difficult circumstances and we see an improvement in our economic performance, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is saying that we will continue to provide for the weak and the vulnerable citizens of this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And even when we go through, and we went through the difficult times, Madam Speaker, over the last five years, for some strange reason because of prudent economic management, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago was able to maintain a social safety net of \$5 billion—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—to protect the weak and vulnerable citizens of this country.

We were able to protect our pensioners. We were able to protect the jobs of every public sector worker. We were able to expand our social safety net by providing all measures of grants and protection for all our weak and vulnerable citizens as we managed through difficult and turbulent times. And that is the reason why, Madam Speaker, despite all the bad talk they came year after year, week after week, they stood in our way as we managed through difficult times. They placed all kinds of obstruction, even during the COVID pandemic. They did not cooperate on one measure as we sought to protect the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

They came every week trying to convince the people of Trinidad and Tobago that COVID did not have any impact on the economy, that somehow it is mismanagement on the part of the People's National Movement.

Dr. Moonilal: Somehow?

Hon. M. Gonzales: Somehow. And despite their bad talk, despite their negative mindset, Madam Speaker, despite their attraction to doom and gloom, we were able to put our heads together, keep our focus and provide good—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—sound leadership to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and I feel very proud of that.

Mr. Ram: [*Interruption*] I am not apologizing.

Hon. M. Gonzales: I feel very proud of that.

Mr. Ram: I am not apologizing.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, can you please protect me from Caroni Central, he is disrupting me.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So, I am sure we would all recall the announcement that was just made a few seconds ago and I would ask us all to incorporate it as we go along in the proceedings today. I am sure I do not have to say anything else. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Public Utilities was allocated the sum of \$3 billion in this fiscal year. The Ministry of Public Utilities, Madam Speaker, is responsible for the management of its Head Office in Port of Spain. It is also responsible for the Water and Sewerage Authority, the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, the Solid Waste Management Company of Trinidad and Tobago, the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation, as well as the National Maintenance, MTS, and, Madam Speaker, the last year—the last two years have been quite a challenging one in the utility sector. And despite the challenges, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago, as every single country in the world, our utility sector is placed under tremendous strain for varying reasons, Madam Speaker; be it outdated rates for the payment of electricity, as well as water, aging infrastructure, outdated HR structures, especially in WASA and T&TEC, and, most importantly, Madam Speaker, the impact of climate change on our infrastructure.

Madam Speaker, I can tell you, that according to the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022 of the United Nations, and I quote, it says:

“About two billion people worldwide don’t have access to safe drinking water today, and roughly half of the world’s population is experiencing severe water scarcity for at least part of the year. These numbers are expected to increase...”—or—“...exacerbated by climate change and population growth.”

1.45 p.m.

Very, very telling information, Madam Speaker. And this report suggests that if we do not put our house in order and make the decisions that we are supposed to make, Madam Speaker, then the future of the country, the water future of our country, and the utility future of this country can be placed in grave peril. So we have serious decisions to make. And it is for that reason, Madam Speaker, over the last two years, the Ministry of Public Utilities, understanding its role in the sector, has decided to put together several policies and programmes to guide the utility sector in Trinidad and Tobago not only for the next year, the next two years, but for the next five, 10 or 20 years, Madam Speaker.

You see, Madam Speaker, with the impact of climate change on our water sector, rising sea levels, extreme drought— As we speak today, as we speak today in October, in the month of October, in the height of the rainy season, the Hollis Reservoir, which is expected to produce over 8.5 million gallons of water— One live example today for us here in Trinidad and Tobago, 8.5 million gallons of water per day on a daily basis, this dam is now producing 5.5 million gallons of water because of excessive heat and drought-like conditions in the Valencia area impacting the supply of water to 55,000 citizens in east Trinidad. This is just one example of the impact of climate change on the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. What do we do in response to that? Do we drag coffins, or go to one part of the country and cry racial discrimination or geographical discrimination, or engage in all kinds of petty politics, when the issues that are facing this country are real? This time calls for steady, sober and mature leadership—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—which only the People's National Movement can provide. And every time I listen to my hon. colleagues opposite, Madam Speaker, it pains me because I grew up in a rural community not knowing what potable pipe-borne

water is all about.

Hon. Member: And “yuh still doh no.”

Hon. M. Gonzales: I know what it is. The first introduction to pipe-borne water in my community, I recall it was a standpipe and it was a cause for great celebration at that point in time. I witnessed and I experienced going to a river to fetch water and therefore when any citizen in Trinidad and Tobago can take to the streets to burn tyres or to raise issues of water supply it pains me because I know and I understand how they feel. And therefore, Madam Speaker, I can tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago today, in my capacity as Minister of Public Utilities, no Member of this House can say that they reached out to me as Minister of Public Utilities with respect to water supply and I did not respond because it is very serious. When a community can go without water for nine days, 20 days, and for 40 days it must bother us as Members of Parliament and as public officials. And therefore our responsibility, especially when we sit in our esteemed offices as public officials, Ministers of Government, and Members of Parliament, our responsibility is to collaborate and work together to represent all our citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: All our citizens. The Member of Parliament for Cumuto/Manzanilla can tell you because he represents his constituency and reaches out to me on a regular basis. The Member for Mayaro can tell you that, even the Member for Oropouche West—might be leading his team to alleged racial discrimination and discrimination and geographical discrimination.

I was written a letter by the Member of Parliament for Oropouche West and in his letter he alleged discrimination against the people of his constituency. It pained me because this hon. Member did not have the decency to put in his letter that every single time he reaches out to me I respond to ensure that his constituents

get an adequate supply of water, despite the challenges. And therefore I condemn—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—every single one of them who wish to use water to ride it into political relevance.

1.50 p.m.

It will not help you. It cannot help you. It is dishonourable to do that. Because every single Member in this House here today can tell you that there are parts of their constituency that may have some issue with respect to the supply of water, including my constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West. Therefore,

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Public Utilities has taken a decision that we will ensure that in the utilities sector that there are policies in place that regardless of whether or not there is a change in Minister or a change in government, the policies and the programmes will ensure that we have a resilient and a protected utility sector, water and electricity, for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And the first thing we did was to put together a National Integrated Water Resources Policy for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The only policy that exists in the water sector in Trinidad and Tobago in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And coming out of that, coming out of that report, Madam Speaker, we put together a strategic action plan for water supply improvement to the population for the short term and the medium term, because we recognize that as we are about to transform the Water and Sewerage Authority which will take time, which will take effort, there must be plans and programmes in place that will

bring about short-term relief for all citizens. Whether or not you are from north, you are from south, you are from central, you are from Tobago, where ever you are, there must be plans and programmes in place to improve the supply of water, at least every community getting water once or three days a week, Madam Speaker, at minimum.

In addition to that, Madam Speaker, we have put together a plan and programme for a sustainable integrated solid waste management policy, because in Trinidad and Tobago our main landfills in Guanapo, in Beetham and Forres Park, they are filled to capacity. And if we do not change course, Madam Speaker, it can create a serious social and environmental issue for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And as a result of that, we have put together a National Integrated Solid Waste Management Policy, and from there a national recycling policy and our beverage container deposit refund policy, Madam Speaker. Policies and programmes to guide the utilities sector for the next 20 years. That is how we do it and that is what we must do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is what we must do. And, Madam Speaker, I can tell you that the Met office has advised me that for the next month we will continue to experience draught-like conditions in Trinidad and Tobago and the possibility of the Hollis dam falling below 5.5 million gallons of water per day is real. And therefore, we must put our house together, we must put programmes in place to protect all our citizens and all our communities, and that is what we are doing, Madam Speaker. That is exactly what we are doing. We are not going to be distracted by people who believe that water and every single irritation in the society must be further aggravated to make themselves politically relevant.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: We are Members of Parliament, we are Ministers of Government on this side and our responsibility is to solve problems because that is why we are here. We will always have problems, Madam Speaker. We will always have problems in our education sector. We will always have problems in our housing sector. We will always have problems in our utilities sector, Madam Speaker, but our responsibility is to fix the problems, fix the problems.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is our responsibility. But when you listen to Members opposite you would believe that Trinidad is a hell hole. You will believe that there are no opportunities, despite all the plans and programmes by the Minister of Youth Development and National Service, the Member of Parliament for La Horquetta/Talparo; all the programmes in place under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Madam Speaker, all the programmes in place under the Ministry of Education, and all other government agencies that our young people can aspire and make use of and turn away from a life of crime. When you listen to Members opposite, you will believe that Trinidad and Tobago is a place where there are no opportunities and we reject that out of hand, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Trinidad and Tobago is a place of tremendous opportunities, Madam Speaker, and therefore those who choose a life of crime, the police must go and find them wherever they are and protect the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Those who choose a life of crime, that is your choice, you must face the consequences but do not come here and pretend as though you do not have a choice and you do not have options. As a matter of fact I can tell you, those options are far more today than what existed 20 years ago. And therefore, the young boy in Beetham or in central Trinidad or east Port of Spain, wherever you

are, if you did not do well at school, there are plans and there are programmes in place put together by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, get up where you are and make something out of yourself and for yourself.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, I talked about the challenges that we face in the utilities sector, climate change and what have you, but Madam Speaker, we were not asleep. We were not asleep. Over the last two years, Madam Speaker, we journeyed all over Trinidad and Tobago looking at the state of the water infrastructure, for example, in Trinidad and Tobago, and we recognized that we needed to make short-term interventions to bring relief to many communities all over Trinidad and Tobago. And once such programme, Madam Speaker, is the Community Water Improvement Programme. A programme which was executed over the last two years that brought about relief to so many communities around Trinidad and Tobago, that today we can boast that over 190,000 citizens benefited from projects under the Community Water Improvement Programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Improving their lives. The Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande can tell you, Madam Speaker, places in Church Street, Pine Avenue, St. Albans. the Member of Parliament for Cumuto/Manzanilla can tell you that in the area of Manzanilla we executed and rolled out a number of projects all over, the restoration of booster stations, the laying down of pipelines, new water treatment plants. In many areas the refurbishment and the drilling of new wells, Madam Speaker. And we can tell you, we can boast today that over 185,000 or 90,000 citizens benefited from these programmes.

Madam Speaker, I would like to read out to you some of the communities that benefited from the Community Water Improvement Programme. We laid

down pipelines in Mucurapo Road in St. James; Bertie Road in Five Rivers; Manimore Road in Five Rivers; Jitman Trace; old Jai Housing Development; Katwaroo Extension; Katwaroo Trace in Penal; Salazar Trace in Point Fortin; Ramoutar Avenue in Ecclesville; Eccles village in Guaracara/Tabaquite; Mayfair, Santa Cruz pipeline project; Bissoon Street, Fyzabad; St. Albans in Valencia; Polo Road project in pipeline; First Street in Mt Lambert; Eighth Street in Mt. Lambert; First Avenue Mt. Lambert; Second Street in Barataria; Ramlogan Avenue, Guanapo Road, Fyzabad; Ranjit-Kumar Street in St. James; just to name a few of projects all over.

Madam Speaker, in Tobago almost three or four new booster stations were laid down in Shirvan Road. In Hope in Tobago, Madam Speaker, improving the water situation in so many communities in Tobago, Madam Speaker, I feel a sense of pride to tell you today that the water situation on the island of Tobago has improved tremendously because of the—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—Community Water Improvement Programme. In addition to that, Madam Speaker, in addition to that, a project which was discussed for years in Tobago, which is the de-silting of the Hillsborough dam, a project that was discussed for years, we were able to successfully conclude the de-silting of the Hillsborough dam to the tune of \$63 million with a cost savings of \$10 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: A project that came under, Madam Speaker, by five months earlier benefiting 15,000 citizens. Madam Speaker, a 7.4-kilometre pipeline, 16-inch, from Signal Hill in Tobago to Apex in Crown Point, 7.4-kilometre pipeline project was executed in 45 days. Never in the history of the Water and Sewerage Authority that such an extensive pipeline project, improving the lives of 15,000

citizens in Tobago, was executed in 45 days, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: 45 days. Madam Speaker, I am pound to say that on the island of Tobago, the sister isle of Tobago, especially in south-west Tobago they are closer to achieving a 24/7 supply of water.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And I wish to thank and put on record the support given by my two colleagues the Member of Parliament for Tobago East and the Member of Parliament for Tobago West for the work that they have done and the petitions that have made on behalf of their constituents. And despite some of the challenges that we have experienced, we have seen and we have witnessed some improvements in the supply of water to the people of Tobago.

Madam Speaker, in Freeport, Member of Parliament for Couva South, in two or three weeks, we will be commissioning three new wells in the Freeport area. We will commence the rehabilitation of the Freeport Water Treatment Plant, a plant that has not been refurbished in over 25 years, 25 years. And we talk about 25 years, Members opposite like to parrot and talk about the improvements that they would have made in the water sector. As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, if I was—well, that cannot happen but the UNC should stay far away from the water sector because their record in the water sector is despicable, it is dishonourable and they have no moral authority whatsoever to speak on anything in the water sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: These three new wells that will be commissioned in the Freeport area, Madam Speaker, as well as the refurbishment of that Freeport Water Treatment Plant would positively impact the lives of 25,000 citizens in the

Freeport area, 25,000 citizens. And under the IDB programme, Madam Speaker, which we had access to, we met conditions precedent in over one month, we met conditions precedent. Madam Speaker, the country will see early in 2024 the rollout of a number of plans, a number of projects to refurbish the Guanapo Water Treatment

Plant which will serve the area of Arima and surrounding areas over 30,000 citizens, to increase water production by over 2 million gallons of water per day, bringing the areas of Arima and surrounding areas to 24/7 supply of water. In the same way we will be doing for the North Oropouche Water Treatment Plant which serves the area of Manzanilla straight down to Five Rivers, over 120,000 citizens will see an improvement in the supply of water when that plant is fully commissioned and refurbished.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And simultaneously the Freeport Water Treatment Plant, the Navet Water Treatment Plant, the Chatham Water Treatment Plant, all of those plants will be undergoing major refurbishment in 2024, improving the supply of water to over 600,000/700,000 citizens in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, in the area of Santa Cruz, I think, that is the constituency of my colleague here on the left.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: The Santa Cruz area, a new water treatment plant which will be producing 4 million gallons of water per day, will be funded under the IDB programme which will bring areas in Santa Cruz and San Juan to 24/7 supply of water, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And with that, water from the Caroni Water Treatment Plant

can be diverted or re-diverted to areas that are underserved or un-served, Madam Speaker. Where is the racial discrimination in what I am talking about? Every single plan and every single programme touching every single area in Trinidad and Tobago that only a PNM government can do.

2.05 p.m.

And if you want to talk about racial discrimination or political discrimination or geographical discrimination, let me tell you this. Madam Speaker, two years ago, I was doing my normal walk, asking questions by some of the officials in WASA, and there was an issue with respect to the community of Oropune Gardens, just about 500 metres away from the Caroni Water Treatment Plant, the largest plant in the Caribbean producing 75 million gallons of water, and I could not understand why Oropune Gardens, 500 metres away from the Caroni Water Treatment Plant was having problems for water. I think that was from the constituency of St. Augustine.

I was told that under the UNC government, after a pipeline was constructed from the Caroni Water Treatment Plant to produce and to give water to the area of Oropune, a decision and an instruction was given, do not put them onto the Caroni Water Treatment Plant, put them on the extremity of the North Oropouche Water Treatment Plant. And the citizens who went there to live saw no end of trouble for water, because a decision was taken not to supply them with water from the Caroni Water Treatment Plant.

So when they stand here in Parliament or they have their news conferences all over Trinidad and Tobago, alleging discrimination, geographical discrimination or racial discrimination in the distribution and the supply of water, because they know what they were doing when they were in power.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is how they governed Trinidad and Tobago. And I gave instructions—I used my political office and my ministerial office and I gave instructions for Oropune Gardens to be placed onto the Caroni Water Treatment Plant. And from the moment that decision was made, Madam Speaker, I feel a sense of pride to tell this country that Oropune Gardens now has a 24/7 supply of water—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—24/7 supply of water.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Elections do have consequences, and I want to warn hon. Members opposite, do not push me too far when it comes to this particular matter.

You went to the IDB, you got access to billions of dollars, you attempted to construct a Beetham Wastewater Treatment Plant that resulted in infamy, that resulted in all kinds of problems, with a contractor leaving Trinidad and Tobago and going for shelter in Panama. That is your legacy in the water sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And therefore, you have no moral authority whatsoever to come and speak and tell this Government what it must do.

We understand what the problem was and it is the reason why we went to the Inter-American Development Bank, to get access to resources to improve the supply of water to every single citizen in Trinidad and Tobago, and we will do that, Madam Speaker. We will do it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, another programme to improve the

supply of water is under the north-west—the north-west area. The north-west region is a region that extends from Mount Lambert to Chaguaramas. We recognize in the north-west region, booster stations all over, from Carenage to Laventille to Port of Spain, San Juan, all over, in a state of disrepair. Unplanned development, homes on hills, dilapidated infrastructure in east Port of Spain, Madam Speaker, and Laventille, in so many areas, in Belmont, crying out for reliable supply of water and we decided that we are going to put together a north-west water improvement programme to improve the lives of 300,000 citizens in that region.

I feel proud to say Madam Speaker, over 50 projects identified under the north-west programme will come into effect before the end of the year. And in the first two or three months in 2024, most of these projects will come into full fruition, improving the living circumstances and the water supply of 300,000 citizens—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—in north-west Trinidad

So Madam Speaker, we are busy at work. I recognize the complaints of so many communities around Trinidad and Tobago because there are a lot of works still to be done. The areas of Cedros, the areas in Princes Town, as well as Mayaro, Icacos, Moruga; areas on the extremities of the distribution system from Navet, from the Caroni desal plant, Caroni Water Treatment Plant, and what we intend to do over the next three or the next four months is to localize sources of water in these communities by increasing water production and bringing relief to so many of these citizens who are not getting an adequate supply of water. I wish to assure every single Member of this House, be it on this side or on our side, that

the Ministry of Public Utilities will work every single day to improve the supply of water to communities all over Trinidad and Tobago.

It is not an easy undertaking. You are dealing with so many issues, you are fixing the plane whilst you fly that plane, but you have to hold it together. Madam Speaker. I wish to assure every single Member of this House and every single citizen, I am listening and I am hearing your cries, but the plans and the programmes that we have put together, I feel a sense of comfort that within the next six months, or the next eight to 12 months, many communities in the Trinidad and Tobago, who are experiencing an unreliable supply of water, that relief will come your way.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Relief will come your way.

Madam Speaker, let me go onto the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission. I want to commend the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission for being a model electricity distribution agency in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean. T&TEC is a well-managed utility agency, despite some of its challenges. An agency that has an outdated tariff system somehow can still provide over 99 per cent of the population with a reliable supply of electricity, Madam Speaker, meeting all of the Regulated Industries Commission's standards for the supply of electricity.

I wish to put on public record, the Trinidad and Tobago commendation to all the employees of the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission for the work that they continue to do to provide good service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.10 p.m.

Madam Speaker, working with my colleague from Port of Spain South/St. Ann's East, Minister Young, and all of the government agencies, we were able to commence the construction of the largest solar plant in the Caribbean as a result of that Shell and BP Lightsource project. This solar plant, Madam Speaker, when it is commissioned and completed in 2024, will produce over 112 megawatts of electricity. The largest solar plant in the entire Caribbean which will transform the electricity sector in Trinidad and Tobago. But, Madam Speaker, in addition to that, this will in turn reduce our greenhouse gas emission from the power generation sector by approximately 150,000 tonnes annually, and this project which involves the construction of solar plants at Brechin Castle and Orange Grove will be completed by the end of 2024.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: In addition to that, Madam Speaker, the completion of the Ghandi Union 220 kilovolts circuit is one step in which we bring redundancy and resilience to the electricity grid in Trinidad and Tobago. Acting as a second circuit that will facilitate the transfer of bulk power from the Trinidad Generation Unlimited Power Plant to the national grid this circuit serves to improve the stability and the reliability of the electricity supply nationwide. This project, Madam Speaker, was successfully completed in this—or the last fiscal year, and I thank the team at T&TEC for making this happen.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, I am proud to tell you that the department at the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, the public lighting department, has done tremendous work over the last year; 672 street lighting jobs were completed with 2,149 new LED lights that were placed among the streets and around the streets all over Trinidad and Tobago. It is first time in the history of

T&TEC that such tremendous work was done in just one year; 672 new jobs with 2,149 LED lights all over Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And in addition to that, the same public lighting department was responsible for the repairs of 31,431 street lights all across Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thirty-one thousand, four hundred and thirty-one streetlights. Madam Speaker, we were able to illuminate 10 parks and five recreational spaces all over Trinidad and Tobago, including the constituency of Mayaro, where two recreational grounds were lit, and in the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla, in the Four Roads area a recreational space was also lit just a couple months ago. And in this fiscal I wish to give the assurance to Members on both sides of the House that we will continue our drive under the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, the public lighting department, as we seek to improve the security of all our communities that our Street Lighting programme will be continued to be rolled out in communities all over Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the upgrade of the West Moorings Substation Phase 2 as well as the upgrade and the construction of the Gandhi/Union 220 kilovolts station or circuit will also be completed in just two or three months. Madam Speaker, two or three mobile generators will be commissioned and procured in this fiscal under the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—thereby allowing the Commission, whenever it wishes, to undertake routine maintenance all over Trinidad and Tobago that these mobile substation will be utilized in order to protect public agencies like hospitals and

health centres and schools, to allow the commission to do its work whilst reducing the inconvenience to members of public, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, let me touch on TSTT. TSTT has gone through a tumultuous time over the last year. A year of transformation where a VSEP programme was offered to many of its staff, and many people questioned whether or not TSTT would ever remain with us on the telecommunications landscape. Madam Speaker, the company successfully navigated a period of significant change and uncertainty due to the rapid evolving telecommunications landscape and the residual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Madam Speaker, TSTT was able to engage in cost-cutting measures, saving the sector over \$400 million, including a VSEP programme to separate some of its staff. These stringent but necessary measures, Madam Speaker, resulted in TSTT, for this financial year, reporting a profit before tax of \$118 million. A dramatic turnaround in just one year after engaging a restructuring programme where many people questioned whether or not TSTT would remain with us, reporting a profit before tax of \$118 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And as a result of that, Madam Speaker, I am advised that the board and the management of TSTT had taken a decision recently to pool together \$6 million that will be shared equitably among its management and all of its staff before the end of this year in a bonus payment.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: To recognize the hard work and the sacrifice of every single manager and every single member of its staff and its employees the organization has taken a decision to pay a bonus to the tune of \$6 million to be shared equitably among all of its employees. Madam Speaker, TSTT, the company expanded its

digital infrastructure in support of Government's digitalization drive while launching a suite of digital services which include e-health e-commerce, e-pay, canto and e-market pays—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member your original speaking time is now spent, you are entitled to 10 more minutes to wind up your contribution if you so wish.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, let me move on to the RIC, an independent body placed administratively under the Ministry of Public Utilities. T&TEC applied to the RIC over a year ago for a rate review. That is the process. No role, no responsibility, no function for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Because under our laws, a separate and independent body, as happened all over the Commonwealth, must be put in place to manage the utility system and the payment of rates, especially for water and electricity.

The RIC is a body established by law, managed by a board of commissioners appointed by the President and its management. T&TEC as one of the utility agencies that fall under the remit of the RIC applied for a rate review, and as is required by law, the RIC engaged in public consultation with the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, as citizens of this country we saw the behaviour and the conduct of politicians, especially those on the other side who attended so many of these consultations and turned it into something which was nothing but despicable and reprehensible. Some dragged coffins; some accused the chairman, a woman, of all manner of things, including that she is a political appointee and a member of the PNM. They behaved in the most despicable manner, disrespecting public servants engaged in legitimate business, and serious business. Madam Speaker, I wish to apologize to all employees of the Regulated

Industries Commission for the behaviour of members of the UNC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: They deserved better. They are going about their legitimate business. They are doing their work, and they deserve nothing but respect. I apologize to the chairman of the RIC for the behaviour of Members opposite. Because as a successful professional woman, she is not being paid for that kind of insult that she endured over the last couple months during this exercise. But I admired how she stood her ground and behave, and with her composure remaining very professional to the task and doing her work, Madam Speaker, I commend her for that. She represents true woman power.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: True woman power. And, Madam Speaker, whilst on my way to Parliament I was advised by the RIC that it has completed, a rate review exercise for the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, and that they will be speaking to the population one week from today with respect to its decision on a rate review for the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission. I say no more on that, Madam Speaker.

2.25 p.m.

Madam Speaker, as I have indicated, SWMCOL is positioning itself for the completion and the approval of the Beverage Container Bill, the recycling Bill, and all of the policies and programmes that we put in place for the solid waste management sector in Trinidad and Tobago. The company is completing its final exercise, the environmental investigation assessment study, which is guided by the EMA which is expected to be completed by May next year. And once that exercise is completed I am very pleased to assure the people of Trinidad and Tobago that SWMCOL will commence, for the very first time in Trinidad and

Tobago, the construction of an engineered landfill.

Madam Speaker, we have done quite a lot of work for the Meteorological Services of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, for years the Radar Tower at Brasso Venado was out of operation. I am pleased to report that the civil construction work which started over six or seven months ago will be completed and the radar is expected to return into full operation by February 2024. In addition to that, the Ministry of Public Utilities has successfully procured a Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellites (GOES) receiving system which will boost the ability of the Met Office to provide weather forecasting, reliable weather forecasting, for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, especially given the impact of climate change.

Madam Speaker, Members on both sides of this House might be pleased to know that the Ministry of Public Utilities runs a very successful social programme that even though Trinidad and Tobago enjoys the lowest rate for water and electricity, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago expends millions of dollars still to protect the weak and the vulnerable citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Even though we have the lowest rates for water and electricity, 12,000 citizens, vulnerable citizens, benefit from our utility assistance programme; 12,000 citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And under this programme, the Ministry, at the expense of the Government, expending over \$14 million, assists vulnerable citizens in the payment of their utility bills for water and electricity as well as the provision of water tank assistance for persons who may need assistance to purchase their water tanks.

The electricity rebate system, Madam Speaker, costing the Government \$68 million, benefiting over 220,000 grade A citizens or customers of T&TEC, that

even though, as I have said, with the lowest rates of water and electricity we run a subsidy programme to assist vulnerable citizens to pay their water and electricity that in addition to our Utility Assistance Programme the Government's electricity rebate programme is benefiting of 220,000 citizens to the tune of \$68 million annually.

Madam Speaker, Electrification Programme, 32 households benefiting, 151 citizens getting electricity for the very first time where we extended the electricity grid under our Electrification Programme. So a number of programmes, Madam Speaker, put in place to protect the weak and the vulnerable, whilst at the same time undertaking a number of infrastructure and a number of programmes to improve the lives of so many of our citizens, whether you live in Tobago, in Port of Spain, in central, all over, we are at work—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—we are at work in true PNM style. And therefore, Madam Speaker, I wish to assure all our citizens that in the next 12 months we will work harder to improve the utility services for all communities and for all citizens and we will not put God out of our thoughts and go back to the dark days of the UNC where every single cent was spent on corruption, corruption, corruption.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: It will not happen, it must not happen and we will work to ensure that the UNC will never see the corridors of power again, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: We have our children to protect and we have our constituencies to protect. Madam Speaker, I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Financial Appropriation Bill that is currently before the House on behalf of the constituents, the great constituency of the Princes Town. Madam Speaker, first allow me the privilege to reflect on the contributions made by the hon. Leader of the Opposition, as well as my colleagues on this side of the House.

Madam Speaker, leading from the front, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar's focus has been on reflecting the thoughts, the sentiments, the feelings, and the pulse on national issues on behalf of every man, woman and child in this country.

Madam Speaker, I listened carefully to the contribution made by the hon. Minister of Public Utilities, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air Westand, Madam Speaker, I expected much, much, more. I say this against the backdrop of screaming headlines bearing on the front page of our newspapers. Cedros is in pain; water crisis throughout central and south Trinidad; blackouts throughout the country; low voltages affecting many parts of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, after 55 minutes of rhetoric, "ol' talk", bacchanal and hysteria not one single policy articulated by the Minister to effect change, positive change, in the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to the public utilities sector.

I heard the hon. Minister say, do not take God out of your thoughts and put back the UNC. Madam Speaker, today every single citizen of this country is looking forward to the next general election with the hope that the People's National Movement will be decimated and replaced by the United National Congress.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: The Minister said do not apologize, he will apologize—he will apologize on the UNC’s behalf. I want to tell the Minister do not apologize on the UNC’s behalf. We are very proud of the work that we have done as it relates to representing the views of people across the length and breadth of this country, where not one single Member or MP from the People’s National Movement turned up at those public consultation to listen, if not to add their voice, Madam Speaker, but to listen to the cries and the pleas of the people throughout this country.

The Minister said that he will apologize on behalf of the UNC to the RIC and WASA employees. I want to tell the Minister do not apologize because it is the very same WASA employees and it is the very same RIC employees that are begging to meet with Members of the UNC to tell us what is going on in the RIC and tell us what is going on in WASA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: But, Madam Speaker, there was really a bit of hope, a bit of hope that I had that the hon. Minister would have really upgraded his contribution. When I reflected on what the hon. Minister spoke about last year, the hon. Minister spent 55 minutes telling us a story about the fly and ointment. Instead of doing better today the Minister did not tell us about the fly and ointment he just gave us one long nancy story. Madam Speaker, we heard about, “dey coulda, dey woulda, dey shoulda” speech today from the hon. Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Eight years later of nothingness. Madam Speaker, the Minister’s contribution was dry and empty just like our taps and pipes across the country. The Minister also told us that he does not believe that Trinidad and Tobago is a hell hole. Well I want to tell the hon. Minister we believe that Trinidad is a hell hole when we see over 460 murders in one year and counting.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: It is a hell hole. The Minister then told the population that they were not asleep. I think the Minister was asleep when he told the population he was not asleep. Because you see, Madam Speaker, the population certainly does not believe that they are awake. The Minister told us about legacies and what the UNC legacy is. I want to tell the hon. Minister your legacy is leaving people in squalor despite having run the country for over 46 years—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—and have them drinking out of “barrel” and “bucket”, and up to today still having to use latrines in the 21st Century. That is your legacy.

Ms. Ameen: That is PNM legacy.

Hon. Member: Eradication Programme.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, in light of recent developments in our local entertainment industry many had hoped that the budget presentation was also a publicity stunt gone bad, not featuring GI but featuring CI, Colm Imbert, Minister of Finance.

Madam Speaker, against the backdrop of themes and statements in the years gone by of Turnaround, the Government can see clearly now that the rain is gone, the economy is booming, and we are on a part to sustainable development and growth. There were two persons that added their voice in terms of what the expectations or what their thoughts were or what the Minister was articulating ahead of the budget. One was the chairman of the coalition of chambers of Trinidad and Tobago. And interestingly the other was the hon. Chief Justice. The Chairman Vivek Charran, the coalition of chambers, this is what he had to say in response to the Minister's policies being articulated ahead of the budget. The Chairman said and I quote, September 04, 2023, *Trinidad Newsday*:

We are yet to feel the growth, we are yet to see the growth.

The hon. Chief Justice at the opening of the law term, Madam Speaker, lamented that in 2015 he was told that the Judiciary will get financial autonomy. 2015 come, 2015 go, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, the Chief Justice is still waiting for financial autonomy with respect to the Judiciary.

Madam Speaker, I raise these two sentiments because it represents and it reflects exactly what every man, woman and child thinks about this Government's approach to managing this country. That it is eight years promised and too late, one. That despite all of the old talk and rhetoric they feel no growth and they see no growth. Madam Speaker, the Minister for eight years has told us, hold strain, the grass is growing, the grass is growing, the grass is growing. Madam Speaker, we know in local parlance, that while the grass is growing the horse is starving. Today eight years later we can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that the proverbial horse is dead.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: The Government is now attempting to resuscitate and perform CPR on a dead horse by injecting borrowings in the billions hoping for a quick fix and a miracle. The Member for Pointe-a-Pierre when he spoke told us that the deficit really looks like \$8 billion and more. Madam Speaker, the budget presented by the Minister of Finance is best described as a death trap, D-E-A-T-H trap, but also it is also a debt trap, D-E-B-T trap, with no exit strategies out of the abyss that we are in, whether it is on crime or the economy.

Once more the Government has failed to secure Trinidad and Tobago's economic future and the lives of our citizens. When our economy tells us that our debt to GDP ratio is 77 per cent and our murder rate is projected to cross 600 murders we are in a death trap and a debt trap. The death trap of over \$50 billion

is a last ditch election ploy devoid of specific policies geared towards securing lives, securing jobs, securing investments and securing our nation's future.

Madam Speaker, this debt trap gives us \$2 more in minimum wage but burdens you with higher water rates, higher electricity rates, property tax, gas prices. To believe that this helps you in any way is like living in a fool's paradise. This is an unrealistic balance of the needs of the population juxtaposed to the pittance being offered to them. Madam Speaker, despite all the challenges of gruesome bloodied murders by the thousands and where children are now direct targets of collateral damage, where the country has collapsed upon itself in every sector, we asked ourselves: why is our nation in paralysis? Why are civil society, business groups, government validators and large swathes of the population so silent and numb to the issues that impact your pockets and your homes?

2.40 p.m.

The country has found itself controlled by fear of a vindictive government. The business groups are controlled by their own selfish desires to keep their pockets filled, while the majority of the population suffers. The Government validators are happy to keep their party of Eric Williams in power, even though we have gone to hell in a hand basket.

Up to a few years ago Madam Speaker, you will recall in local parlance we would say, "things are getting bad, things are getting bad". Today I want to say to you things are not getting bad, things are very, very bad.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: It is time we call it for what it is. Madam Speaker, instead of propping a failed government for personal interest, for personal enrichment, for "eat ah food", today is a clarion call to wake up and face the reality that this country has collapsed. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it, because no

amount of public relations and mamaguy would sway the opinions of every right-minded citizen in this country to believe otherwise.

Every day when you are gripped by fear to leave your homes for fear that bandits would invade, rape and plunder your homes, you are confronted with the reality that this country has collapsed. Every day when you choose between putting food on the table, and paying your light and water bills, you are reminded of the joblessness that exists in Trinidad and Tobago. Every day when you lament the lack of support for your children in schools and in the workforce, you are confronted with a country that has become totally unrecognizable.

But Madam Speaker, today, if we take God out of our thoughts and believe the Minister of Finance that there is growth and development and progress, then we too would have succumbed to living in a fool's paradise just like the Minister, and the Government. It is often said fool me once, shame on you, but fool me twice, shame on me. They have fooled you not once, Trinidad and Tobago, they have fooled you not twice, not even thrice, but for eight long, hard and torturous years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, if we are to take the Minister's promises again today for growth, then we too become like the proverbial horse. The Minister stopped short of telling us that while we can expect all these lofty promises to materialize, the horse would continue to be starved today. I want to say that while we know in local parlance that while the horse—the grass is growing, the horse is starving, we have now reached the point where the horse is now dead, dead, dead, and you killed it. For eight years you have purposely starved the horse, for eight years your greed was more important than the needs of the population, for eight years you blamed everyone under the sun including the UNC for your

incompetence—

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

Madam Speaker: Okay, so Member, two things. One, I would uphold Standing Order 48(6), and I will also remind you, you are coming kind of late in the budget so that, be careful with tedious reputation.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, one of the most troubling and deeply distressing issues for citizens across the length and breadth of this country has been the water crisis.

Hon. Member: Correct.

Mr. B. Padarath: The dry taps, empty tanks, empty barrels and empty buckets have wreaked havoc and severe hardship on many communities for weeks, and in some instances for months. It has also had a direct impact on schools, businesses, agriculture and health care. The water crisis that has engulfed the country is a real crisis, a crisis that many have painstakingly felt especially in areas where it still continues to persist up to today.

Madam Speaker, when the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West got up, it was almost expected that the Minister would have spent a significant time in his contribution dealing with the plans, the policies that his Ministry would put in place in terms of dealing with the water crisis in many parts of the country.

2.45 p.m.

The first thing that the hon. Minister has been parroting since coming into office since 2010, as Minister of Public Utilities, has to do with restructuring of WASA. And, Madam Speaker, like an answer to every question, regardless of whatever the hon. Minister is asked about in the public utilities sector, the Minister's go-to answer, without fleshing out any plan, any policy, is the restructuring of WASA. Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance in his

presentation indicated that WASA's new business plan will facilitate increase investment in capital and infrastructure, while meeting operational expenditure. Today, I want to ask the question whether or not this is code for WASA employees getting the axe.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: I want to ask whether this is code for fluff and no action, and whether this is code for mega spending without accountability.

Madam Speaker, this grand announcement by the Government is being marketed as a panacea to the issues in the water sector. But, Madam Speaker, no amount of money thrown behind any issue, without vision and proper management, will not yield the desired results. This Government has a history of having an implementation deficit, and much of the critical work in the water sector will have to be delivered by a UNC-led government. Today, Madam Speaker, in the interest of transparency, I call on the hon. Minister to lay the WASA's business plan in the Parliament, since it will affect over 5,000 employees and an investment of over \$1.4 in capital infrastructure.

When the Minister entered the budget debate, Madam Speaker, I thought that he should have put in the public domain WASA's debt portfolio and failure of the Government, over the last past eight years, to effectively manage the debt. The Minister would have us believe that the current situation at WASA happened overnight. This has happened over a period of eight years of PNM incompetence. The Minister of Public Utilities continues his feeble attempt to separate, or attempt to separate the Government and himself from WASA, when for eight years, Madam Speaker, they have appointed the commissioners to the board of both WASA and T&TEC. They have directed the policies and the management plan of the State. I want to tell the Government that the failure of WASA and T&TEC are

your failures. You are one and the same.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, the Minister announced that the Government is giving a June 2024 timestamp to complete the process of a WASA rate review through the Regulated Industries Commission.

I want to ask: Will this rate review take into consideration that T&TEC is owed \$1.4 billion by the State, and WASA's debt to T&TEC accounts for \$834 million of that \$1.4 billion? Would this rate review take into consideration that on May 11, 2010, the then PNM Government committed this country to a desalination contract with Seven Seas, where one of the concessions was for Seven Seas not having to pay for electricity and, therefore, passed the burden off to WASA in the tune of millions of dollars? Will this rate review take into consideration that, by the WASA's own admission, 50 per cent of portable water is lost through leaks and therefore, never reaches consumers? Will the rate hike announced by the Minister take into consideration that thousands of citizens pay WASA bills and do not get pipe-borne water for weeks and months? Madam Speaker, would this rate review take into consideration that many Ministries, government agencies and state enterprises owe WASA millions of dollars, yet the small man is being penalized?

Madam Speaker, the timestamp of two years to complete infrastructural work for water distribution was dealt with by the hon. Minister of Public Utilities and the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance has made a promise of two years to move from a minimum of three days water supply per week in 2022, to a full seven days per week supply in 2024. However, in 2023, most citizens get a water supply three days in a three-week period and in some instances, a three-day supply in every three months. Madam Speaker, I repeat that. In 2023, most citizens get a water supply three days in a three-week period and in some instances,

a three-day supply in every three months.

The Minister spoke about geographical discrimination and attempted to hoodwink the population into believing that anyone introduced racial discrimination. No one spoke about racial discrimination—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—but that is their bogey. That is there—

Dr. Moonilal: Default.

Mr. B. Padarath:—dog whistle, Madam Speaker, and their default. Thank you, Member for Oropouche East. That is their default position when their backs are against the wall and they do not have answers for the burning issues when people cannot get water for—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—over three months; three months in parts of Cedros, and it is still ongoing, Madam Speaker. We saw that up to yesterday, parts of Cedros, Chatham, La Brea, Penal, San Francique, Mayaro, Rio Claro, Tableland, Moruga, Princes Town, San Fernando, Claxton Bay, Couva, Caroni, Chaguanas, Cumuto/Manzanilla, Sangre Grande, and even in the Minister of Public Utilities' own constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West. Madam Speaker, if they do not have care for their own constituents, you think they will care about mine in Princes Town?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, despite how the Minister wants to spin, these are the facts. The Minister of Finance further stated, in 2024, we will see a substantial reduction in water scheduling through the implementation of three integrated pillars. Madam Speaker, if this was not a sad admission of failure, it would be comical since most communities on water schedules know that these

schedules are non-functional.

Madam Speaker, I get to the issue of the transformation of WASA, in terms of the human resources. Madam Speaker, part from demonizing WASA workers, blaming the Government's incompetent on sabotage, on constant under-resourcing of WASA after eight years, they have not done little or nothing to transform WASA. Each year, Madam Speaker, we have seen critical areas of WASA being slashed. These areas include material and supplies, maintenance and contracted services. Without adequate funding over the past few years, the Government has purposely driven WASA into the ground similar to what occurred at TSTT and Petrotrin.

Madam Speaker, the Minister, in 2020—the new Minister of Public Utilities, when he came in, in 2020, as part of their transformation, their so-called transformation efforts of WASA, brought in 15—1-5new consultants. And you know the Minister spoke earlier about apologizing to the employees of RIC and WASA? I want to let the Minister know, do not apologize on our behalf to the people in WASA, because it is the people in WASA that gave us this information at a management level. The Minister, in 2020, brought in 15 consultants at WASA, one of which was a failed PNM general election candidate who was moved out of UDeCOTT and brought into WASA. Each consultant receives a consultancy fee of \$40,000 per month, and they are the 15 consultants who are running the operations inside of WASA while the political directorate pulls the strings from the behind.

Madam Speaker, this is the transformation of WASA the hon. Minister refused to speak about today. Because this is the transformation of WASA that continues to have WASA in the position where it continues to go down, and down, and down. Today, I want to ask the hon. Minister to focus a little bit more

attention on not only the wells inside that are being drilled by WASA, but also the wells that are inside, on the board of WASA.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Padarath: The Minister might be very au courant with that particular well issue.

Madam Speaker, I want to deal with WASA's two-pronged approach, the production and the distribution. Madam Speaker, the Government is promising a capital investment of \$1.4 billion to inject into WASA's water production and distribution after the last eight years. The question that arises is: What has occurred between 2015 and 2023? Madam Speaker, I shared a sample of the massive cuts that have been made to WASA over the years and thereafter, the proof of the Government's attempt to drive WASA into the ground further is in the black and white. The Government has allowed WASA's failing, crumbling and dilapidated infrastructure to go unaddressed, despite the Opposition's repeated calls for reviews and maintenance, as well as an increased water production capacity.

Madam Speaker, the IDB loans that the hon. Minister spoke about proposed in the budget stated that the State will contribute—and hear this one, “eh”. The same WASA with all the woes, and all the troubles, and all the problems that the Minister just spoke about, the Minister says that the State will contribute \$854.5 million from loan resources and WASA will contribute \$190 million from internal sources. Madam Speaker, we were just told that, pretty much, WASA is bankrupt, WASA is insolvent, that they have to inject these IDB loans to get things up and running. That was the excuse for why nothing happened between 2015—2023. The Minister told us these IDB loans will be the panacea to the entire issue, and that this was really what was going to bring about significant change in the water

sector.

Madam Speaker, I want to ask the hon. Minister: What are these internal sources of \$158 million with WASA? You see, Madam Speaker, WASA owes T&TEC \$800 million by the Ministry of Public Utilities' own admission in a question in this House. How much does WASA owe to other state entities? The Minister must explain the internal sources he has identified to service the capital investment. The Minister, Madam Speaker—we suspect that additional financial burdens are being placed on WASA to manufacture a situation where Government will shut down the entity, therefore creating an avenue for VSEP for workers, getting rid of the trade unions and starting afresh under a new name, the same playbook as they did with Petrotrin.

Madam Speaker, the projects. The Finance Minister indicated that new water treatment plants are needed for an increase in production. The UNC, in 2015, was able to supply, Madam Speaker, with the same WASA, the same infrastructure, 74 per cent of the population with 24/7 supply of water when we demitted office because of the strides we made in water production, while continuously upgrading WASA's infrastructure.

Madam Speaker, there was constant maintenance and increase in production at the Caroni Water Treatment Plant, the Navet, the PowerGen, the Chatham, the Talparo and others. We can confirm that none of these plants, since we left government in 2015, have undergone any significant improvements to boost water production. Alternatively, the Government has provided no additional water sources to meet the growing demands in many areas.

Madam Speaker, after eight years of rundown of water treatment plants, dilapidated rotten pipelines, corroded mains in our water sector that has collapsed on itself, the Minister of Finance comes to lecture the population about substantial

investment in a range of projects that have been promised ad nauseam. But, Madam Speaker, in true PNM style, we expect to get lip service and little action in this regard. The Minister of Finance is promising the refurbishment and upgrading of water treatment facilities at Freeport, Guanapo, Chatham that will improve citizens' supply across these areas.

Now, Madam Speaker, while we are happy for these citizens, what about the citizens of Cedros; what about the citizens of Penal, San Francique, Mayaro, Rio Claro, Tableland, Princes Town, Fyzabad? Madam Speaker, you would recall the screaming headlines for mercy as Iwer George eulogizes, "The people want water".

Madam Speaker, let us deal with the wells. The repeated promises of three new wells in Freeport and others in Tucker Valley, Clarke Road and Chatham were once more articulated by the Minister of Finance and parroted by the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, the Minister of Public Utilities. These were promised for over the last eight years that have never been materialized.

Madam Speaker, to tell you that the Minister does not even what is going on in his own Ministry, I can confirm that the hydrological reports coming out from the dams and the wells being dug in Freeport, Madam Speaker, they are below capacity and they are now being categorized as duds, meaning that they will not be able to contribute in any significant way to water production and to the dams articulated by the Minister. And therefore, if this is the myopic approach that the hon. Minister is taking by coming to be Parliament, not being able to substantiate and corroborate what exactly he is saying in terms of projects to bring relief to the population, no wonder WASA is in the situation that they are in because this is a clear case of the blind leading the blind.

Madam Speaker, I want to ask: How many new wells have been successfully

completed; and how much additional water supply will these new wells contribute to the national grid?

3.00 p.m.

The answer is none. Just take a visit to the Clarke Road and ask Mr. Steve Rampersad. He will tell you nothing has been done in this regard despite several previous announcements. Similarly, go down to Chatham and Cedros, ask young engineer Jesse Ramcharan and he will tell you the very same thing.

The Minister in his presentation claims that these projects will assist approximately 11,000 people. But what will happen between the period when promises are made to when it is fulfilled, if ever it is fulfilled? The intervening time will result in the closure of businesses, the destruction of crops, and the loss of animals with no compensation to add to farmers. This is a clear indication that while the grass is not growing, the horse is starving. However, in most instances, the horses, as I told you, are already dead.

Madam Speaker, let us deal with the issue of the construction and outfitting of booster stations that was articulated by the hon. Minister of Finance. Not one word coming from the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West who is the Minister of Public Utilities in terms of these booster stations but I will tell you why, Madam Speaker, that the hon. Minister totally skirted this issue.

Once more, without any details, the Minister of Finance claimed in his presentation that the construction and the outfitting of booster stations will impact approximately 31 people to receive a five-day per week water supply schedule. Like many other things, the Government has a penchant for making announcements without any follow-up. Today I ask the Minister, tell us, where will these booster stations be located? How many booster stations do you propose? What is the proposed cost of these booster stations?

Madam Speaker, I want to tell the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West and the Minister of Finance, in announcing booster stations first, you have to have water in order to boost.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You have done absolutely nothing to increase the production levels but you are announcing booster stations.

Madam Speaker, WASA has claimed that there has been a reduction in water leaks, despite the assurances, we know differently. Every day, we are seeing every corner of this country, new leaks emerging and old leaks left unattended for weeks and months. This shows the continued negligence and under-resourcing of WASA. We have seen in numerous budget presentations by this incompetent Government the reduction in allocation for WASA. What WASA is facing now is the impact of the reduction in allocation to WASA over the past eight years.

Madam Speaker, let us deal with these modular water treatment plants. A Minister of Public Utilities who stood in the Parliament for 55 minutes not once mentioned these modular water treatment plants. But again I will tell you why the hon. Minister chose not to mention these modular water treatment plants. You see it was in March of 2022 that the Minister came to the population and he announced not one, not two, but 10 modular water treatment plants. The Minister further went on to say that in October 2022—Madam Speaker, we are in October of 2023. Minister said in October 2022, the first water treatment plant would be delivered in central Trinidad. Madam Speaker, I can assure you that I have visited central Trinidad and there is no modular water treatment plant that has been delivered. The Minister did not speak of any of these modular water treatment plants.

When my colleague, the Member for Oropouche East asked the Minister in August of last year about the memorandum of understanding that was signed

between the Ministry of Public Utilities here and a Canadian entity, the Minister said he knew nothing about it. Mind you, Madam Speaker, in March 2022, the Minister was the one who made the announcement of the MOU being signed with the Canadian authorities. Madam Speaker, they speak from both sides of their mouths with the hope that the population will forget the promises that they have made to them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Today, I want to ask the hon. Minister: Are these plants on or off? What are the terms and conditions of the MOU signed with the Canadian authorities for these plants? What is the average cost of these plants? Where will these plants be located? What is the capacity of production for each plant? What is the source of water for the plants identified?

Madam Speaker, the desalination plant contract, this was another red herring, a bogey that was thrown out by both the Prime Minister and the Member for Diego Martin North/East and the Minister of Public Utilities at some point. And the Minister of Finance when he spoke and delivered the budget presentation, the Minister announced that there will be a review of the desalination contracts that are up in 2028. I want to encourage the Member for Diego Martin North/East to either go back to WASA, the Minister of Public Utilities or the Cabinet documents because the desalination contracts expire in 2034 and 2036, not 2028.

And, Madam Speaker, what the Minister is signalling purposely or “unpurposely”, but I tend to believe it purposely is an attempt to shut down, privatize WASA, get rid of the unions, have a new entity take over—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: —and then renegotiate, break the contracts for these desalinating plants and then renegotiate these contracts or send them packing. But,

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Public Utilities and the Minister of Finance need to answer the questions of the desalinating contracts.

Madam Speaker, you may ask well if I know what all the challenges in the water sector are and I have identified the areas in the budget that we are most concerned about in terms of from the Opposition, what would we do? And Madam Speaker, I will tell you it is not what we would do eh, it is what we have done before and what we will do again.

In the short term, we will re-establish the Ministry of Water Resources. We will hire additional water trucking contractors at WASA and regional corporations. Madam Speaker, when we had the challenge of the desalination plant going down in Point Lisas and the Caroni water treatment plant having operational challenges, for weeks, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West sat on his hands and remained silent while people suffered for water in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: After the UNC smoked him out, the Minister of Public Utilities—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—got his PR and communications person to put out a press release on Sunday evening indicating that WASA would be providing truck borne water to the areas where the Caroni water treatment plant and the desalination plant was down that impacted.

Madam Speaker, I can say with this certainty, no additional resources were deployed to WASA to add to relieving the burden of citizens. Instead, the regional corporations and particularly, it was the regional corporations controlled by the UNC were then placed under pressure because they were inundated with calls from constituents and residents across the length and breadth of this country begging,

pleading, and crying at their mercy for water.

Madam Speaker, I then with my colleagues, the Members especially who represent the central and south constituencies together with the chairmen of our regional corporations called on the Minister of Local Government, the Minister of Finance to add additional resources to regional corporations to provide water trucking services because water trucking services, the regional corporations, Madam Speaker, I understand, that is only done where in areas where there is no WASA infrastructure. That is what it is meant to address. It is not meant to address when WASA “lock off yuh taps”.

Madam Speaker, saddled with that burden of hundreds of thousands of citizens in central and south Trinidad, the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, the Minister of Finance, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Public Utilities refused to act in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago in those areas, and therefore want to come to lecture us today about racial discrimination and geographic discrimination.

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

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, that hogwash, that distraction, that feeble, weak—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: —leadership coming from the Minister of Public Utilities, we will have none of it. You see, Madam Speaker, we told them establish communal tanks in rural areas in particular. We told them to expand the water tank distribution service, immediately upgrade the capacity of water treatment plants and dams. Those were the short measures we told them to use, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, you know it is often said the devil is in the details and one of the areas that we told them to address was the issue of the water tank

programme that they like to parrot about that affects the depressed and underserviced communities. When you look at the *Public Sector Investment Programme* and it seems you know the Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East who likes to tell people “they doh read”, well he should tell the Minister of Public Utilities that he does not read. Because when you go to the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, it tells you that in the last financial year, that 80 projects for water tank services in depressed and underserviced communities were identified, when you look at how much was delivered, Madam Speaker, in a year where we have seen tremendous trouble for water throughout many of these communities, particularly communities that are considered depressed communities, out of 80 water projects, a big fat zero was delivered. Zero.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, you know I heard the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West and also the Member for Tobago West speak about the fact that they are proud products of the PNM and they are proud of the legacy of the PNM that they represent. I want to tell those two Members today, Madam Speaker, when you look at 46 years of governing Trinidad and Tobago and you look at page 232 of the *Public Sector Investment Programme* and you look at page 134 of the *Social Sector Investment Programme*, it truly tells you why you are proud to be a part of that PNM legacy. You see for that 46 years, according to page 232, Madam Speaker, they have a new programme called the National Rainwater Harvesting Programme. In the 21st century, for rural areas, their proud legacy of governing this country for 46 years is the National Rainwater Harvesting Programme.

Madam Speaker, let me read for you what page 134 of the *Social Sector Investment Programme* says for the Latrine Eradication Programme that they are

so proud about for the past 46 years, they have kept their own constituents in squalor and bondage.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: This is what it says:

“Additionally, the Ministry will pursue the formation of an Advisory Committee to finalize a policy direction for the LEP.”

Latrine Eradication Programme. Budget 2024, page 134. When they say something hits the fan, this takes it to a whole new level.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: But this is the legacy that the Member for Tobago West was so proud to represent knowing that her party have been in power for 46 years.

Madam Speaker, I want to turn to the area of Cedros and I want to deal with Cedros in a very particular way because of the geographical nature and the underrepresentation by Members opposite of areas like Cedros and Chatham and Icacos. Madam Speaker, I want to pay tribute today to a few people who are community leaders, community activists who stood on the side lines and battled this Government to ensure that they receive water despite all the excuses.

I want to start with the UNC Members of the Siparia Borough Corporation. I want to single out Councillor Shankar Teelucksingh for his leadership in Icacos, Chatham and Cedros.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: I want to single out Sunil Sookram, community activist, June Ramnarine seen on the front page of yesterday's newspaper.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Seeraj, Mr. Baboolal. Madam Speaker, the issues in Cedros can be fixed very quickly but it requires political will and out of spite and

malice and hatred, these areas continue to suffer. Why? Because they are known to be UNC-supporting areas. That is why, Madam Speaker. That is why.

3.15 p.m.

Madam Speaker, Wells Nos. 17 and 9 at the Granville Water Treatment Plant. Those wells are shut down every night. You why Madam Speaker?—due to a low voltage problem. Madam Speaker, Granville has seven wells. Only one new well was drilled under Minister Le Hunte, and that was in 2017. Four more were promised plus a plant upgrade; nothing has been done since 2017, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, instead all you hear about is wells and MAXCO in Cedros, Penal, Chatham and Icacos for the purposes of giving out contracts. And one of the reasons why I asked about this hydrological report, Madam Speaker, is that I am advised that there are over 600 wells in Trinidad, however, only 50 of these wells—

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town, your original speaking time is now spent. You have 10 more minutes to complete your contribution.

Mr. B. Padarath: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Please proceed.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you Madam.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, I am calling for the Minister of Public Utilities, to put in the public domain the latest hydrological report. When last has this Government done a hydrological report on the over 600 wells in Trinidad? Madam Speaker, they continue to announce the drilling of additional wells. They will not tell you the cost to drill one of those wells is over \$2 million, Madam Speaker; to drill one well. But, I understand why they like wells on the ground and wells on the board, Madam Speaker. I understand, Madam Speaker, about

MAXCO, and the reason for why they may like these wells, Madam Speaker.

But, Madam Speaker, they have not indicated whether it is only, whether it is true that only 50 of these 600 wells are in operation. Madam Speaker, these are the burning critical issues that are affecting the water sector, the water sector. Madam Speaker, I want to pay particular attention to two pieces of news items, and one has to do with the *Guardian* editorial that I saw yesterday. The *Guardian* spoke about successive governments not dealing with the dilapidated mains and pipelines, and they attributed all the problems in the water sector to that issue. And the injection of the \$1.4 billion, through the IDB and the others, will be the panacea to the issue, that they were looking forward for.

But, today I want to call out the *Guardian*, because you must call a spade, a spade and stop hiding behind print for the purposes of political espionage, Madam Speaker. You must call out a government who has run this country for 46 years, has been in power for the last eight years consecutively and has done nothing as it relates to the infrastructure of WASA.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, we must ask ourselves why a People's Partnership Government was able to bring water production and water 24/7 in the pipes of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago by over 74 per cent. This is not the UNC saying that, Madam Speaker. It was a joint select committee of this Parliament earlier this year that you heard representatives of WASA admit that under the People's Partnership the country had 74 per cent water supply 24/7. Today in that same joint select committee, they admitted that only 13, 1-3, per cent of the population receives a 24/7 supply of water.

Hon. Member: Wow. What a shame. What a shame.

Mr. B. Padarath: And therefore, when the *Guardian*, talks about successive

administrations, not because you have to politically drop blows on the PNM, because you are forced to, because your failure is so bungling and in front of your face—

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: —that you have to throw the UNC, in it .We will take no blame for that because the evidence and the eating, Madam Speaker, and the facts is the eating.

Madam Speaker: So Members, there is a continuous, you know, underlying sound in the Chamber and while the Member of Prince Town has a fulsome volume, it is still interfering with my hearing. So I will ask all Members, please to oblige with Standing Order 53. Member for Princes Town.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I want to deal with the issue of T&TEC, and again, Madam Speaker, a lot of the issues that we have been raising in the public domain, the Regulated Industries Commission, in terms of the impending increases in water and electricity Madam Speaker, we have been saying to the RIC that you cannot bring about higher water and electricity rates without fixing the problems at WASA and T&TEC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3:20 p.m.

You cannot saddle citizens with the burdens and the debts of the State, Madam Speaker. And therefore, Madam Speaker, for the past two to three years Members opposite, whether it is the Member for Oropouche East, the Member for Barataria/San Juan, myself, sometimes the Member for Mayaro, speaking about the utility companies, but also speaking about state companies like Petrotrin where the Government has taken on the same blurred playbook of demonizing the company, and then shutting them into the ground, sending home employees and then opening

up a newer entity. The very same thing is happening at T&TEC, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I just explained to you what is happening at WASA, let me explain to you what is happening at T&TEC. Madam Speaker, in an answer to a question in this House, it was admitted that T&TEC is owed by the State \$1.4 billion. Madam Speaker, when we sit in the Standing Finance Committee, and I can recall from 2017 we have been asking, these large increases in Ministries, in terms of will this be—for electricity and water, will this settle the outstanding arrears? “Oh yes, yes, yes, if we need additional we will come for it.”

Madam Speaker, let me tell you what the real deal is, in terms of how much the State owes to T&TEC: WASA owes \$834 million to T&TEC; Petrotrin owes \$147 million to T&TEC; UDeCOTT, \$101 million to T&TEC; Ministry of Education, \$60 million; Ministry of Housing, \$34 million; Ministry of Education, \$33 million; Tobago House of Assembly, \$23 million; UDeCOTT, Madam Speaker, I said \$101 million; Ministry of National Security, \$4 million. Madam Speaker—

Ms. Ameen: And they want to “cut people bill”.

Mr. B. Padarath:—it was in an article on the 4th of September, 2022, written by one Curtis Williams, that said:

“The minister acknowledged that the state of affairs was unacceptable but...”—that—“...the Government was seeking to protect the population from high electricity rates.”

Madam Speaker, I just told you it is what—they tell the population things from both sides of their mouths. But the real crux of the matter, Madam Speaker, is that they continue to tax and pauperize the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And, Madam Speaker, that is what is happening at T&TEC.

Madam Speaker, I want to deal in the last few minutes that I have, with the

approach and the strategy of this Government. Madam, this is by far the worst incarnation of an inept, hapless, bungling and failed PNM.

Hon. Members: “Awww.” [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: They are all symbols of generational failures that have kept their constituencies and core support base in bondage. Keeping them poor and destitute means keeping the PNM in power. Madam Speaker, you cannot seriously speak about progress after 46 years, yet your supporters in many parts of this country still depend on rainwater in barrels and buckets, and handouts from the State to buy groceries. Madam Speaker, that is not progress, that is abuse.

Madam Speaker, you cannot give pittance of \$3 more and then tell the population, pay property tax this year, higher water rates this year, higher electricity rates this year; that is not progress, that is abuse. You cannot tell citizens to curtail macaroni pie and cinema attendance, but you are hosting gala dinners at the Hyatt on the back of supporters; that is not progress, that is abuse. You cannot tell the country that you are protecting women and girls but promote sexual predators to plump foreign jobs; that is not progress that is abuse.

Hon. Members: “Ohhh.” [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6).

Hon. Member: [] “He didn’t all no name.”

Madam Speaker: Okay, so Member for Princes Town, in respect to your last example, I would ask you to withdraw that, okay?

Mr. B. Padarath: I withdraw, Madam. Madam, you cannot tell citizens with hungry bellies lined up for food support, that they are greedy. That is not progress, that is abuse. Madam Speaker, yesterday was Mental Health Day, and I ask Trinidad and Tobago to take stock, because how much more abuse can you take. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Works and Transport.

3.25 p.m.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan):

Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, thank you for allowing me the privilege of having to come to the House to give a full report on the performance of the Ministry of Works and Transport.

I want to also thank the Prime Minister and leader of the People's National Movement for allowing me to deliver my seventh response as Minister of Works and Transport.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And I will tell you why that is significant. No Member opposed to the PNM has ever done anything like that. They were never allowed two terms in government. After one term, they were kicked out. And this Government is on a roll to get three terms, 15 years, in office.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: So that is why that is significant for me.

I also want to congratulate the Minister of Finance for delivering a budget that all the detractors could only term as an "election budget". Whenever you hear that term "election budget", it means it is a great budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: It is a budget that allows you to win the hearts and mind of the population so they are going to go back and vote for you. Well, this is not an election budget. This is just a budget that will continue to take Trinidad and Tobago forward, exactly what we promised when we came into office in 2015.

So, today, unlike the last contribution, I will report to the population on the

achievements of the Ministry of Works and Transport. What I am stating here is facts, it is not hearsay and “dey say”, like the discourse we just got. These are facts because I think the budget is about reporting to the population on achievements.

Madam Speaker, today, I intend to focus and share the vision that will continue to propel Trinidad and Tobago towards a brighter and more prosperous future. However, I stand here today, as we face a stark reality, our infrastructure has aged overtime while rapid growth has resulted in congested highways and long commuting times. Climate change poses new challenges that have placed considerable strain on our drainage system and infrastructure. Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago does not exist in isolation from the rest of the world, as we have not been spared from the ravage of climate change. Countries such as China, Puerto Rico and Hawaii have all felt the wrath of drastic changes in weather pattern. Australia and Canada have battled with wildfires, which have destroyed forest reserves, homes and communities.

Only recently, Brooklyn, New York, received a month’s rainfall in just three hours, leading to devastating floods and a state of emergency being declared. Right here at home, in July 2023, several areas of south Trinidad were deemed impassable after heavy rainfall caused severe flooding, similar to what happened in New York, where we got almost one month’s rainfall in three hours. Fortunately, for us here, because of the great work done by the Ministry of Works and Transport’s Drainage Division, within half an hour the water was able to recede. This type of unprecedented rainfall affects our drainage system and road infrastructure. It has proliferated a number of landslides across the country and overwhelmed our aged drainage infrastructure.

Madam Speaker, the theme of my contribution is “Rebuilding our

Infrastructure Together". The concept of together is pivotal in this endeavour, as rebuilding our infrastructure is not just a financial commitment, it is a collaborative and unified effort. It is about central government and local government working hand in hand with the private sector, community organizations and every single citizen. It is about transcending political divisions and focusing on what unites us, our shared future for the well-being of our country.

Madam Speaker, let me start and show how we intend to maximize economic potential through transportation and infrastructure. Madam Speaker, our last national comprehensive transportation plan dates back to 1967. So since 1967, we have been working with a transportation plan here in Trinidad and Tobago. There have been some adjustments to it, but not a comprehensive national transportation plan approved by the Cabinet. In fact, the Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension to Point Fortin, the project which we now know as the Point Fortin Highway, was recommendation of that plan. However, with expansive development throughout the country, there is a need to craft a new plan in alignment with our evolving societal needs. This is being approached on a phased basis, with the first step being the development of a national transportation policy.

In partnership with the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, CAF, the Ministry of Works and Transport commenced work on developing a comprehensive national transportation policy for Trinidad and Tobago. I am pleased to announce that in July 2023, we retained a consultant to undertake the development of this policy. And what does that policy mean for Trinidad and Tobago? What will we get from that? One, develop a comprehensive national transportation policy, tailored to the unique and multifaceted aspects of a transportation network; prepare a strategic guideline to ensure a holistic and interconnected approach; create a strategic roadmap, which

would be precise and define plans offering a clear path for the next five years; prioritize projects by creating a portfolio of priority development programmes, defining their sequence and seamless execution; recommending a governance and management framework to foster collaboration between the public and private sector for a shared and concise path forward; and institutional strengthening by implementing a robust training programme for capacity building and managing mobility and goods transportation. Madam Speaker, this national transportation plan is long overdue, and I am really happy that we finally can get a national transportation, which includes not just land transportation, but land, sea and air transportation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, at the rate this Government is going, very soon we might be like India. As the Minister of Finance said, we have to look at space as well. Madam Speaker, while this plan is being prepared, the Ministry has taken a three-pronged process to deal with our infrastructure—our land infrastructure. We have developed and implemented three pillars that continue to guide our work. This includes the continued build-out of a major highway network, the upgrade of our main and secondary road network, and the execution of traffic alleviation initiatives. In other words, Madam Speaker, we are looking at the entire build-out of the highway network in Trinidad. We are looking to upgrade all roads in Trinidad. And we are also looking at traffic alleviation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, under the highway programme, we were very happy, in May of this year, to deliver phase one of the Valencia to Toco Highway. That project has been on the books for over 30 years. This Government was able to deliver the first phase of the Valencia to Toco Highway.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And for those of you who do not traverse that part of the island, I welcome you to see the quality of work that has been done by the Ministry of Works and Transport on that highway. That project will continue all the way to Matelot, upgrading the entire road network, so we can have a first-class road all the way from Valencia to Matelot, similar to what we have in Tobago, which we call the Claude Noel Highway. It is a single-lane upgraded road with proper shoulders, lights, built to international standard.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And, Madam Speaker, all these works do come in, in budget, eh.

Madam Speaker, the Churchill Roosevelt Highway Extension to Sangre Grande, this project is ongoing and we are hoping to have the use of that segment of the highway, which is the extension of the Churchill Roosevelt Highway Extension to Sangre Grande, by the end of the first quarter in 2024. Again, a project that has been on the books since the '60s. This Government was able to have that project constructed. And by the first quarter of 2024, we will have access, with a new route into Sangre Grande, which we expect will open up the entire eastern quadrant of Trinidad. And I know the Member for Mayaro will be very happy because that will also help his constituency. You see, this Government does not just look at constituencies where we have our support. This project is in Cumuto/Manzanilla, extending all the way to Mayaro. So this Government looks at the development of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, a project that this country is supposed to be very proud of, the Solomon Hochoy Highway Extension to Point

Fortin. That project was the last project on the 1967 plan. Since 1967, that project was supposed to be commissioned. In 2008, again, a PNM Government decided that it was time to start that project. There were several starts and several stops going back to, I think it was 1998, when Trintoplan was commissioned; start, stop, start, stop, problem.

In 2010, the project was tendered out. The project was started in 2011 but, again, several challenges, several problems with that project. I am very happy that on Saturday, this Saturday, this week, a significant part of that highway will be commissioned and you will be able to drive from San Fernando to Point Fortin within 20 minutes, something that took an hour and a half, if there were no accidents or anything on the road. You can now commute from San Fernando to Point Fortin in about 20 minutes, and that is a great achievement of this Government.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: I know a lot of people will try to take credit. But I want to warn you, between 2010, 2011 and 2015, that is one project that nobody should try to take credit for. That was a nightmare for this country and it would have cost this country billions of dollars that was unnecessary. This Government brought it back into line and we are now at the final stage. We have one part of the highway that there are works that are going to go on, but it does not stop the commuting from San Fernando to Point Fortin in 20 minutes.

Madam Speaker, I could talk about the Diego Martin overpass, another project started and completed by this Government. And if you listen to the comments coming out from the people of the western peninsula, they are very happy about this project. We are hoping that by the end of November we will be able to open this project 100 per cent.

Madam Speaker, the upgrade of the Manzanilla Road to Mayaro, another

project I know the Members for Mayaro and Cumuto/Manzanilla have been very excited about. We knew what went on, on that road a couple months ago. The Ministry of Works and Transport, through the PURE Unit, would have started the rebuilding of the road, and we are on track. We are on target. We are not just rebuilding and repairing the road from the state it was before. We are hoping that by the time we are finished, we will have the same standard that we have in Valencia.

3.40 p.m.

We all know about driving through the coconuts. The road was below what we call international standards. The width of the road was not what we consider international standards. So yes, we are widening the road to just bring it to that international standard. So we should have a much better road once this is completed. This will again encourage more people to coming to Mayaro. So again, the Government's focus is to connect the entire country where you can drive around the country on roads that will not take you more than half an hour from one town, one city, to a next.

Madam Speaker, it is no secret that our nation's roads face unique challenges. In some cases, the historical evolution of a country's road infrastructure has been characterized by unplanned and non-engineering roads. Rapid growth and development increased the axle load capacity of vehicles and the placement of utility lines within the wheel path of our roadways have all contributed to the deterioration of our roadways.

Also, it is important to note that roads which were previously serving agriculture communities have now become major roads for commercial vehicles. Our road infrastructure continues to be directly and indirectly impacted by the effects of climate change. We are now experiencing more intense dry periods,

which causes our clay-type soil structures in the southern region to crack to greater depths, and with the onset of the rainy season, these cracks fill with water triggering landslips. The collapse of the Manzanilla-Mayaro roadway is one example of extreme climate change events.

And Members on the opposite side would recognize that most of the areas that they represent we have this clayey soil and the amount of landslips that occur has everything to do with the soil and with climate change, I mean that has posed even greater problem for us.

Through the work of the Highways Division, the Programme for Upgrade Road Efficiency Unit, and the Bridge and Landslip Unit and the traffic management, under the Minister of Works and Transport, we have undertaken over 600 projects in areas of road rehabilitation, slope stabilization, traffic management measures, bridge construction, milling and paving, strengthening of roadways, reconstruction of collapsed cylinder crossings, bridge repair, sidewalks and manhole cover repairs.

In fiscal 2023, the Highways Division continues its aggressive Road Rehabilitation Programme where we have brought online several small contractors to assist us with the patching of roads because not all roads can be paved at the same time. So we have to maintain the existing roads. And we have patched over 67,175 m² of road surfaces across all districts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, there are several projects as I said the Highways Division, and PURE, and BLT, this year we calculated we had over 600 projects, never before, never before had we done that amount of projects in Trinidad and Tobago. And that is why, even at this time when we are reading the budget, normally what you find is work will slow down and we are waiting for

funding to start other work.

Our road paving programme started in January 2023. The Prime Minister did indicate that there will be a major Road Rehabilitation Programme ongoing, and as we speak, our roadways are being repaired on the outside.

Our drive is to upgrade all roads in Trinidad and Tobago, all roads. However, all cannot be done at the same time but we are working with a programme the Ministry have worked out a programme on first phase, three years, a second three years, and a third phase, which encompasses road maintenance, road safety, traffic alleviation, and government policy, and to support local government with all the secondary roads.

Our Road Paving Programme is very aggressive, and I know I do receive a lot of compliments from Members on the other side although it is not going to be—they are not going to say thank you publicly. But I appreciate the sentiments that you all send when you see road paving happening in your areas. Chaguanas West, thank you.

So, Madam Speaker, that is the second way that we are attacking our road rehabilitation. First is continuing the highway programme; second, rehabilitating all roads on a phased basis, and third, we do have a major traffic problem in Trinidad. We have been developing and we have not been planning our developments. So if you look at a place like Chaguanas, Chaguanas does have a serious traffic problem, but it is not only in Chaguanas, it is around the country. So we have identified several projects that we will be attempting in the next financial year for traffic alleviation.

One of these projects was launched just last week in Arima, which is the Andrews Lane to the O'Meara Road project and the O'Meara Road Upgrade Project where we will actually be upgrading that whole intersection there to move

traffic off the highway into Arima, and have a smooth transition from the highway into the secondary roads in Arima.

We also have a project called the Churchill Roosevelt Highway widening where we know, you come from the Grand Bazaar Interchange and you come from three lanes down to Chaguanas, and then you have to bottleneck into two lanes. So the project there is to continue the widening of the highway to three lanes but you doing it in phases. Because we cannot widen from Chaguanas to San Fernando all at once. So this year we will be attempting to widen from Chaguanas to Couva. And that will bring a great ease in the area. The Tumpuna Road Network upgrade. If you look at the Tumpuna interchange if you are trying to get into La Horquetta on an evening, it is a nightmare. So we are upgrading that entire intersection not with interchange and so, but just by simply widening some of the roads and allowing two lanes to go into La Horquetta instead of one lane because we do have land on the other side. So it is about reorganizing how we deal with these connector roads.

In Sangre Grande for those of you who commute to Sangre Grande, you will recognize that Sangre Grande is a nightmare. So what we are doing is that we are looking at roads around Sangre Grande. So if you want to go to Manzanilla, Mayaro, Foster Road, Biche, you do not have to go into the town. You could bypass the town and go around and get to your destination.

Endeavour interchange upgrade: If you are coming out of some of the shopping areas in Chaguanas you have to go all the way around by the hardware Chanramlal, go up, come down. What we are doing, we are upgrading that area and these projects, studies were done, engineers would have designed them, they are not the answer to all the traffic but they will help with traffic alleviation.

Munroe Road Interchange upgrade: Another area that we have serious traffic

problems. The Solomon Hochoy Highway, again Chaguanas to Chase Village Project, Maraval access point. I know the Minister of Finance has been clamouring about this. If you try to get in and out of Maraval during peak hours, it is a nightmare. So we have a project that have started to widen the bridge, to move the bridge from two lanes to four lanes. And then we will be widening, putting an extra lane coming out so in the morning you could have two lanes coming out, one going in, and in the evening you have two lanes going in, one lane coming out.

The San Fernando Bypass, the Torouba Link Road, again nightmare. Indian Trail Overpass, and for those of you who know that Couva area it is really a risk trying to get in and out by the Indian Trail Overpass. So that is another project. And there are several other projects that we are looking at for traffic alleviation. But again, all cannot be done at the same time but we have started with these projects.

Madam Speaker, it is not just about—we recognize that we cannot build our way out of traffic. So what we are also using is soft infrastructure projects similar to what I described about Maraval, where you have two lanes going in in the evening, one lane coming out. And we will be using technology, signage and so to indicate these benefits.

You have the Traffic Enforcement Centre in Caroni, we have gotten the permission and working with national security is to link cameras to that traffic enforcement centre where we can advise the citizens about one, accidents in certain areas, and give routes that they can use, bypass certain areas and use different routes. We are using signage to identify different routes to take you to a final destination. So we are going to incorporate in our projects soft infrastructure projects and using smart technology to improve on the traffic management.

Madam Speaker, the drive at the Ministry of Works and Transport is simple,

it is to improve our infrastructure to that international standard so we can have a seamless commuting where you can get to any point in the Trinidad and Tobago, and you will have information to take you from point A to point B. Our signage in the entire country is being upgraded because we do have a problem with signage in Trinidad. We recognize that and Cabinet has approved for the Ministry to go out and improve the entire signage network throughout the entire country.

Madam Speaker, as I said before, climate change has posed some serious challenges for us. In terms of landslips and bridges, we have identified on a bridges programme about 63 bridges at this point in time that have to be rebuilt—sorry 92, so far 37 have been delivered, 14 are ongoing, and we have 12 bridges to start within the next month or so. That will bring us to 63, and hopefully over the next two years the next 29 will be attempted.

So what we will have is a large improvement in the amount of bridges. However, with climate change going forward we have to even revisit the way we build our bridges because we must recognize now the flow of water under the bridges that we have constructed was designed for a certain amount of water. What we see happening now is that that has drastically changed.

Under our Landslip Programme, we have identified over 300 landslips in Trinidad and landslips continue to be added today this listing on almost a daily basis. Because during the dry season as explained, we have cracking of the soil, and when we get the downpour what happens is you have mass movement of the land. So we have devised three methods of dealing with landslips where we actually have temporary shoring up of these landslips while we design a permanent solution to them. And this year we were able to deliver on about 25 of these landslips, and we have another 35 to be started. However, our goal is to ensure that all roads remain passable.

So what you will find is that we cannot attempt all the landslips at one time, landslips are very costly. They are very costly but we have to make sure that the roads are passable. So what we do, immediately we will go in, shore up the road, make sure that it is passable. In the event that a road is not passable and an emergency, we ensure that they have alternative routes. So no part of this country remains disconnected, and so far the Ministry has done a great job with that.

Madam Speaker, let me turn to the Drainage Division, and under-the-road programme. It is important that I mention that at this point in time we have over 700 contracts where work is being done in this country. And this does not include the major highways. It is over \$2 billion in infrastructure that has been awarded and work is ongoing in the last fiscal year. And that is why if you speak to the contractors, they will tell you the construction sector in this country is booming.

3.55 p.m.

The construction sector in this country is booming. This is something that we had promised, that this country, we would rebuild the infrastructure. The contractors are telling you that there is a lot of work now on the market.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: A lot of work on the market. I can tell you a lot of the contractors who would have migrated or moved some of their equipment to other parts of the Caribbean are now bringing them back. They are not bringing them back, and that is a good sign for us here in Trinidad and Tobago. Our construction sector is booming. However, we do operate under strict procurement laws at the Ministry of Works and Transport. So once you are willing to come tender, past the technical, then the amount of work to be done in this country we are welcoming contractors. We actually have a programme now where we are trying to train contractors, showing them how to tender properly, and giving them

advice and directions as to how to get into our programmes. So we do have a lot of work.

Madam Speaker, climate change has ushered in a new era of challenges. With increased intense rainfall, our drainage systems require strategic intervention. This year, in numerous instances across the globe, drainage systems designed for historical rainfall patterns have proven woefully insufficient against the intense and unprecedented downpours brought on by climate change. Internationally it has been recognized that the drainage infrastructure required to handle the escalating volume rainfall is a critical concern in the face of climate change.

Madam Speaker, again, the Ministry is not operating by guess. The Ministry recognized that we did a lot of plans in the past and a lot of studies. Nothing, nothing that we did was ever utilized. And in 2018, the Ministry was quite clear that we had to get a new national strategic drainage plan. We engaged the Andean Development Bank again on this matter and from grant funding, we were able to now have a consultant on board working on this national drainage plan.

What we expect from this national drainage plan, Madam Speaker, is a way forward, how to deal with the whole infrastructure in the country when it comes to drainage. Because we recognize what is happening with climate change and just a simple desilting programme every year is not going to help us. I can say this year, the desilting programme did 636 projects; never before anything like that. And I think if you drive around the country, you will recognize that all drains— You drive on the highway from Grand Bazaar to Point Fortin, all the rivers have been cleaned. That programme was a very intense programme this year.

The Drainage Division did over 750 projects, over 600 in desilting alone. All right. And to complement the desilting, recognizing that desilting is not going to save us, they went into river walling, river widening and some of the rivers— It

is important that I call some of the work that went into some of the rivers so that Members on the opposite side will know that all the rivers in their constituencies are also being attended to.

Madam Speaker, the Caroni River Rehabilitation and Improvement Works project. We recognize that the Caroni River is a major river that brings water all the way from Tamana, all the way down through Arima straight down to Port of Spain. The Caroni River runs all the way through and a major project is taking place on the Caroni River. And for Members Caroni East and Chaguanas and Couva South who always call about the about the flooding in their areas, this project will bring a lot of relief to that area; a lot a relief to that area.

Work is also going on in areas like the St Ann's River, the Maraval River, the Goolcharan River, the Bagatelle Ravine in Diego Martin, Carapo River, the Mausica River, St Ann's, the Oropouche River, Dunderhill Ravine in Bon Air West. The Boys Ravine in Carenage, St. Ann's, Bagatelle River, the Caparo River, the St. Joseph River, the Laventille Road in San Juan, Santa Cruz Old Road, the San Juan River in Santa Cruz, La Pastora Garden in Santa Cruz, the Guapo River in Point Fortin and the La Seiva River.

Madam Speaker, our drainage department have stood out this financial year, because all the projects that they were attempting they were able to get boots on the ground. I know in the Standing Finance Committee, some questions will be asked about some of the line Items where money was not spent. I can say the drainage department this year has committed over \$350 million in drainage projects, over \$350 million dollars in drainage projects with the anticipation of what we are facing with climate change. We are very proactive and that is why we have the services of the Andean Development Bank consultants going forward. And it is just not about again, not about just desilting. It is a major project to take

us forward over the next 10 years in terms of how we rebuild our drainage infrastructure.

Madam Speaker, in terms of our Coastal Protection Unit this year over seven projects have been attempted. The Cap-de-Ville Shoreline Stabilization Works, the Mayaro/Guayaguayare Coastal management works, rehabilitation of the existing seawalls in Lady Hailes Avenue, several other projects and these projects will continue. We see our Coastal Protection Unit as a major unit for us because we know what is happening, again, with climate change and what is happening on the coast. This year we have seven projects earmarked to start under the Coastal Protection Unit. And if I could give a little indication, the Moruga coastal protection work phase one, Otaheite shoreline stabilization, Little Rocky Bay stabilization, the south Manzanilla shoreline stabilization, the Paria Main Road coastal repair work, Macqueripe seawall rehabilitation, Cap-de-Ville shoreline stabilization and the East Guayaguayare shoreline stabilization work. Madam Speaker, these are just some of the projects under the maritime section that we will be attempting this year.

Madam Speaker, if I speak about the maritime sector, we are working vigorously on the Toco Port. We are at the stage where we are getting the statutory requirements, and that project is online. We also working on the drydock facility in La Brea. Again, all the statutory requirements are being worked on and very soon we will be commissioning the fishing facility in Moruga. I am hoping that by the end of November, we should be able to open the land site facility in Moruga, which will bring a lot of employment for the people and relief to the fishermen in Moruga. I am hoping that on that day the Member for Moruga will attend the open, obviously without any tyres.

Ms. Benjamin: I would not even be invited.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: I will invite—I will make sure that you get that invitation. I promise you, through the Chairman.

Mr. Deyalsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: No, yeah, but no protests.

Ms. Benjamin: Yeah, I realize that—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, I know from time to time the Member for Moruga complains about infrastructure, but I tried to reason with the Member for Moruga for her to understand that Moruga has a major problem with soil type. We have spent more money in Moruga on infrastructure over the last five years compared to any other constituency in Trinidad. And we continue to spend money in places like Moruga because, Madam Speaker, I really will—I am sure after 2025 Moruga will be sitting on this side of the House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Moruga will be on the PNM side. So, we intend to continue our work in Moruga.

Madam Speaker, in terms of—road infrastructure is one part of the Ministry, transportation is another major area that we are working on. And I can tell you that the PTSC, the Public Transport Service Corporation, is the tool that we will use to create a mass transportation system in this country. We cannot again build ourselves out of traffic jam, but if we have a proper working public transportation system, that is what will help us and at the Ministry of Works and Transport, my colleague, Minister in the Ministry, Sen. Richie Sookhai, he is working on the PTSC, on that project, and very soon we should be in a position to acquire an additional 300 buses. But putting 300 buses in the same system will not solve our problem and we recognize that.

So, we are also working on a smart transportation system to improve the service at PTSC. We are also working on routes because the idea of a public transportation system is not just to work on the highways. It is to get into the rural areas as well. And I am very confident that we will be able to deliver a proper working public transportation system to this country very soon and that will help us again with our traffic alleviation problems. We have also—the Cabinet have also approved a checkered ban maxi taxi system for rural areas. And that will be coming on stream shortly. That again will help with transportation in this country.

Madam Speaker, I did indicate that transportation is land, sea and air and I do not think I have to go into the sea transportation and Trinidad. I think the population—I was in Tobago last week meeting with the Chamber, we did have an interruption on the cargo section, and all indications from everybody in Tobago is that they are quite satisfied with our passenger service to Tobago. For the first time we have four passenger vessels—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: —working between the islands. And apart from the mishap we had with the cargo vessel, which was an accident, they are quite satisfied with the service that they are getting in Tobago. Unfortunately, in this House, a Member was talking about starvation. When I went to Tobago they said that that Member who spoke about starvation in Tobago does not represent them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: They have two representatives in the Parliament, and Couva South does not represent the people of Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the licence office. I have to touch on the licence office because we have seen a drastic improvement in the service of the licensing department in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And yes, we have a long way to go because you still have people complaining about the service in the licence office. But I do get a lot of commendations on the service at the licence office. We are hoping to bring the licence office to the point where you only visit the licence office if you have a problem. In other words, we are trying to put all the services at the licence office online. And we have succeeded in doing quite a lot of them already and we are hoping this year for those students or first time applicants for an online permit, you do not have to go to a licence office anymore to apply for that provisional permit, you can do that online. You apply online, they give you a date when you go in with your document, they give you your permit one time. You do not have to go down and make an appointment and then come back. You make your appointment and so online.

4.10 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Minister, your original speaking time is now spent. You have 10 minutes to complete your contribution if you so wish.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Yes.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, this year adding to the online services at Licensing Office will be renewal for driver's permit. So no longer will you have to go to Licensing Office to renew your permit. You will be able to do it online and you will be able to get it delivered home by the TTPost.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: That system is in place. It is being tested now and we are hoping that by the first quarter, 2024, it will be rolled out.

Mr. Charles: It is sounding like Singapore.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Yeah. Well, I mean, the Government of this country has a lot of foresight so I am happy to hear the Member for Naparima saying this country is getting like Singapore. Singapore is quite a developed society, eh, and thank you, Member for Naparima. I think you are the first Member on the Opposition side to compliment this Government in that manner.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: We are getting like Singapore, thank you. So Licensing Office again is an area that we are very proud of at the Ministry of Works and Transport. We do have a long way to go but technology has been embraced at Licensing Office, and there are several aspects of Licensing Office that you can now do at home.

Madam Speaker, I know my time is running out but I have to again compliment the Airports Authority of the Trinidad and Tobago. Again for the third time they have been judged the best airport in the Caribbean.

Dr. Moonilal: You are welcome.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Now, I know the Opposition likes to say, “Well, we bil’ it”, you built it for about 20 years and you won nothing. It took a PNM Government to come and improve the airport.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: We had to come in and improve the airport, and for the third time, consecutively—after 20 years they could not “win nothing” with the airport, you know. For three—we came in, did what we have to do and now Trinidad is judged the best airport in the Caribbean.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: But more than that, Madam Speaker, the airport will be the first, for the first time, and we are hoping to commission this, a solar park in

the airport. That is forward thinking. That is forward thinking. The Piarco Airport will be the first solar park in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Scotland: “Barbados have that?”

Mr. Charles: “Long time.”

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: The first solar park in Trinidad, and this will be commissioned later on this year. What that will do, it will contribute about 8 per cent of electricity to the airport.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And that is just the start. That is how we are thinking at the Ministry.

Mr. Hosein: A stray dog running on the runway.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: For the first time the airport—
will be utilized I know it is hard for you all to vision that, eh, because—

Mr. Hosein: What about Brownie?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: I mean, unfortunately the airport—

Madam Speaker: Okay. So, Members, we started off with the reminder about crosstalk, all right? This is a conversation. While it is for all our ears, it is a conversation between the Minister of Works and Transport and the Chair. If Members want to make an interruption, they know the relevant Standing Order or the remaining Members can treat with the issue in their contribution. Minister of Works and Transport.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Thank you. I know, Madam Speaker, when they hear about the airport on the other side, progress and vision is not what they think about. They do not think about the airport had a certain stigma. We have transformed that airport, taken away that stigma from the airport and now the airport is the number one airport in the Caribbean—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan:—and again, using the solar park to power at least 8 per cent of the electricity required by the airport, and that is the start. The vision for that is to have, down the road, that when planes come in that they can plug in and utilize the facilities there.

So, Madam Speaker, we can go on, on a lot of things that the airport is doing, upgrade of the runway. We have plans to upgrade the terminal building this year, because we do have in Trinidad now, a lot of traffic that use the airport to move to different destinations. The airport is also working on other carriers to come to Trinidad, and those who are operating here, to increase the amount of flights in and out. And, Madam Speaker, another proud moment for the airport, that whole aerodrome that we started over 20-odd years ago and could not go forward with it, right now, as we speak, there is a hotel being constructed. So the airport city, the first airport city in the Caribbean has started right here in Trinidad and Tobago under this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: And that is something again we are supposed to be proud about. That will create over 10,000 high-paying jobs for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Port Authority, again, they continue to improve the services. This year they commissioned a new ship-to-shore gantry crane; overhaul, the hydraulic ramps at Port of Spain and Scarborough; installed four new X-ray bag scanners, and the port will continue over the next year to improve on the equipment at the port, because the Port of Port of Spain, our dream is to ensure that that port remains the number one port again in the Caribbean. There is the public-private partnership that the port is seeking, that process continues, and very

soon, once that RFP goes out, if the port and the Government find a suitable partner, then the port will engage that partner again to improve the services at the Port of Port of Spain. Until then, the port will continue to improve its services.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Works and Transport is probably one of the largest Ministries in Trinidad and it encompasses several different aspects and several different state enterprises. The Caridoc facility was transferred to the Ministry of Works and Transport, and again that company is being worked on, and very soon we should be in the process of having a new floating dock at Caridoc. Also, Lake Asphalt was transferred to the Ministry of Works and Transport and since then we have seen a drastic improvement in the availability of bitumen and the products that Lake Asphalt produce.

Also, recently, the National Quarries was transferred to the Ministry of Works and Transport, and I can assure you that the shortage we had in terms of material for highways and road networks, that also has started to improve. At the end of the day we have given the assurance that our infrastructure is being rebuilt, and it is being rebuilt—it has to be rebuilt with everyone and all hands on deck. The Ministry will continue to do what it has to do and very soon we will be very proud, just like the people on the Valencia Road, the people in Point Fortin who have these new roads.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Very soon the people in Mayaro; our friend in Moruga, and all the different areas where our road improvements have started to show signs. Everyone will very soon be very proud of the roads that we are driving on. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute in this very important debate on the budget and, indeed, matters related to several sectors. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of Works and Transport did not trouble me too much, so I really do not want to spend too much time on some of those issues he raised, but just to note that the Minister appears extremely excited with some of his policies and plans and programmes, and so on, and he is obviously passionate about that sector. It is a pity that we have these type of announcements eight years into the administration—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—and on the verge of demitting office that they come today to tell us about drainage, roads, bridges. You would not believe that this is an administration that has been there eight years and done nothing, precious little—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—and today would tell us about these plans. The Minister told us about that highway to Point Fortin as part of a project in 1967. That was started by the administration of the People's Partnership led by the Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: That is our project.

The Minister has gone every two, three years—not necessarily this Minister but a Minister of Works and Transport—to cut a ribbon to open half a mile, quarter mile. This Minister will be remembered as the Minister who presided over, as my friend from Toco/Sangre Grande reminded us, one-lane international highways.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And while I am happy as a southerner to hear of this highway to Point Fortin—20 minutes I am told it will take to Point Fortin to visit my friend

from Point Fortin down there, but the Minister in his 55 minutes, and I wish he had more time, honestly—I wish the Minister had more time because to this day the Minister has not told us how you will reach in 20 minutes passing through the “Mosquito crack” because that is not fixed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: A year and a half later we have no report. We are told \$64 million more because they built a piece of the highway at the Mosquito Creek, around there, and, Madam Speaker, it broke up like Crix biscuits on your plate, and that is what we face. So we cannot go 20 minutes to Point Fortin, I am afraid, if we have to pass through the “Mosquito crack”.

The Minister told us about drainage and bridges, and so on, but, Minister, I want to alert you, you and my friends on the other side are an Opposition in waiting.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: You are in the departure lounge, and we want to check your luggage before you leave. They are in the departure lounge, 20 months or so left. So nobody will believe any plans and programmes, nobody will accept it. Madam Speaker, today we heard from the Minister there telling us, you know, about climate change and so on. The Manzanilla Road breaking up since 1973, we are hearing about climate change today.

Madam Speaker, we heard about all the grand plans in Sangre Grande, everything the Minister touches he says, “That is a nightmare, this is a nightmare, that is a nightmare”. Eight years is a nightmare of the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Eight years they have been there. So, as I said, I do not want to get too carried away. The Minister told us that—what?—we will be resembling

India by land use, and so on, soon. I will tell him, India just put a rocket on the moon. You could not land a plane in Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—but we would be like India and so on, you know. The Minister is clearly passionate and excited by that sector and in the 22 months from now, I am sure he will avail himself of some employment opportunity around the sector when the United National Congress forms the government of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—because he may have some talent that we do not know about. Madam Speaker—

Mr. Charles: You have to give him a job. “He deserve it.”

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah. Because when you look around opposite, I do not know what they will be doing in 20 months from now, you know, half of them are unemployable, the next half untrainable.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: So I do not know what they will be doing.

Madam Speaker, let me get to the point immediately. Madam Speaker, no one listening to this debate would believe the state of the country we are in. On one would believe that on this day when I stand to speak in this debate, this morning was an assassination attempt on a Deputy Commissioner of Prisons in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Sinanan: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: I am finished with you, you can go.

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

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, no one will believe that there was an attempt

on the life—on the life of a Deputy Commissioner of Prisons. Today we extend very deep certain for Mr. Steve Phipps, prison officer, who was shot this morning at 7.00 a.m., or around there, in an attempt to assassinate a deputy commissioner of prisons.

Hon. Members: Wow.

Dr. R. Moonilal: This is where this country has reached. Madam Speaker, we have heard from the prison officers suggesting that it is a matter of hours before prison officers may walk out of the prison and go home and abandon their posts. And the Prime Minister, the Minister of National Security, in the last eight hours or so, have said nothing about this. That is a very scary development in a country when you have an attempt to assassinate such an officeholder.

Madam Speaker, this speaks to the collapse of the intelligence agencies. They have collapsed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: You know, they know when the UNC is holding a protest over the flyover, Monroe Road. They know when we are protesting, Debe Junction, but they do not have intelligence as to who is going to assassinate, attempt to kill a deputy commissioner of police.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: The entire intelligence agency should be fired forthwith—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—that you cannot intervene, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the political leader of this side, the government in waiting, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—gave a brilliant and comprehensive, detailed analysis of our problems, sector by sector, last Friday.

4.25 p.m.

We want to join our voices together and congratulate her—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—on that contribution. But, Madam Speaker, when I heard her I sat here and I was frightened, I was nervous, I was anxious. I could not believe that it is so much work we have to go and do again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And a lot of that work will be on the slender and not so slender shoulders of my colleagues on this side. But we will have to work hard to save this country, it will not be easy. Madam Speaker, if you can tell me one thing they have built, I will tell you one thing that they have not destroyed. They have destroyed every sector; every sector. We will have to rebuild to save this country, Madam Speaker.

And in the budget—the budget brought no hope, and to hear my colleagues opposite speak on this budget—the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West will eventually try to convince people, who are unemployed, that they are really not unemployed, eh, they are employed. That is where he is going eventually. The Members opposite spoke with such fanfare about development and so on.

The Member for St. Joseph, presiding over a particular sector—Madam Speaker, a constituent of mine went to the San Fernando General Hospital a few days ago—I do not want to be too specific—needed emergency dialysis. Do you know emergency dialysis was not available at the San Fernando General Hospital?

Hon. Member: Shame.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The constituent passed away. Now, I am not saying that if the constituent necessarily got that, it would have changed anything, but emergency—

that is a human resource challenge, not an equipment challenge, I am told. It is managing the human resources of the health sector to provide that.

Madam Speaker, in Mount Hope, the relatives of patients tell me, they buy toilet seats to go in the wards to put for male toilets, female toilets and so on. They go with—what is it called? Lasko fans?

Mr. Padarath: Yes.

Dr. R. Moonilal: They go with Lasko fans, and so on, when they have a loved one in a ward so they can get some breeze. That is the health sector. So I want to tell the Minister of Health that my constituent died but the good news is that when they took her, they got a good parking space at the brand new car park for \$132 million. And that really sums up the problem, you know. That sums up the problem; \$260 million to build an administrative building for the staff of the Ministry of Health and a patient died because you could not do emergency dialysis, and that is where we are, Madam Speaker. I say no more about that; no more about that.

Madam Speaker, I was making the point that the attempt today on the Deputy Commissioner's life—Prisons, suggests that intelligence has collapsed. Madam Speaker, it is not only in that area. Madam Speaker, a few days ago, on or around October 4th, I have in my hand an intelligence brief from the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Port of Spain, Criminal Gang and Intelligence Unit. And I will read only a few lines, and I will call absolutely no names and that type of thing. But, Madam Speaker, in this brief, the police are warning—the police, they are warning themselves, and they said:

A gang has declared war—a particular gang—on members of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. Threats came in response to a particular activity that took place and a member of the gang was recorded as saying, “Knock it

pon dem police dem.”

I “doh” know how they pronounce that but that is what the message is.

Tension is rising in this society, Madam Speaker. Tension is rising when the police are now telling the police, be careful, be on high alert, be cautious, remain vigilant. That is police to police. If that is the state of where we have reached, then the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has indeed collapsed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And you cannot expect, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago police officers and prison officers to work in this environment. Today, I want to tell the prison officers and the Trinidad and Tobago—members of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, I want to tell them that the United National Congress stands with them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And we will provide you with the equipment, with the resources and with the legislative framework so that you can work and be assured that you have some measure of safety.

4.30 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: The hon. Member for Siparia, Madam Speaker, will provide the resources, will provide the legal framework to support the police—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—and the prison officers and the law enforcement officers. Madam Speaker, we have said to the police and today we say to the prison officers, stand your ground because we will stand our ground.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER, in the Chair]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And this administration is on the way out, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You see, the people are the final arbiters in all matters of politics. It is always the people at the end of the day. You can talk how much you want, the people are the final arbiters and August 14 was a litmus test. That was a litmus test. It is a small test like in a lap as to what we are likely to see what is happening and the United National Congress got the overwhelming majority of votes in Trinidad—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—mere months after they were decimated in Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: So as a former Cabinet colleague of mine said, they lost Tobago, they lost Trinidad, they are holding on to the “and”—Trinidad and Tobago and “dey will loss” that too, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They have no support and today they are a minority Government with no moral authority.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: This is why gunmen could shoot at the Deputy Commissioner of Police’s vehicle.

Mr. Hosein: Prison.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Deputy Commissioner of Prisons, and injure his bodyguard or driver as the case may be because the Government itself they believe cannot confront the criminal elements. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I repeat the call that the Minister of National Security ought to go.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: He ought to go promptly. Mr. Deputy Speaker, he is now legendary. He is now legendary in this land as the worst performing Minister of National Security in the history of the sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, he has surpassed all failure standards, all. He has surpassed them just when we believe it cannot get worse, he was forced by some angel of kind to apologize in a left-handed way. I read it and did not understand it what he was saying really but that again is typical of him. So we could not understand the apology. But this is not a matter of apology as the *Guardian* editorial today pointed out. That will not help. Policy will help, programme will help, resources will help.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not have to remind you, the Member for Laventille West presides over the fire services. Now, I want to tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago, anytime you think security, you must think safety, they go together. There is an emergency on the highway, there is a killing, a murder, you ever notice is police and ambulance and fire, because security goes with safety. In Trinidad and Tobago today, let me tell you in case you do not know, 11 stations, Mr. Deputy Speaker, four out of 11 have fire appliances, four out of 11. No appliances in Belmont, Woodbrook, Santa Cruz, Tunapuna station. Do you know if there is a road traffic accident and an appliance leaves from San Juan to go somewhere down the highway, and in that business spread in San Juan/Barataria, my great friend next to me here, that a fire appliance has to come from Port of Spain?

Mr. Paray: None in Mayaro either.

Dr. R. Moonilal: None in Mayaro. None in Penal, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and he presides over that. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had a figure that I am told \$2.5 million to outfit a fire appliance because it is a very specialized kind of vehicle and with all kinds of detailed equipment and so on. You could not find that to purchase more appliances for Penal, for Siparia, for Woodbrook, for San Juan, for places but you find \$260 million to build a headquarters for the Ministry of Health, \$132 million to build a car park but you cannot provide a fire appliance in an area to save lives.

What kind of Government is this?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: What kind of Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker? The fire personnel has told us, they lack proper gloves, breathing—what is it called?—breather apparatus, turnout jacket suits. That is the suits they put both and down when you go into fire and you are going into the heat and so on. They lack sufficient equipment. Not everybody has the jackets. In fact they were telling me that they “doh” even have the axe that you could use to breakdown a door. And I told them, well, “You should axe the Minister of National Security”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: You cannot buy basic equipment but you spend hundreds of millions of dollars in matters that are not priority. I am not saying that we should not have good car park for people. I am not saying the public servants should not be in nice comfortable headquarters and so on. We outfitted the Government Campus, \$1 billion for Ministries of Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Partnership. Nobody raised any corruption about that, I noticed, I will tell you why on a next occasion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, so nothing at Penal. I do not know if it is because the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West had a terrible fall there. Nothing there, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In terms of police, are you aware that there are 600 police vehicles that are not road worthy and cannot be used? 600 police vehicles cannot be used at this time. They are in a graveyard somewhere in Cumuto I am told. That is the state of play in terms of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is what you say, body cameras.

And I just want to go quickly, body cameras, they do not have enough or

sufficient. There is a hand-held device called an electronic U-turn device. It is used to get data quickly when you stop somebody on the highway and you feel that they are suspicious, you want to quickly check their driver's permit to see if they have demerit points, to see if they are red flagged and so on. It is something called an electronic U-turn device. Okay. We do not have that. We do not have that and we do not have sufficient quantities. So the policemen cannot do that on the road and this happens under the Member for Laventille West, Mr. Deputy Speaker. These are the issues that confront us. These are the issues and they come in this debate and this budget, you know, with all types of hoax and so on, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The one, the classic one the Minister of Finance gave us is the school book and what?—uniform grant?

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The term started already last month, they come with this grant now. And you have to do a means test. So that means it is not automatic.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: So in the meanwhile you have to stay home.

Dr. R. Moonilal: So in the meanwhile you stay home.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: You have no book, you have no uniform. So when are you going to give this grant to the parents and so on? For the next term? That is next year, next year September, because presumably you do not buy, you do not change books every term.

Mr. Hosein: No.

Dr. R. Moonilal: It is every year. Look at that. Nobody picked up that. Everybody say, “book grant” and on the other side they pound the desks. I think, one of them broke down a desk somewhere there, pounding when they heard “school grant”. School term opened, gone, but they hear that and they are happy

and they are excite themselves.

Hon. Member: 35,000 have to stay home.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this country today overridden with crime, overridden. Bandits would go into a health centre and rob patients. They robbed the chicken and chips man. I am predicting if this continues, for Christmas people will invade homes to steal Christmas gifts from under the trees. That is where it will reach. When they are leaving now and they ambush you at home, they will be going with the gifts from under the Christmas tree. That is where Trinidad and Tobago has reached and they are now happy and clapping and, “Oh, we are doing so well, we are doing so well”, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They are robbing churches, mandirs, mosques today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the Government pats themselves on the back and say, “We are doing a good job. We are doing a good job”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to get onto another matter which will engaged my attention for a minute. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was just reflecting, as I said before, the Member for—the Minister for Work and Transport really did not give us much by way to respond to, but I am hoping that the Minister of Housing and Urban Development can speak in this debate at some time and clear up some matters for us. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are proud that when we held that position of government 2010/2015, under the HDC and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development which I had the honour to lead, we gave out 100 homes a week.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: 100 homes per week. When they got in office they “fire” everybody who was doing that and, I think, they charged a few too. Not charged, they put them in civil court matters and so on. 100 homes per week gave out. They come today, the Minister, and they boast in one year that they gave out 475

housing units, in one year. That is the boast, you know. That would have been, how much? A month and a half for us or something? We would have done that in a month and a half. 100 homes per week, 7,000 or so over the period. I mean, people whispered to me in my ear, “We cannot wait for you all to come back, ah waiting for my house”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Then I get more nervous. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that housing sector is now in shambles, in a mess and it is not only that they took the wrong approach. Everywhere they met successful contractors and so on, they put them in court to tie them up for money and then stopped all the projects. They stopped all the projects, put people in civil court over money issues so nothing is built, nothing is done. Eight years later there are housing sites in this country abandoned, abandoned.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, something has come to my attention and I want to raise it in this House because I think it is really worthy of being raised but before I get to that, there is a release dated October 10, 2023 on the HDC website that was properly smoked out by the Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Nothing missed that eye of his. And it says:

“Remedial works to begin at Charford Courts”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Charford Courts is located in Port of Spain. It is an HDC compound. Mr. Deputy Speaker, would you believe concrete “fall off” the building, concrete fall from the building and dropped on four vehicles. They erected housing structures in Port of Spain and the concrete fall down, not on one vehicle, you know, on four.

Ms. Ameen: That could have killed somebody.

Dr. R. Moonilal: That could have injured, killed—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*] That is like the Parliament.

Dr. R. Moonilal:—human beings. This is the type of construction. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I read that I understood well what was happening. I understood well. Because, you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have in my hand a report, a big report, phase 2 design development report townhouses. Now this is a particular, what you call housing estate in D'Abadie. It is called Trestrail. I remembered it well because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, under my Ministry when I had the honour there, we purchased the lands there for housing for about 1,000 housing units and so on. We did the purchase. I noticed nobody is saying, I have to answer questions for that.

And again, I will tell you why I do not have to answer questions for that and they say I have to answer for somebody else or something else. And I want to tell the Member for Diego Martin West in his absence, I will speak today as a functionary. So, as a functionary I speak to indicate that we purchased this land. When we left office we had already turned sod, already had construction activities started by about four or five contractors. They stopped it. They stopped it because probably they do not like the contractor. Probably they felt the contractor is UNC or something like that. It stopped. But, you know, they restarted it in 2017. They restart in 2017 with, I do not know which contractor and which contractor not because I was not privy to that type of thing, information. But let me take a sip of water first.

[*Member sips water*]

It is that serious. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have a report in our hand from a company called CEP. It is an engineering report dated 30th August, 2022. That project started 2017. That is five years later. So that means, in five years nobody

built house there. No house was given out. No homes given out and so on. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 2022 and I want to take you through this report. It is Trinidad and Tobago House Development Corporation Trestrail development zones D to E 1. But in a nutshell I can tell you, it deals with about 100 townhouses, 100. We have pictures. In fact, I am told that some clever person put up pictures of this on a website called CounterPunch TT. I “doh” know of the website. It is nothing I know about but if somebody will punch it in they could probably see pictures, while I talk.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they did an engineering study, they were asked to undertake studies on these 100 townhouses. This is almost, when you look at the price for both infrastructure and the building, \$100 million. La Alturas was about \$17 million. The “mosquito crack” will cost us about \$64 million. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you understand where I am going with this? It is a \$100 million spent or budgeted for this. We will have to come to that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when they looked through and they concluded for the various areas, in terms of foundation they were looking at the soils. The soil as it presently is and treated and the development works done, is not capable of withstanding applied loads. You know what that means?—“applied loads”. Ah mean, nobody cannot go there.

Mr. Deputy Speaker:

The bearing capacity...

And I am reading page 29:

The bearing capacity and settlement analysis done suggests that the foundation for some of the townhouse blocks will not be able to support to the applied loads.

Huh!

And therefore the existing soil conditions will need to be improved to achieve an increased bearing capacity.

Where is Mr. Sinanan when you need him? The townhouse blocks that were required—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Member, please remember proper titles.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Oh, I was referring to another Sinanan in San Fernando, Barry Sinanan.

4.45 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Continue.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The house blocks that will require some improvement work below the substructure—Mr. Deputy Speaker, without reading details and technical details you know what is happening here? They are now telling—the consultant is now telling the HDC they have an option to demolish 100 town houses or go and inject the soil. It is called “gouting”.

Hon. Member: Grouting.

Dr. R. Moonilal: It is called “grouting”. We will have the words coming up just now. I myself had to learn a few things. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the building footprint is underdeveloped for the structure but the structure is up. So they are now saying—when I read this I thought was the Ministry of Health. “I didn’t know housing does do injection”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: They have to go at the side of the building, through some complicated scientific process with, I imagine, sophisticated technology to inject the soil.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah, they are going to do injections of the soil. That is where

we are in this housing, masonry share walls. Mr. Deputy Speaker, they speak about that, and I want to get through some of these things: Re-enforced—a housing Botox type of business, I am told. Re-enforced concrete beams. They talked about that, but they want reinforced concrete first floor slabs, page 30. Based on the visual inspection of cord concrete samples through the—RC is re-enforce concrete—first floor slab in Block 35, the areas where galvanized sheeting was used no re-enforcing bars were observed.

Hon. Member: No steel.

Dr. R. Moonilal: No steel. So they put a concrete with no steel. I want to tell people who taking these homes I hope they “doh like chutney music and ting you know, because if you make two dance there you are pumping in the sand”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Literally. Literally. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, no concrete bars were observed. In addition, the alternative galvanize roof sheeting used to support the suspended first floor slab is not a material recommended for that application and it lacks the material properties for concrete bond to be achieved. The roof sheeting is small and does not have an embossment pattern manufactured into the sides; some of the technical issues.

We go on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to another area, geotechnical design considerations. From the results of our—and it is a very technical report, but I am only dealing with conclusions. From the results of our bearing capacity and settlement analysis it was determined that the foundation of some of the units will be unable to support the applied loads of the two-storey structures. “They done build it already”.

Hon. Member: What! “Wais dis?”

Dr. R. Moonilal: This, Mr. Deputy Speaker, speaks to a breach of fiduciary duties

of Noel Garcia, Newman George and all of them at the HDC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And Noel Garcia, wherever he is, he should resign forthwith if he had any part to play in this matter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence!

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Member for Port of Spain South wants to hear more. Let me tell him.

Mr. Scotland: I want to hear—[*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And the bearing capacity—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second, just now. One second. No! Again, it is clear the sitting is in session, let us ensure that we maintain the proper decorum. Right! I only recognize the Member for Oropouche East. Member for Naparima, please! Please.

Dr. R. Moonilal: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this speaks to a breach of fiduciary duties of the board that they presided over this matter. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is an impending collapse. This is Las Alturas II for a \$100 million. I mean that could not happen when the Member for San Fernando West sat on the HDC board. Not at all. And you know, you cannot give people those homes in these conditions with such a technical review. Nobody will be able to spend one night there. The Prime Minister you know he always likes to point out about nightie and duster and thing. Nobody will put on a nightie and stay there one night. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I call for an independent enquiry into the collapse of 100 town units at Trestrail—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—at the cost of almost a \$100 million. My friend from Lopinot/Bon Air West his eyes open big. He cannot believe it. He is in awe, in

shock, his mouth agape.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, this calls for an investigation. I want to take you through another piece of this report: Conclusion and recommendations of one part, and they are indicating with some technical things and so on. They need to do backfilling now. This is after “de units built, eh”. They need to do backfilling on the land. This happened in Debe, Wellington, when we came into office in 2010, same thing. The HDC houses were moving. I thought at one time they were mobile—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: —because they did not treat with the cane land well enough for the infrastructure, so the houses were moving by two feet every now and then. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was determined that the foundation of some of the units would be unable to support the applied loads of two storey structures, the bearing capacity was too low. There is need for excavation of the foundation. Now they are going to dig up the foundation when you already build the building, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And there is something called “re-enforcing”—

Hon. Member: The ring beam.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The ring beam. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had to learn some much about ring beams and so on. Apparently, ring beams are the beams you put at the top to hold down the blocks and then the roof and you tie the roof to the ring beam. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this report is telling you that no ring beams were observed.

Hon. Member: What!

Dr. R. Moonilal: So they have some details in some of the bedrooms that some of the things— No re-bars in concrete.

Hon. Member: Bedroom.

Dr. R. Moonilal: No re-bars in the bedrooms of these people. So imagine you get a nice HDC house, you move in there with your spouse or so, and you lie down on that bed in the night, and “wap, de roof blow away”.

Hon. Member: The roof?

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah. “De roof gone”.

Hon. Member: And the bed on the first floor.

Dr. R. Moonilal: And then your bed “fall down” on the first floor because the slab, the flooring has no iron/steel. So this is a serious matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am not today casting aspersions on any contractor or group of contractors. The HDC has ultimate responsibility for this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: They have a project engineer, a project manager, a department to monitor this.

Hon. Member: And a Minister.

Dr. R. Moonilal: And they have a Minister of Housing and Urban Development whose job it is to hold the HDC accountable. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have some pictures in the report that people will look at and so on, and when they took concrete to test—in fact they were saying that they took four pieces of concrete to test, three fell apart, only one they could have used. Only one they could have used in the analysis.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they came to another area and the one, the famous Las Alturas dilemma. To demolish or not to demolish; that is the question. That is where they are. They are now making proposals as to whether they should go to those units in Trestrail and demolish completely and rebuild and then you lose your \$100 million, as the case may be. Or you go and give injection to the soil and try to hold it up. But it is not just the soil. It is the wall. They are

suggesting that you know, like in a big mall you run iron across walls and thing to hold up frame, big, big frame. They are suggesting you try to do that in some of the houses as well. Instead of breaking it down you put cross beam and all type of thing to hold up that. So that would like a German house, I imagine after, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And they had the gall, the unmitigated gall, to attack us. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to say with pride and with no fear of contradiction, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to make the point, in the years 2010 to 2015 not one police station of the nine, not one house of the 7,000, not one fire station of the four we built, not one school of the 100 we built “fall down”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Nothing the People’s Partnership built has collapsed. With my friends opposite you have the Brian Lara; we do not want to say too much about that. You have the Mosquito “crack”, you have the Las Alturas, and now you have Las Alturas II. Any time they build something these things happen. What is it? What is it about them that “everything fall apart” around them? And they have fallen apart in the Tobago House of Assembly. They have fallen apart in the local government, and they will fall apart in the general elections.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: They are on the way out, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we cannot continue this way where we have these types of reports coming to us. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and on that note I have received complaints—many people know I am a former Housing Minister—that they were making before the local government elections, they had a lot of functions giving out keys to people for HDC homes. They “call back” the people and take back the keys. I do not know what to say again. I think they should give out computer cards or something. They take back

the keys from the people who receive it because they said they have to do remedial work on the units, so that was just for the formality and the show to the public.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we call for this investigation into the Trestrail Housing Development and what appears to be \$100 million going down the drain. And the report is here. If the report is fake, tell me. If the report is not true, tell me. If the technical details that they give here is incorrect, tell me. Tell me, it is in my hand, and I am willing to share it. I am willing to share this report. Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I do not want to continue anymore with housing in that area but to really come back to an issue that I wanted to raise.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

On the matter of crime and insecurity, a matter was raised in the public domain a few weeks ago. Madam Speaker, a matter was raised in the public domain a few weeks ago and I want to put on record our very deep concern with this new form of extortion that is perpetrated by alleged members of gangs where they go to businessmen and demand security money. They demand security money, and if you do not pay, you refuse to pay, there is a fear. There is a fear, Madam Speaker, that they can attack, they can injure, they can murder your family, members of your family. The front page of the *Guardian*, today I believe it is, if I am not mistaken. Fear grips Bamboo No 2, Businessmen report death threats from criminals, ordered to pay hundreds of thousands for protection, some flee community, others want lock down.

This is the work of gangs. You know what is amazing? This Government spent \$45 million-plus, it could be much more, to hire lawyers, superintendents, special reserve police, Kate Mc Mahon from London and her team to come down here to persecute members of the UNC, \$45 million-plus. She made a mistake and I think she sent in my email the bill too.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: She felt that if the PNM not paying I should pay. And, Madam Speaker, they spent \$45 million—plus, but they cannot spend money to strengthen the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service or to seek international help so that we can get some assistance for the police to deal with what is called serious and organized crime that includes gangs.

All over the world, it is a threat in different parts of the world. But we need, the time is coming when we may need international help. Because, Madam Speaker, let us be real, the average age of a gang member is 22 years. Policemen and women would like to reach in their 70s to see their children and grandchildren and they are in fear, some of them. They have to be alert, to be vigilant. They do the best under the circumstances. But you spend \$45 million to persecute UNC operatives or functionaries, I do not know, but you do not want to spend a cent to get international and foreign help to strengthen the gang unit. In fact I want to put on record, it is time the police, the TTPS, create an extortion unit to deal with this specific issue of extortion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: It may involve, Madam Speaker, amending the Larceny Act, because under the Larceny Act the penalty, we believe, for extortion and demanding money by menace as they call it and so on, I believe it is five years. Two to five years. So imagine you are asking businessmen for millions of dollars in security money. If you get “ketch” it is two to five years, maximum. This requires a stiff penalty. A stiff sentence to send the message. In a society—Madam Speaker, when a business person closes down their business and migrate people lose their jobs. Nobody pays taxes. There is no income distribution and redistribution. You collapse the economy. You depress the economy when the

business community migrate and leave. And businessmen and women are telling you they prefer to go and live abroad than to be here for gang members to be calling them for protection money and security payments and so on.

This is something we have to deal with. It may require amending the law, as I said the Larceny Act, and increase the penalty and create an offence of extortion by gang members, if it comes to that, Madam Speaker. And we call on the police to be more vigilant with this as well. I read a report in the newspaper where a high ranking officer was saying, “we have no reports of extortion, you know”, when we raised it at a Sunday morning press conference. I want to tell my friend the policeman, do not expect a businessman to walk into a police station, go to the constable at the desk and say, “Hello, I am the businessman, my name is X, Y, and a gang member just asked me for money”. You want to kill him? You cannot do that. This has to be intelligence driven. It has to be a high level of confidentiality and privacy in dealing with those sensitive matters. The police cannot expect people to walk in the station and say “I am a businessman, I operating this hardware, this supermarket wherever”, or “I am a contractor on a construction site and they just asking me for money”. You are in trouble, because we all know the situation in Trinidad and Tobago, gang members may get that information and they may take retaliation, action against business persons and so on.

5.00 p.m.

So, Madam Speaker, this is an urgent matter that the Government needs to address. And as I say if we do not have the capacity in Trinidad and Tobago, we may have to look outside to ensure that we have some type of support to matters like these.

Madam Speaker, I had a couple of matters again to raise before I end. I wanted to remind the Minister of Health, I had the opportunity to listen to the Minister of Health. And the Minister of Health made a statement in the Parliament

during his contribution, I believe, and he was talking about making the Port of Spain General Hospital a campus of some kind, a campus for teaching and training and so on. I want to remind the national community, if not the Minister himself, because I am not sure if he is aware, Madam Speaker, that it was the United National Congress and the People's Partnership, that government outlined a policy for a new medical campus for the Port of Spain General Hospital.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: So the Minister comes to Parliament and he speaks about the Port of Spain—a campus, a medical city and teaching facilities and so on, in his speech. I have a note:

“New medical campus coming to...”—Port of Spain—“General”—Hospital. Hear the date on this, December 18, 2013, Trinidad *Express*.

Mr. Hosein: We would have done that already.

Dr. R. Moonilal: That would have finished long, long time, that would have been there already.

“The British Government will assist this country to construct a state-of-the-art medical campus at the Port of Spain General Hospital”—says—“Minister of Health Dr. Fuad Khan...

Khan spoke at a post Cabinet”—press conference and indicated that there was—“a Memorandum of Understanding...for a proposed medical campus...”

That is a Partnership idea.

Hon. Members: Yeah, yeah.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Partnership was going to implement that. Ten years later we have a big announcement that a committee is being formed. We signed the MOU, a committee is being formed, that is the announcement that we are

awaiting—

Mr. Padarath: Advisory committee.

Dr. R. Moonilal: That is like an advisory committee, the Member for Princes Town pointed out earlier, to deal with some other matters. He pointed out that, some matters of waste.

Madam Speaker, the Government also announced the recruitment of, I think it was 1,000 police officers more to the police service. You know what was interesting when I heard that comment, when I heard that policy being outlined, at the Joint Select Committee on National Security we have had on several occasions the opportunity to examine—

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East, your original speaking time is now spent. You have 10 more minutes to wind up your contribution.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Thank you.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, when the Commissioner of Police came to several of our meetings, you know, the Commissioner of Police gave us, what appeared to us to be a very detailed crime reduction plan dealing with several areas. It was really comprehensive enough for that purpose and of course the Commissioner also made available to us a PowerPoint presentation and so on, and we looked at it, we examined that plan. But you know, in that plan, nowhere it speaks about increasing the manpower from 300 intake per year, which is the norm, to 1,000. Where did you get this idea from? And how are you going to do 1,000 persons recruited in one year? This is a matter that the Government needs to rethink, particularly where you have SRPs already in the system with considerable

experience and so on. You may want to move the SRPs to the mainstream, Trinidad and Tobago Police Service as part of your increase in manpower resources to undertake specific areas of work. So I was taken aback by that policy initiative.

Madam Speaker, in the few minutes I have left I wanted to just speak to a couple of matters in the constituency Oropouche East. And I wanted to say, again my gratitude to the people of Oropouche East—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—who have returned me and the United National Congress on multiple occasions as their beloved Member of Parliament. Madam Speaker, we again call on the Minister of Education, we will call upon you from now until “thy kingdom come”, when are you opening the Ramai Trace Hindu School?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: When? Madam Speaker, every year I ask this question and typically it is question 1 on the Order Paper every year. And then I will have to ask it again. And it is so bad I do not even have supplemental questions because it is for the record I am asking. And the Minister has promised and the Minister before her, I forgot his name—

Mr. Hosein: Anthony, Anthony.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yes, a distinguished gentleman.

Mr. Padarath: He is forgettable.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Before her he promised in writing, he said once to me here, do not worry it will be opened. Poor me, I did not ask him which century. And I again plead with the Minister, please, it is one thing to punish the Member for Oropouche East but do not punish the children of Oropouche East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Those children—do you know children have graduated from a school and never set foot in the school. For seven years or so they were at a temple, a Hindu temple far away from where the school is located, and when they graduated they got a certificate that they attended the school which they never set foot in. That is where it is and it is because of the Member for Oropouche East.

The Prime Minister said it, he was in London. That question was actually asked in London of him. That is their approach. What I am saying, do not punish the people. And I will ask the Minister of Education on a related note, what is the status, what are we doing with the South Campus of the University of the West Indies?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: It is a quarantine centre.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The constituency of Siparia, in the area of Clark Road and so on, was supposed to become an education hub in that area with secondary schools, training facilities and so on. When you pass there now, everything is covered in bush. Yes, that is how they have left education, for “caraille vine to run” all over. I mean the cost of doing that must be significant as well, because they have left it for eight years, so that is a significant cost.

But the Minister of Education could give us a statement as to what is happening with that, with those areas. What is happening in the constituency of Oropouche there? I mean want to raise again because my constituents are glued to their screens. We have serious problems with the road network. I do not know what else to tell the Minister of Works and Transport. This is the only island that parts are inaccessible by road. Normally that is for continents and so on. You know there are big countries with forests and so, and you say, okay, there is a point at which the roads stop and you cannot go by road. This is an island where there

are some places you cannot go by road.

In the Papourie Road, in my constituency, Madam Speaker, “long time” you used to dodge the hole, now you cannot dodge anymore. You have to select which pothole am I going in. Let us decide that before, because you cannot dodge anymore. Bridges have collapsed in the constituency. We asked the Minister for a bridge in Sohani Trace, a bridge in Barrackpore. They put a temporary type of steel structure and so on. They told me no, no, no, do not worry. Now anytime the Ministers on the other side tell me do not worry, I worry, “I frighten”.

So, Madam Speaker, these are questions I had for the Minister of Works and Transport. I know his hands are full given the deplorable state of infrastructure in the country, his hands are full. I do not know, you know, he is excited now that he is demitting office, Madam Speaker. But in the constituency we have problems with education, we have problems with infrastructure. Oh! Water. I mean, I do not what else to say about this problem with water in this country. This is the only island where one month you could drown in floods and the next month you have no water to drink. It is the only island this could happen and that is as development gap.

Madam Speaker, this Government has presided over eight years of lost development. It is called lost development in theory. I was recently abroad and a gentleman met me, elderly gentleman, he had been monitoring our politics for 40, 50 years, and he came to me and you know what he asked me? He said, “Rudy, how did they do it”? I said, “what you mean, ‘How they do it’”? He said, “How did they do it”? I said, “How you mean”? He said, “How did that Government destroy your country in such a short period of time”?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: How did they do it? When you come to this country today, if you were here 10, 20 years ago I imagine, and in great respect even when Mr. Manning was Prime Minister, you know, he had some type of vision and if you came to this country 10, 20 years ago, it is unrecognizable today. If you land at Piarco—well, I do not know how you come through the port—if you land at Piarco it is unrecognizable, it has disappeared and now the Minister comes this year with the same broken promises. Every single year you know it is the same thing. The port scanners, we announced today, they beat the table. You know those ports scanners are being procured about five years now—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—and when the head of Customs came, the head of Customs came to the Joint Select Committee on National Security. We asked her, Madam, why is this taking so long, something like scanners, you could purchase those things now easily. This is not 1925, you could purchase easily. She said, she want to tell the committee that they were purchasing the scanners and then they got an instruction from the Ministry of Finance that they cannot use what is called sole selective, they have to go through Central Tenders Board and that is very instructive.

When they are buying ships and boats, they do not go through Central Tenders Board; when they are buying equipment for the Strategic Intelligence Agency, they do not go through Central Tenders Board; when they are buying airplanes, they do not go through Central Tenders Board; but when you have to buy scanners, you go through Central Tenders Board? So it takes two, three years-plus to get scanners installed, it takes years to get scanners installed. And ones wonder whether or not that is deliberate. Because these things you can buy, they

are like dialysis machines and so on, you could just buy 10, 20 and scatter them. You can buy that. And these are years, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, in closing, I know I have a couple of minutes left, but in closing I want to say that today I also want to give hope to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that as far as bad as it appears the United National Congress is standing strong and standing our ground.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: We have the personnel, we certainly have the support in the aftermath of the local government. We have the support we have the personnel, we have the ideas. In fact one thing you cannot say about the UNC and the Member for Siparia, you cannot say that we do not have plans and policies. In fact, I was nicely surprised the next day after the Member for Siparia talked, the headline was, Kamla outlined 27-point plan, as if—you needed to see that, 27 points. You cannot give us five points. And Madam Speaker, we have the plans, we have the policies, we have the programmes, some we introduced already, we will have to restart those programmes to deal specifically with crime and the importation of illegal firearms and so on. We have the programme, we have the personnel. We can mobilize this country. So I tell members of the national community: as down as you feel; as weak as you feel; you may be in despair; you may be depressed; you may be sending me messages about this country collapsed and “gone through”; please, we cannot accept that. We must save our country—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And Madam Speaker, I want to put it to you that for us to grow they must go. I want to thank you for your attention.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam

Speaker, I am grateful for the opportunity to account to the nation on the work of the Ministry of Education as well as the constituency of St. Ann's East. And on behalf of the 250,000 ECCE, primary and secondary students, and tertiary, of Trinidad and Tobago, I want to thank the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development for the provisions of the budget which assure our young people that their educational opportunities are going to continue for yet another year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And I want to thank the people of St. Ann's East. The Member for Tabaquite seems to take issue with giving thanks that—Madam Speaker, I have been raised on the tenets that ingratitude is worse than witchcraft, you know. So we say thanks.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And I say thanks to my constituents of St. Ann's East because I came into this eight years ago as a new MP, a new Minister and without their support I could not be here, so I thank them.

We have worked hard in this constituency together advocating for the development of St. Ann's East, Madam Speaker. And we have had good success over its time. New community centres in Gasparillo, Cantaro and La Pastora. We have a new community gym at the Cantaro Community Centre. We have had the refurbishment of Maracas Bay, Bourg Mulatresse, Febeau Village Community Centres. Paving of major roads throughout the constituency: Saddle Road, Santa Cruz Old Road, North Coast Road, Maracas Royal Road. We have been able to restructure the Hololo Bridge, no more cutting off of the constituency in the rainy season. We have extended the river walls in Febeau Village and Hidden Orchid. We have refurbished the Ato Bolden Grounds in Bourg Mulatresse, the Brian Lara

Grounds in Cantaro, the Las Cuevas and Cantaro Health Centres, we have refurbished.

Major paving of Sou Sou Lands Road; Las Cuevas Road; Maracas Valley; Upper Ramkissoon Trace on the Old Road; School Street; Hotel Street, Las Cuevas. We have completed and opened the Maracas Valley ECCE. We have done work in Quarry Road providing water and so on, bridges in La Pastora and La Canoa, and various minor road paving and so on, throughout our constituency.

5.15 p.m.

We have been working hard in St. Ann's East and we are looking forward to water improvement projects. My colleague from Lopinot/Bon Air West, we look forward to that water improvement project to help our constituents in Santa Cruz and San Juan; the provision of water to upper Mayfair Gardens; the water supply improvement in Hillview Drive, Febeau Village.

The construction of a Las Cuevas Community Facility, the Texas Trace river bridge in Rincon, my colleague from San Fernando West has committed to helping us with that; the construction of the Maracas Bay ECCE, a playground in Rincon; upgrades of the Febeau Village Basketball Court, Glencoe Village Community Centre, La Canoa Basketball Court, Gran Curucaye Basketball Court, Sun Valley court, Arnold Dwarika grounds.

We are looking forward to a library and access centre in the community centre in Upper Santa Cruz as well, and we are looking forward to continued work on our schools and our rivers in Santa Cruz and Febeau Village.

Madam Speaker, we reach out to our youth as well in St. Ann's East. We have been doing, for the past 8 years, a school spelling bee for our primary school students, poetry competition for our primary school students. We have been giving scholarships to our SEA students, those who have just written SEA going into a

school, to attend a cooking for teens programme. We do essay competitions. We do a TVET programme, we have done it for the past two years, in collaboration with MIC, so that our young people, 16 to 18, can get an introduction to TVET areas. We reach out to our community. We donate monthly to senior homes in our constituency. Weekly, we give out bread to those who need it. We have a free flea market every Friday; monthly hampers. We recently held a health fair in St. Ann's East and, of course, the annual school book grant distribution.

And I want to thank, at this juncture, the Ministry of Finance, the Minister of Finance, for that book grant. And I want to thank him because we as MPs, we do it ourselves to help our constituents, and I do not understand how the Opposition could take issue with that, understanding what some of our people need to help their children get to school.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So I want to thank him for that. And the puerile argument about “school done start already”, what is that, Madam Speaker? Obviously, school goes on every year. So if we announce it now, it comes in force in 2024, and I thank the Minister of Finance for that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, I want to thank the staff of the Parliament who support the operations of our constituency office with efficiency. I want to thank the councillors. I have five councillors whose district fall within St. Ann's East and I want to thank them for their projects which support the development of St. Ann's East. And I want to thank the staff of the St. Ann's East Constituency Office for their support in implementing the programmes that we do, so that there is high quality, consistent support to the people of St. Ann's East. We say something in our constituency that, “Life is better in St. Ann's East”, and it is

just because we work hard to make it so, Madam Speaker. So thank you to everyone that has a part in doing that.

Madam Speaker, this was 400. We have expanded that opportunity to 600 students. They have the opportunity. One hundred scholarships, 500 bursaries are available, and those who benefit from that, they are also testimonies to the success of our education sector.

5.20 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Yes. The over 8,000 students who graduate annually from the secondary education system armed with a minimum of five subjects including math and English. Over 8,000 of them graduate every year with those qualifications. They are testimonies. The thousands of students who register for their free chance to repeat CSEC subjects—Madam Speaker, we may not understand that in other countries, in our very region, even your first chance at CSEC is not free. You have to pay for it. In this country we pay for your first chance and we pay for a repeat. I remember attending a CXC conference and speaking about that, and other Ministers of Education were incredulous. They could not believe the opportunity our students have. They are testimonies of the success of our education system.

The over 15,000 students registered at the UWI, St. Augustine, testimony of the success. The over 6,000 students registered at UTT. There are approximately 12,000 students registered at YTEPP, MIC, NESC, COSTAATT, and all of these with the opportunity to benefit from over \$400 million supplied in GATE to pay for their tuition to enter. All of these are testimonies of the success of our education system. The thousands of young people taking advantage of training under the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. Shade House,

Homestead, AMPLIFY, leadership training programme, MiLAT, MYPART, CCC, all of these are evidence of success of Trinidad and Tobago's education sector. And regardless of the challenges we have like anyone else, let us not forget that we successes and we have to celebrate them.

Just like the economy has not collapsed, the education sector has not collapsed and the Government has not collapsed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, we have over 250,000 students throughout the education sector and they are depending on the Ministry of Education to continue to create those enabling circumstances so that they too can be successes and testimonies of the success of our education sector. We know why education is important, but it is good to repeat the words so that we keep it before us always.

The salvation of the nation depends on the scholastic development of our children. They carry the future of Trinidad and Tobago in their schoolbags. Scholastic does not mean just academic. Scholastic means the whole package of education, holistic education. And, Madam Speaker, I want to encourage parents, teachers, repeat these words to our students, our children. Place before them on a continuous basis, inundate them with their responsibility to country so they understand that there something that we are depending on them to do, which is, to give us a bright future in Trinidad and Tobago. And because we understand that the strength of a nation depends on the strength of its citizens, again a quote from Dr. Williams, we in this country, successive Governments have dedicated and invested between 9 and 10 per cent of our annual budget for many years to education, and this year there is no difference.

This year, the Education Ministry has been allocated just over \$6 billion, and

I want to break down how that \$6 billion is generally spent—approximate figures:

- \$2 billion pays teachers' salaries;
- \$1.3 billion supports our post-secondary and tertiary institutions: UTT, UWI, YTEPP, NESC, et cetera;
- \$700 million is allocated to GATE, scholarships and bursaries, and the HELP fund;
- \$500 million deals with recurrent miscellaneous expenditure at the Ministry of Education head office. That is your NIS, your CXC fees, insurance, vehicle maintenance, et cetera;
- \$350 million pays the non-teaching Ministry of Education staff salaries;
- \$320 million goes to school feeding, school transport programmes;

And let me just mention, over 10,000 students from 83 schools are transported daily and in the last fiscal the school feeding programme would prepared and distributed over 7 million breakfasts and 9 million lunches.

- \$240 million repays loans for school repair that we have taken;
- \$230 million deals with grants to public and private schools; and
- \$180 million is allocated for school repair and furniture.

So that is just a rough average of how that \$6 billion is distributed throughout the Ministry and expended. And this investment, this 10 per cent of our annual budget, we are investing that because we want to yield young citizens who are broadly and holistically educated, disciplined, skilled, productive, tolerant and impassioned about energetically serving and developing Trinidad and Tobago with integrity.

What I have just described, Madam Speaker, is the ideal Trinidad and Tobago citizens. We invest in education to develop the ideal Trinidad and Tobago

citizens who will progress the development of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: However, Madam Speaker, we have faced several challenges over our 61 years of independence in the achievement of the vision of education which is modern, relevant, quality, equitable education for all. That is our current vision. There may have been different iterations over the years, different governments, different Ministers, but it all boils down to producing the type of citizen that will progress our development. What are some of the challenges that we have faced over our 61 years and continue to face in some cases? Underperformance of schools and students and this has been exacerbated by our COVID-19 experience.

Inequity in educational opportunity; the need for the Education Act reform; student attrition; manual data collection systems; lack of digital databases; relevance of the curriculum; student violence and indiscipline; school infrastructure; upgrade and maintenance; inefficient human resource management systems; staff and student mental health issues; parental disengagement; negative community influence on the schools; insufficient school resources; leadership crisis in the schools; low level of patriotism. These are the challenges that we are faced over the years and we continue to face even as we go along the way in educating our students to create the ideal Trinidad and Tobago citizens.

And as a nation we also contend with challenges, and I am quoting here from the Vision 2030 document: dependence on oil and natural gas price cycles; aging population and migration; food security and sustainability; dependence and entitlement; low productivity; weak institutions; crime and criminality; climate change and natural resource development; rapid advances in technology; managing a diverse society. These are some of our national challenges. Now whether the

educational challenges created the national challenges, or whether the national challenges created the educational challenges, that is a chicken and egg situation. However, these are what we face. This is our reality. It has been our reality for many years. We have been facing these challenges and surmounting them as you go along.

So this \$6 billion investment in education, and every investment that we have made for the past years and the years to come, must deal with these challenges that we have identified that we know we face and that we know we must overcome in terms of our plans, our policies, and our implementation. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education recently held a week-long conversation with the nation on the plans for education from 2023 to 2027, and this conversation followed our national consultations in 2020 and 2021. And so, that would have led us to the development of the education policy, 2023 to 2027.

Madam Speaker, it is interesting to note that not a member of the United National Congress, including the two Ministers that shadow education, they neither commented. Either in person, e-mail, virtual sessions were held, they did not comment. They gave no political analysis of the policies that were discussed with principals, students, and the national public. The policies are available on the Ministry's website have been available for some time. Yet, the content of both shadow Ministers, the content of what they gave in their contribution to this debate, showed that they read not a page of the policies that are available showing the plan for education. If you are not even inclined to look at what is happening in education, how are you qualified to even speak about what we are doing education-centred?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, the national conversation was

necessary because we need national buy-in and effort in order to change the course of education in Trinidad and Tobago.

We say that education is every one's business, the teaches, the students, the parents, the staff of the Ministry of Education, civil society, corporate Trinidad and Tobago, Government officials, the Opposition if they are interested at all to even read the policies, and everyone. It is everyone's business because there will be no attainment of Vision 2030 or any other developmental plan without a transformation in education. And I am quoting again from the Vision 2030 document.

“...transformations...must be undertaken so that we may begin to reverse...non-progressive factors as well as nurture and efficiently use the positive ones towards catalysing our nation's development.”

So let us talk about the Ministry of Education is going to use our allocation to face the challenges that we know affect the education sector, and I am going to speak about five sub-policies, which support the education policy. We are engaging for success, digital transformation, cultural transformation through education, patriotism policy, and TVET revitalization. So I start with reengaging for success, and this sub policy seeks to address the following challenge: underperformance of schools and students; inequity in educational opportunity; student attrition; student violence and indiscipline; school infrastructure, upgrade and maintenance; staff and student mental health issues; negative community influence in schools; insufficient school resources; leadership crisis in schools.

In 2022/2023, we started focusing on 26 secondary schools, that by their school performance, and by the behaviour of the children, and by the grades that we saw in terms of student performance, they really needed some extra focus and support. We extended this during that academic year, which was the last academic

year, last fiscal, to 106 schools because we added 80 primary schools understanding that we could not deal with the problem at the end. We needed to deal with the problem at the source. So we have 106 schools of focus that we are focusing on in terms of resources and support so that we could increase school performance, we could increase the discipline of our students, and the student performance and success. We started with a one year pilot.

During the last year academic year, the last fiscal, again what we did is that we sought and received approval to extend this to three years because we understood that what we were seeing, the progress of this initiative, it was giving us the right signals and we knew that what we needed to address would not be addressed in one year. It is not a quick fix. It is something that will take us some time. So the critical infrastructure repair, that was a part of this reengaging for success, and we set out, received approval and so we are currently implementing extensive repairs and refurbishment in the 26 secondary schools. That is costing us \$175 million. And I want to take some time at this juncture to address the issue of school infrastructure.

Madam Speaker, in 2022/2023 we completed over 1,000 repair projects in more than 350 schools with an expenditure of over \$400 million. We incurred that expenditure. Now, the projected cost of completing the schools that we met unfinished—Madam Speaker, we met 80 schools unfinished in many different stages of construction and we have had the task of completing that. So when the UNC keeps saying they built 100 schools that is incorrect. They awarded 100 contracts but the school were not built—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—and what is worse is that funding was not identified to complete the schools. So it fell to us in 2015 to find the funding to finish the

schools. And so we have embarked. We have spent \$1 billion already and that only covers 20 of those schools.

5.35 p.m.

So you could understand, Madam Speaker, when we talk about completing all the schools, we are speaking about tens of billions of dollars that we have to expend to do that. So we have been embarking on this project bit by bit as the country can afford to be able to finish these schools.

Our existing school stock is aged. We have 53 schools over 100 years old; 260 between 60 and 100 years old; 125 between 30 and 50 years old. It takes a lot of maintenance. Every single day, there are multiple schools presenting with issues and many of them are issues that could shut down a school: sewer, plumbing, electrical, structural integrity. So for that reason, you would find a triage system in place where we take the ones that are the most serious and attend to those first so at least school can continue and educational continuity is assured.

So, Madam Speaker, that would explain why there are schools that need work to be done, but if these works are not as critical as others, you would find the work being done on the others to make sure that the school continues. And where we could have spent \$1 billion fixing many schools, we have had to spend \$1 billion on a few schools because of what happened during the time of the UNC. So we are dealing with it because it is what we are—the cards we are dealt, however, this is the situation. So every effort is made to conduct school repairs as quickly as possible. However, we have to now consider that there are many, many schools that need infrastructural repair and so we balance that as we go along.

Madam Speaker, I want to say this. Leadership of the education sector is a very, very complex, fraught with challenges, tasks and it requires both base level thinking and higher order thinking. So when someone offers that if you cannot

deal with brick and mortar, how could you deal with anything else, I want to say this, through you, to the Member for Tabaquite. We do not have the luxury as leaders to simply deal with one issue at a time. We have to multitask. In the face of challenges, we still have to perform. So even as we deal with school infrastructure, we have to deal with the Education Act amendment, with home schooling, with private school registration, with curriculum reform, with the performance of students, teacher training, school discipline, digital transformation, CXC examinations, SEA examinations. This is not a job for the faint of heart. This is not a job for the simple-minded. This job takes complex thinking and action and that is why some people will exist in the harsh and sometimes hot glare of the light and some people will remain in the shadows.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: We are engaging for success. So along with critical infrastructure, which is ongoing, we also assigned learning support assistance to these 26 schools and we included them for the 80 schools that we brought in. So 106 schools, we provided learning support assistance and they are to help in operational matters at the schools. Supervision of students, whatever the tasks are, they are assigned to help with that. We did specific training for the teachers and the principals, leadership for the principals, remedial Math, writing and English. Over 600 of our Standard 3 to 5 and Form 1 teachers underwent this training in the last fiscal to equip them with the skills to help the children where they are.

You would have seen us introduce the VRP, Vacation Revision Programme, we did it in 2022 and we expanded it to both secondary and primary in 2023. It is noteworthy that in 2023, we had less secondary school students in the programme because more of them had done better at the SEA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So we are not instituting a culture of remedial work, we are meeting them where they are and taking them out from there and carrying them to a higher level. These schools, especially the 26 schools of focus, the secondary schools, they need support to reduce student indiscipline; and allow me to say something now about student indiscipline.

The power of social media has made it impossible to ignore the fact that we have a problem with our young people. Too many of them—now, the majority of our students are in school doing what they are supposed to do, you know, but we have too many students who are violent, disrespectful, addicted to drugs and marijuana, gang members, completely uninterested in education and out of parental control. Some parents are powerless to restrain their children and if a child has no fear for a parent, they will have no care for a teacher and we are seeing that playing out more and more.

So at these 26 schools, and even at the 80 primary and secondary schools, we hired dedicated school social workers and guidance counsellors because we understood that the caseload in those schools would be higher and they needed someone on task at all times. We ensured that the space for the operation of the SSSD staff, that is the school social workers and guidance counsellors, we had to take 18 of them and refurbish them so they had space to operate.

We have asked the TTPS to be present and active in 17 of these schools. We have asked the TTPS to patrol outside of the school after school and in urban areas so that the children would not be allowed to be fighting, they would be sent on their way home, so that they would not be engaged in these negative activities.

Last year, we introduced a youth mentorship programme using volunteers and we are going to ask again for volunteers because many people say they want to go and speak to the children in school, we want to afford them that opportunity.

We asked this year for the TTPS and the Defence Force to send us officers who would engage in this youth mentorship and go into the schools to speak to the children, to mentor them, to encourage them along the right path.

In 11 schools, we have introduced in the last year the restorative practices and we have hired facilitators to be in the schools to ensure that the school operation is imbued with that restorative practice. So that has happened in the last academic year and it is continuing now. We routinely sent information about students who are at risk for expulsion and those who have been expelled to the Ministry of National Security, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Services and we sent them this information so that they can intervene as well with the resources under those Ministries to help and support these students and their families.

Madam Speaker, where possible, we make a link between the parent and the student and MiLAT because some of our children need a more structured environment to be able to succeed and we make that link and we allow those students to go in. So we are very happy when the Minister of Youth Development and National Services speaks about the MiLAT for girls because we are recognizing more and more that our young ladies are getting involved in the negative behaviours that formerly there was a multitude of young men, our young ladies are now getting involved in that same behaviour so we are looking forward to that MiLAT for girls.

And I want to say this. The time may have come for Trinidad and Tobago to enter international discussion about students who are misbehaving at schools, despite the best efforts of the Ministry to give them that support to change their behaviour to be entered into mandatory national service so that they are given the support they need to be developed into productive citizens. Madam Speaker, I

want to say this to all parents and students, that we have taken careful note and we have given enough time for the return from COVID and we have supported and we are helping, but we have taken careful note of students who are continually disruptive, violent, disrespectful and out of control and there are provisions for the Minister of Education to deal with it and we will take advantage of all such provisions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So I put the parents and the students on notice.

We are still on re-education for success, still on the programmes that we have put in place, not are putting in place, have put in place to deal with our schools that need the most support and the children. We have hired literacy and numeracy coaches. Those should be starting in the schools this term and they should be helping both teachers and students, those who have been trained with the remedial teaching, to actually enact it in the classroom because we understand that there is sometimes a disconnect between the training and the actual implementation in the classroom.

We have done free after-school tuition for the entire year, last academic year, in the last fiscal and we will continue it this year for Standards 3 to 5 and we have done that to give them more opportunities, not just the Vacation Revision Programme, more opportunities to be able to get the skills and to catch up. Some of them still suffering from the learning loss, battered and bruised by the COVID-19 experience. We have done that and we will continue to do that in this academic year.

In the 26 schools of focus as well, what we have done, and that had started last year and continues into this year, we have asked the schools to adjust the curriculum because we know that the students who scored under 30 per cent, they

have some catching up to do. So the curriculum in Forms 1 and 2 should be designed to bring them up to the level of what was formally called the primary school leaving exam. It is now called the Lower Secondary Proficiency Exam. And so in Form 2, they are going to sit that exam and that will allow them to know that they have reached to the stage of what should be the Standard 5 level of ath and English and then they could move forward from Forms 3 to 5 doing five subjects in CXC, their ath, their English and three others including some TVET which we are introducing from Form 1. So it gives those students a different way of operation, so they are not expected to come from behind scoring under 30 per cent in their SEA and still reach to the same level as others who have a better chance at success, being better prepared at the primary school level.

Having put these initiatives in place in the last year, Madam Speaker, what we have noticed in the results of the SEA and CSEC were improvements from 2022 to 2023. In 2022, only 37 per cent of students received grades above 50 per cent in the SEA. In 2023, that increased to 58 per cent using the same assessment framework. So we know that the comparison makes sense. In 2022, there were 27 per cent of students falling under 30 per cent. In 2023, that reduced to 13 per cent, again, using the same assessment framework so we know the comparison makes sense.

So when, through you, Madam Speaker, when the Member for Tabaquite speaks about the increased SEA grades of the time under the United National Congress using a completely different framework, it does not make sense to compare. It does not make sense because you are not comparing apples with apples. And in fact, I may—what “dey say? “Yuh look like yuh have puppy look and dog age?” Madam Speaker, you see in— I have a little years on the Member for Tabaquite, and that CAC, that Continuous Assessment Component that was

introduced in the SEA, they may have had good intention, but it was a terrible thing that they did because they did it very hurriedly and they did it to be able to increase the grades without increasing the quality and significantly lowering the quality of the SEA exam. So yes, yes, there are many children who were disadvantaged and many who benefited from a system that there were no proper checks and balances for the quality of the exam.

And for the Member for Tabaquite, who prides herself on data, to stand here and speak about that as though you are comparing apples and apples with what we are doing now, that is disingenuous. I think it was intentional and that is not right, that is not right.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: I had a child—“why I tell you, where I gone, de Member now coming.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: I had a child who did SEA before CAC, during CAC and after CAC, and I could tell you, Madam Speaker, the difficulties we had as parents. So, through you, to the Member for Tabaquite, please, when you are coming to this House compare apples with apples and tell the people the truth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: The truth. And if the policy you want us to use is to lower the standard to increase the pass rate, I can assure you that is not the PNM way and we will not do that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: We will do the right things.

Mr. Charles: Standing Order 48(6). To impute that the Member is not speaking the truth.

Madam Speaker: Please continue, Member.

5.55 p.m.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in CSEC we also had an increase in the performance of our students, 52% were over the five with Math and English mark, and that compared to 2022 where it was 44%. So what we have been doing in the education sector for the past academic year along with the hard work of our parents, our students, our teachers, that has yielded the kind of success and we are trending upward in the education sector and we will continue to do all we can to continue that trend in the right direction.

Madam Speaker, my partner in the struggle I call her, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, spoke about digital transformation and that is another big part of what the Ministry of Education is doing. It is designed to address the following challenges:

- The manual data collection systems.
- The lack of digital databases.
- Inefficient human resource management systems.
- Parental disengagement.
- Insufficient school resources.

So she would have spoken about the School Learning Management System—sorry, the Minister Morris-Julian, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, would have spoken about the School Learning Management System; the student management system, where we are digitizing all of our student records. So we do away with that manual cumulative card, that physical card that follows students around, and in the school inner management system, Madam Speaker, we have created E-Classrooms for 6,409 of our teachers and this work continues. The

school management system, we have put 395 schools' data on the system thus far and this work continues.

The SEA results portal, Madam Speaker, we have moved the SEA results to a completely digital format and that will continue in 2024, and we will just continue to refine the process so that it is even better, but I can tell you from the reviews our parents, our students are very happy to receive their results at their convenience in the comfort of their homes.

Device provision: We have provided students with over 71,000 devices and we continue to do so.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, we are ramping up our e-testing as well, so the laptops that we are providing are the tools the fundamental tools to allow students and teachers to participate in all of these different digital transformation efforts to have access to the e-classrooms, to have access to the school management system so that it can put in student attendance and so on, digitally. So it should be very clear that our digital transformation effort is much, way more than simply providing devices. Providing devices is a means to an end, it is not the end in itself.

Madam Speaker, I want to deal with cultural transformation through education and the patriotism policy. These are very important policies that again are available on our website, so that the country—and we spoke about it in our national conversation. And it deals with the relevance of the curriculum on the performance of schools and students in equity, in educational opportunity, student attrition, parental disengagement, negative community influence on schools, insufficient school resources, and the low level of patriotism.

Madam Speaker, we have tailored our policies to deal with the challenges

that face the education sector, so that as we implement them we will be measuring the changes in these challenges looking at how we are alleviating the challenges, mitigating and how therefore, we are progressing the education sector. It is not just like that, it is very strategic what we are doing. The major goal of this policy, these two policies, cultural transformation through education, and patriotism is to empower our citizens and to imbue within them the right and positive values, attitude and behaviors which aligned with *Vision 2030*. *Vision 2030*, speaks extensively about the negative values, attitudes and behaviors that our citizens are exhibiting, that are keeping us back from our developmental pathway.

So if we are educating to create the citizens that are going to develop the country, we have to look closely at how we inculcate these values, attitudes and behaviors, so that our citizens will now display those and we will be able to move forward in our developmental agenda. And I want to encourage all parents, all citizens to take a look at these policies to see exactly what they entail, because it is going to change the way our students are experiencing education in their schools. It is going to change the way our teachers are teaching, and this is a very fundamental change in the way we are operating the education system.

We are going to look at the timetable allocations and make changes to those timetable allocations, because if we want an outcome, we have to plan for an outcome and we have to allocate time to that. So whereas our education system, very heavy on the academic, we are going to allocate time within the school day to not focus just on academics, but academic, moral, physical, culture and arts education, and TVET at the primary and lower secondary levels.

We are speaking about fundamental, granular changes to the timetable of our children.

5:55 p.m.

Music instructors for the Primary Schools Music Programme—and many people have been asking me about this—we have increased that from 50 to 100, and we are currently hiring those in anticipation of ensuring our students have the culture and arts education part of what is planned for them.

We are going to increase the use of portfolios and formative assessment for termly assessment, especially at the infant level. So we are speaking about reducing examinations and pushing the authentic assessments of formative assessment and portfolios, both physical and as student's progress in primary school, digital portfolios with student presentations. Because if we are speaking about inculcating 21st Century skills, we have to prepare our students to do that at the lowest levels, and so that is where we are going to infuse the digital portfolios and we are going to ensure that our students have the skill of student presentations, which is fundamental in today's world.

The reintroduction of dedicated class time for the teaching of reading: Madam Speaker, this is something that teachers have been calling for. We cannot have students coming out of primary school not able to read. And when children come into primary school, if they cannot read, they are to be taught to read and teachers are to take that time. So, again, it speaks to the reorganization of the timetable itself.

And the Values, Character and Citizenship Education Sessions, that is a syllabus that already exists in the primary school, so they are going to be allocated specific time to be able to explore the tenets of that syllabus.

The daily form teacher periods and weekly class sessions at the secondary level, Madam Speaker, we are going to have to intervene to ensure that our students in the upper secondary school, they use this time to link with credit unions and banks, to get them their bank cards, get them their ID cards. Madam Speaker,

we have people who are in their 20s with children, no ID card, no bank card. They have never been introduced to financial literacy at all and we are saying that in the education system, that is what we have to do. Because what they used to do on the outside and parents would do, it is not being done. So we have faced that reality and we changed our timetable to allow these things to be introduced at the level of the school. So that is why we are so happy to see that junior achievers programme, and thank you Minister of Finance for bringing it back.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Along the way, we lost some of these things because we started to focus so much on academic, which is excellent and important, but our students need broader development than that if they are going to become the ideal Trinidad and Tobago citizens that we are looking for. Things as simple as singing the national anthem every day, saying the national pledge every day, these are things that we lost along the way.

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Ann's East, your original speaking time is now expired. You have an additional 10 minutes to complete your contribution if you wish.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you so much, Madam Speaker, I will avail myself of that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: We have mandatory termly activities that we have to introduce. A "no to violence" day, we are introducing that in our schools. Annual activities, Madam Speaker. Performing arts productions, it was a normal thing to have a concert in school, that has been lost along the way as well.

We are asking our schools to implement a student-led community service project. That way the students understand their responsibility to the community

and their responsibility to the country, and it does not have to be complex. It could be simple as going to an old people's home in your community and singing a couple songs for them, as simple as that. It does not have to cost, it just takes thought and it takes creativity to be able to show our children a different way.

Visual arts exhibitions, sports days, career days, science fairs, class field trips—it may sound interesting to some that we have to mandate these things but, Madam Speaker, what has been happening is that some of these were not written into policy and therefore, as characters change, principals change, these things fell by the wayside, and so some of our students are not experiencing a school life that allows them the opportunity to develop skills that they should, and we see that playing out all over. So therefore, we are saying that these things that used to happen, you have to do them now, it is mandatory. We are going to support you in completing these activities, so that there is equity in educational opportunity. Some must not have it and some do not.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

6.00 p.m.

So we are going to support. We understand that what we are speaking about here is something that is not simple. And this cultural transformation through education, that is carded to take place over two academic years. We have started already in this academic year, by introducing the mandatory activities. In the next academic year, that is when we are going to tackle the timetable changes, and so on, and the curricular changes. And so this year it is going to be spent preparing for that, doing the requisite training, and so on, so that we can get to that stage. We know it is not going to be immediate. We know it is a paradigm shift we are suggesting. We understand that it is mindsets we are changing, behaviours we are changing. But we are determined that this is our Trinidad and Tobago and we

want a better one. And, therefore, we have to start for the education sector to build the Trinidad and Tobago that we want to exist in.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, TVET revitalization, that is our last sub-policy that I want to deal with. And this speaks to the following challenges: underperformance of schools and students, inequity in educational opportunity, student attrition, relevance of the curriculum, student violence and indiscipline. Again, Madam Speaker, I am saying specific sub-policies to deal with the challenges that we face. We have three aspects ongoing. We are rationalizing the TVET offerings of our post-secondary and tertiary institutions. We are repairing schools TVET laboratories in the 26 secondary schools of focus. And we are sensitizing students in those schools to the availability of the opportunity at the tertiary and post-secondary level. We have had MIC, NESC, and so on, going into the schools and having career days.

Our next stage is linking those schools with the post-secondary institutions, so that we can have a deepening of the engagement. So students can understand the articulation that is easy between the secondary schools into the post-secondary level, so that they can have a clearer sight of their career path. And I want to introduce this again into national conversation. I have been approached by persons who believe that a TVET subject should be mandatory at the CSEC level for all students; a TVET subject being mandatory at the CSEC level for all students. And is something that has been brought up, and it is something that we can discuss further, because people are understanding the skills that TVET brings to our students.

So, in conclusion, this world faces unprecedented challenges, and we have spent 2021 and 2022 on consultation, research and planning. We are now at

implementation stage. We have sensitized the public about what we are doing, how we are moving forward, because we need all the assistance we can get. And we know that this transformation will take time. It is not simple. And what I am describing is the work programme in the Ministry for the next five to seven years. It is a lot of work to do, but we have the will. We have the commitment.

And I want to thank the hon. Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, my partner in the struggle; the PSs of the Ministry of Education; all directors and staff of the ministry; the boards and the CEOs of all institutions under the Ministry, administrators, teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, students, education stakeholders, T&TEC and TSTT. I have to thank them as well, because they are our valuable partners and help us a lot—

Hon. Member: WASA.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: —and WASA. Madam Speaker, I want to thank WASA. Minister, I want to thank WASA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. G. Dolly: I also want to thank civil and corporate Trinidad and Tobago. Let me say a word about corporate Trinidad and Tobago. I want to thank the Minister of Finance ensuring that there is a facility which gives a tax break for the donations to schools. I want to thank him—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: —because, when we needed it, when we needed it the most, Madam Speaker, during the COVID-19 experience, corporate Trinidad and Tobago stood up like champions and supported our schools with devices, and we are calling on them again. Because even as our schools have to do these mandatory activities, they will need support.

I want to thank most recently TTMA and Unicomer for coming forward and

helping us with vision screening and provision of eyeglasses in 40 of our primary schools of focus. Those schools that need the most support, they have come forward. And they, as recent as this week, have committed to providing the vision screening and the eyeglasses for the children who need it. Thank you corporate Trinidad and Tobago, and we will be coming to you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: We will be coming to you. And I heard the Leader of the Opposition say something, and she said we are begging the corporate sector. It is in their interest to support the education sector. Where is their qualified workforce coming from in the next few years?

Hon. Member: Correct.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: From the education sector. So, it is in their interest to partner with us and we thank God that they do not share it as that view as begging. They see the opportunity to partner with us and they are doing so. Thank you, and we are coming to you even more.

Madam Speaker, in my last couple of minutes, I want to quote the words of Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley at the CARICOM Summit on Crime, hosted in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2023, as I just deal with the last aspect of our education transformation.

“We have all continued to be haunted by violence from the domestic quarters at home, to our schoolyards, to our streets and borders...

Violence in the Caribbean is a public health emergency which threatens our lives, our economies, our national security and by extension every aspect of our well-being.”

I am quoting the Prime Minister's words, because I want to now give the spin and give the understanding of what education does, in terms of crime. I am not using

my words. I am going to use the words of another citizen, Cuthbert Sandy of Point Fortin, in a letter to the editor in August 2023, and he said:

“Education is the key to preventing crime. Less educated people are more likely to be convicted and their children are more likely to commit crime... Education plays a key role in the reduction of crime...”

Therefore, Madam Speaker, in my last two minutes, when we speak at the Ministry of Education to the vision of modern, relevant, equitable, education for all, it is to create the ideal Trinidad and Tobago citizen and it strikes at the heart of crime and criminality and the development of Vision 2030.

Madam Speaker, we invite all citizens, including the Members on the other side, to visit our website, look at our policy, read it, analyze it. If you have comments bring it to us, and join us on the road to transformation. The future of Trinidad and Tobago depends on it. Education is everyone's business. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Digital Transformation (Sen. The Hon. Hassel Bacchus):
Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is really and truly a privilege and an honour to come to this House to contribute on this most important debate.

I must start by thanking the Minister of Finance for his extremely lucid and comprehensive presentation of the fiscal package that we had, so far. And, you know, looking at this from out of the Chamber, it would seem that there is very little criticism, if any at all, of the measures and the fiscal measures that were put into the budget. I think the conversations around the community, the wider community, have been on other things, but certainly not in the direction and the fiscal measures that have been placed inside of the budget. So, Minister of Finance, my congratulations.

The Ministry of Digital Transformation has a key and very important role in the development of a number of the initiatives that are being funded under the allocations of the budget. But I do not get to be in this House very often so, maybe I should, through you, Madam Speaker, give a little bit of the background of what this young Ministry has been up to, over the time in which it has been in existence, which is just a little bit over two years.

One of the founding principles upon which the Ministry was formed is that we really wanted to populate it with young, enthusiastic, capable people. You would recognize, of course, Madam Speaker, that the digital space is primarily a young person's game. And if we populate the ministry with those types of people, there is more than likely a larger chance of success than if we did otherwise.

I want to thank the Minister of Education for participating in a Cabinet-approved programme that allowed us to receive tranches of returning scholars every year. We are getting our third tranche now. And those people actually have become, in a lot of ways, the face and the driving forces behind a number of the initiatives that are happening within the Ministry of Digital Transformation, and funded by the Ministry of Finance.

So, the Ministry itself is in quite a maturing phase. The first year, we took the time to establish what is happening in the landscape, look around at what is happening in Trinidad and Tobago, look around the ministries, divisions, and agencies, social services, everything that was there, and see what was possible and what needed to be done. We started doing some planning in that phase as well, as well as trying to assist where we could with a number of ministries, divisions, and agencies that were struggling in their digital quests.

In the second year, those plans were brought to fruition. Of course, we are building the Ministry as well. The second year, a lot of those plans came to

fruition. They were firmed up and the projects themselves were initiated, of course, funded under the allocations we had last year. I would have come to this House last year and done exactly the same thing I am doing now, which was to highlight what our plans were and what we were going to do at that time.

The third year, which is where we are now, we have moved again; evolved from that, and we are now in this space where we are implementing a number of those programmes, and that implementation is well underway. It is important to note that in this type of transformation, the ministries, divisions, and agencies all have allocations for the work that they have to do. And the Ministry of Digital Transformation is providing guidance in a lot of cases, control in some cases, referencing in a number of cases, as well as the ministry itself taking on flagship and crosscutting projects that are fundamental to all of the things that we have to do in Trinidad and Tobago.

The digital transformation agenda is really being constructed in three interconnecting pillars; three things: a digital society, a digital economy, and a digital government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: And I would have said those. And if you—we did not take them from anywhere. Those were the things that we came up with, again, when we were doing this in the planning phase. But if you look through digital transformation efforts anywhere across the world, you would find that those, or some variation of that, represents what needs to be done. I would probably explain what those are as I go a little bit deeper into what it is I am trying to do.

But the thing that came out, when I listened to the Minister of Finance's presentation in the budget, is the number—and I think it is not lost on the population, and I am sure it was not lost on Members opposite—of ICT and digital

transformation projects that are being funded under the allocations that were set inside of it. Almost every single ministry, division and agency has within it some component of ICT or digital transformation working inside of it. So, the question then becomes: How is the Ministry of Digital Transformation involved in those projects?

Well, firstly we have, and have been given, the mandate to ensure that the strategy that we are implementing across all of government is adhered to, respected and aligned with the things that these ministries are doing on their own. So, during the budget presentation, you would have a number of successes, particularly in the financial space, that is going on. And again, I should complement the TTIFC for its work that it is doing inside of there as well, in bringing a number fiscal and financial-type pieces to the ministries, divisions, and agencies, and ultimately to the people of Trinidad and Tobago in the financial space. But the idea is that we have this responsibility to ensure that the actions and the projects that are going on within those ministries fall and are aligned with the strategies that we have, and make sure that we do that.

The other thing that we do, of course, and I said that apart from the technical advice, and so on, is that we have direct responsibility and planning for implementation for our crosscutting whole-of-government digital transformation initiatives. Those would include some of them that were mentioned, again, in the budget presentation, including the interoperability networks, EID, some levels of cybersecurity and operations, some physical infrastructure dealing with data centres, et cetera, et cetera. I will speak a bit about those as we go alone.

The Ministry of Digital Transformation is a partnership ministry. I do not know how else to say it. It is a partnership ministry. We partner with local agencies, foreign agencies, civil society; everyone really that can contribute and

work with us, we partner them once they are designed and fit for purpose. In the budget presentation, you would have heard of the initiative with ALTA, as it relates to CEPEP. This is quite—it is an extensive thing, but I think it is useful for people to understand. And, through you, Madam Speaker, I will explain how some of these relationships have come about. Some of them are organic and some of them are intuitive, but some of them come about simply because people recognize that resources are being made available and they can be used to benefit the society in a larger way.

6.15 p.m.

I will probably explain those later as I go a little deeper into what I plan to do. But the thing that came out, when I listened to the Minister of Finance's presentation in the budget, is the number—and I think it is not lost on the population and I am sure it was not lost with the Members opposite—the number of ICT and digital transformation projects that are being funded under the allocations that was sent inside of it. Almost every single Ministry and agents, divisions and agencies have within it some component of ICT or transformation working inside of it.

So, the question now, becomes, how is the Ministry of Digital Transformation involved in those projects? Well, firstly, we have and have been given the mandate to ensure that the strategy that we are implementing across all of Government is adhered to and respected, and aligned with the things that these Ministries are doing on their own. So during the budget presentation you would have heard a number of successes, particularly in the financial space that is going on here. Again, I should compliment the TTIFC for its work that is doing inside there, as well as in bringing a number of fiscal and financial type pieces to the Ministries, agents and divisions and ultimately to the people of Trinidad and

Tobago in its financial space. But the idea is that, we have this responsibility to ensure that the actions and projects that are going on within those Ministries fall and align with the strategies that we have, and make sure that we do that.

The other things that we do, of course, and I said that apart from the technical advice, and so on, is that we have direct responsibility for planning and for implementation for cross cutting the whole-of-Government's digital transformation initiatives, and those would include some of them that were mentioned again in the budget presentation, including the Interoperability network, the EID, some levels of cyber security and operations, some physical infrastructure dealing with data centres, et cetera, et cetera. I will speak a bit about those as we go along.

The Ministry of Digital Transformation is a partnership Ministry, and I do not know how else to say it. It is a partnership Ministry. We partner with local agencies, foreign agencies, civil society, everyone that can really contribute and work with us, we partner with them, once they are designed and fit for purpose.

In the budget presentation, you would have heard of the initiative with ALTA as it relates to CEPEP. Now, this is quite, you know, an extensive thing, but I think it is useful for people to understand, and through you, Madam Speaker, I will explain how some of these relationships have come about. Some of them are organic, and some of them are intuitive, but some of them come about simply because people recognize that resources are being made available and they can be used to benefit the society in a larger way.

The relationship with ALTA with the Ministry of Digital Transformation really started with a Police Youth Group. A Police Youth Group in central had identified that a number of its charges were having issues with numeracy and literacy skills. I do not know—there are multiple reasons why that could have happened. It was

also just—2021 COVID was on the side of it. A number of things happening in that space, and they said listen we are going to seek— They decided, the police officers that is, to seek help for these charges, and they went to the Adult Literacy Tutors Association. It went to ALTA, and they said, “Listen, we have the students, can you help us?” They said, “Well yes, we have the things. We have an online platform, but we do not have a facility in central where they can go to and get the necessary things to help them”. ALTA said, “Alright, the Ministry of Digital Transformation may be a place that we may find some assistance”. And what did they do? They came to us, we said yes, and the next thing you know is that a partnership was formed between the Ministry of Digital Transformation and ALTA to the benefit of the charges of the police youth groups and that started the relationship and it continues to todaye.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Hon. H. Bacchus: It is interesting that the first place that happened was in Marac and that program was the flagship programme and it works and continues today, and has spread since then, and with the advent of what was proposed in the budget, this will only be make it larger. Compliments should be due to ALTA, and of course to the police association who did that, to make sure that this happened, but it shows the power of partnership and collaboration.

The Ministry of Digital Transformation is a partnership. We not only partner with local agencies, but we partner with a number of international agencies and you would understand why we have to do that, given the complexity of what we are trying to do in the digital transformation space.

So let me give a few examples of our international partnerships. Over the past few years, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, we have benefited immensely from our partnership with the IDB. The Inter-American Bank has

provided a number of things. Expertise; they provided, grant funding. They have been around with us for a significant period of time and they continue to be a well-trusted and actually extremely important partner for us. The people they have been really stalwart in what we have been doing.

We have the United Nations Development Program, they have become another significant, technical resource and support for us. In early 2022 they did a digital readiness assessment of Trinidad and Tobago, actually it is published. It makes excellent reading. You will understand where we are ranked in the Caribbean and where we are ranked in the world. But we were able to work with them quite intimately to use the information gathered in there to develop Trinidad and Tobago's first digital transformation strategy, and that remains where we are now. We are going to keep working on that, and the UNDP continues to support us with that. If you want to know where we are ranked with a number of things, that is a good place to go.

Only recently in August, a team and myself went down to India, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding of cooperation and digital transformation with the government of India. When I mention that to people, I realize that when we talk about technology it seems India is not the first place that people look at when they think about technology. They think about North America, they think about Europe, but not necessarily India. India is an emerging—an extremely well respected partner in the ICT world. We are very closely aligned to them in multiple ways, I do not need to explain how that has happened. But, importantly, the journey on which we have embarked is the journey upon which they have already walked, and by that I mean when we embarked on what we were doing technically, I had put some guidelines in. One of them is that, we would use a cloud, as much as possible. Another was that we would use—stay away from

proprietary software and/or hardware unless it was absolutely necessary. Another is that we use open-source first, as many times as we can. Another, is that, we would not buy things wholesale and set up manage/service contracts that we would rather have people come here, and have our own people build it so that we can have the sustainability and the things that we want for where we are going. It is amazing that this is exactly the journey that India has gone on.

6.20. p.m.

And they have offered to us the use of their entire India stack, which includes a number of the things that we have already started to build, and we can almost wholesale lift the things that they have. And by the way, the cost of these things is almost nothing because of the licensing that we have in 2023.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: So the willingness of India to share its digital transformation expertise is in there, and I would mention it specifically in one of the products which I am sure people will go and have a look at. And that would be their Aadhaar e-identity system. We have been working with them with it for some time. They have successfully deployed this for 1.6 billion people, we have 1.4. We should be able to do this within the short space of time.

The national digital transformation strategy that we are talking about, even as we debate today on this budget, we are on the concluding stages of the consultations of that, and I suspect not too long after that we will take it to Cabinet for its consideration and bring it back to us. Why is this necessary and why is it important? Because it outlines for the next two-year period—we do not want to plan for much longer than that—what it is exactly, the umbrella strategies upon which we are going to work. We know them but we wanted to ratify them across the multiple stakeholders that we have because you know, as with everything else,

digital transformation is a whole of government, whole of Trinidad and Tobago effort. So I expect that will happen soon before the end of that.

The projects that were mentioned in the delivery, that were happening within the budget presentation, speak to a number of things and, Madam Speaker, I want to, through you, explain not really explain but list a few of them and identify how they relate to people. I mean, the Minister of Education just spoke, Member for St. Ann's East indicated a number of initiatives and a number of them included digital transformation.

Madam Speaker, one of the things that happens when you introduce technology into things and if you do it right, you find high levels of efficiency but in a lot of cases it is the least expensive way to achieve anything. One of the things that you would have heard about, and I am sure it is a topic that comes up with the Opposition as well, is the procurement of laptops for the use in schools.

Madam Speaker, let me give you a very short story. The Ministry of Education was seeking to procure 8,000 laptops, 8,000. And having just procured a large number like that recently within the year before, we knew what the cost per unit was and as such in the necessary budgeting we put that number inside of there, based on the per unit cost. What happened subsequently, the Ministry of Education went through the Ministry of Digital Transformation, got to iGovTT and said, "Listen, you procure these things for us". What did we do? We looked at the specifications to make sure that we were not using old specifications and that we were using things that were now fit for purpose, and would have been effective in the environment in which we now live. We took those back to the Ministry, they agreed on them and gave them to iGovTT, iGovTT reviewed them and said, yes.

And then in this partnership mode in which we are, iGovTT in its procurement utilized an electronic procurement system from the NGC. Now, what

that allowed, it allowed for something that they had not done in the procurement of laptops before which was to utilize a reverse auction system. Some people may be familiar with what that is. The end result of that, Madam Speaker, is that the cost of those laptops that should have been in the region of \$20 million was acquired for less than half of that—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:—\$9 million. And none of this would have happened had we not taken the chance to look at something and review it for fitness of purpose, reach out to other people who have technology, and utilize that technology to the best of our ability. That is the kind of thing that this Government is engaged in—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus:—and that is what the Ministry is going to do. Similar things are happening across a number of places. You have heard a lot of what happened in the e-money space that we are going into. Introduction of e-books again is coming along, a number of those things, all of those things, the Ministry of Digital Transformation finds itself in the middle of it.

Another myth that happens is that the entire spend of the Government on ICT and ICT development resides within the Ministry of Digital Transformation; it does not. All Ministries, and in the previous year I sat on all the budget meetings and sought to increase—get the cooperation of the Minister of Finance to increase the allocations for ICT for various Ministries to ensure that they were able to fulfil the requirements that they had, so that they would be able to be fully participant in where it is.

It was about \$340 million in 2022, 2023, 437, and I expect this year it is not much different to that. Those are rough figures when you try to add up all the

pieces in the allocations, and so if somebody does it they will see it.

The proof of the pudding though is when you look at how it actually spells out. Why do I say that? Well, the Ministry of Public Administration for digital transformation efforts has \$10 million. It also has \$14 million for a new EHRM system. The Ministry of Finance continues on its quest with IFMIS another \$14 million, the Ministry of Health continues on its health information system. The Ministry of Trade and Industry continued enhancements on its single electronic window, \$10 million. Ministry of Education acquisition of more laptops, another \$20 million. Ministry of Education Digital Inclusion Programme, \$15 million. Registrar General, \$4.9 million, Ministry of National Security, another \$5 million. TTPS, development of a computer system for the police service, \$15 million.

All of these things break down to the benefit of the man in the street. Think about this, half the price for the laptops costing \$9 million that could have cost 20, what do you do with the next \$11 million? What does that mean for you as a person or as a person who could benefit? That \$11 million could be spent on something else or it could mean you can acquire double the amount of laptop for the thing that you have. This is the value and benefit of using ICT systems across what we have to do in government all across. More efficiently—more efficient government, less cost government.

Madam Speaker, I want to talk a little bit about another unit that we have that has already been established and is working across government, and it is called the Digital Delivery Unit of the Ministry of Digital Transformation. The Digital Delivery Unit is something where we examine the landscape we thought to be absolutely necessary. And why is it absolutely necessary? It is necessary, Madam Speaker, because not all of the Ministries, divisions and agencies are starting from the same place, not all of them have the same technical capabilities and capacities,

and very few of them have the ability to translate what they need and want into the speak of an agency that is providing it.

So what did we do? We went ahead and created the Digital Delivery Unit and embedded people from that unit in those Ministries. So what happens? What does that mean for the Ministry? What it means, Madam Speaker, is that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for example, in its ISEMS rollout had to find a way to get its requirements spoken in a language that the vendor would understand. The Ministry of Digital Transformation was trying to impose upon that process the requirements of saying do not buy stand-alone gear put it in a cloud. Ensure that the security is built in inside of that, and if those things were being translated by messages, the ability to accomplish that was significantly diminished.

So by the creation of the Digital Delivery Unit, what we have done by embedding people who understand how to do that and have the expertise do that, has made for significant progress across all of the initiatives that are going on with digital transformation in many of the Ministries for which we have.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: We have them embedded in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, in the Immigration Division, in the Licensing Division, et cetera, et cetera. It continues and the intent is, wherever there is a major project going on you will find one of our people sitting inside of there.

E-Services: Madam Speaker, e-services is really and truly where the rubber hits the roads for the general citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. Why? why do I say that? And that is because the product of a lot of what we are doing is the creation of a service that is going to be consumed by a member of the public, or by a public officer, or by somebody. So at the point of consumption the thing that you are

actually consuming as a result of this transformation is an e-service. What did we do?

Well, one, we want to create as many as possible. But creating them you have to ensure that they are fit for purpose and they continue to be fit for purpose. You also have to ensure that they are aligned with the need for which you originally created them. So what did we do? We created a services maturity model. What does that mean? It means that every service that we have, whether it is created by the Ministry, by anybody, we can track anything and put it into that model to determine whether or not it continues to be fit for purpose, whether you have to do adjustments to it whatever we have to do.

We are currently tracking over 200 e-services that are available in Trinidad and Tobago. At this time last year, it was 105, we are at 200 so it continues. The issue though that we have to fix is that while we are tracking over 200 of them, 77 per cent of them are primarily informational or low transactional services. It is a site that you can go to, to get information. It is a site you can go to, to download a form; it is a site you can go to, to make an appointment maybe. A large quantity of our services are like that. We want to translate those from there to further on the maturity level.

The second state, what do we have again? Well, we have some that can be considered transactional, meaning that you can start and initiate some part of what you want to do online, cannot complete it. And then, the last part where we only have six per cent of them are generally end to end services, meaning that you can go, start, and complete your transaction online. The work that we are doing now is to get those numbers closer, to push the things that are transactional and only informational, push all of them down to the place where they are now at the point where they are completely end to end. The thing though is, even somewhat

manual semi-mature services can have a very big impact on the society. And I will give an example, Madam Speaker.

The Life Certificate service. I do not know how many of you have heard about it. Nobody here is really of the age to be dealing with that in a significant way, but I am sure some of our parents and grandparents are. And that is a service available through the TTConnect service centres and we can expand those if we so wish. But this is what it means. Users of this service can make appointments to have their Life Certificates processed at the centres. Now, why is that significant? Because it means that you do not have to travel to the Social Development and Family Services Office to get it done. That, as simple as that may seem, it has had a tremendous impact on the people who have to do that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: It is using iGovTT's online appointment system to do this. Again, it is a homegrown system it does what it does. It assures more or less personalized service on the day when you have your appointment, so the complaint will be well, we "doh" have enough appointments but for the people who get there at the time when they get there, the service is of such a quality that they themselves enjoy. Can you imagine the elderly not having to wait for seven hours to get something done?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: When you go there you can get it done at the same time.

What is the outcome? How do you measure it in value for the people? The outcome has been that there is a 90 per cent reduction in wait time for pensioners, and more than 2,000 satisfied customers have enjoyed this system since it was first put into place. That is what we are talking about. When we do what we are doing

in digital transformation, it is supposed to impact the lives of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago in a positive way. And that is a really, really, simple example, Madam Speaker.

Earlier I spoke about the pillars upon which we built digital society, digital government, digital economy. Let me touch a little bit on some of these. Digital society: What does it do? It seeks to really ensure that all citizens, residents, people in Trinidad and Tobago benefit from digital technology. Benefit from it in a number of ways, we want to make sure no one is left behind. We want to make sure broadband is accessible, available, people have the ability to use it with confidence. It must be usable, it must be ubiquitous across Trinidad and Tobago. And in the digital society pillar where all of the initiatives and projects that we have, and all have already started, there are none to be started in this fiscal. They have all started. This is continuous work that we are doing here now.

And while I say that, just the same way in which the Minister of Education congratulated things, I also want to join in congratulating a number of the sectors that deal with broadband delivery in Trinidad and Tobago because our coverage from a broadband perspective in Trinidad and Tobago is second to none in the Caribbean. And from all estimates and averages it hovers around 90 per cent of the population of Trinidad and Tobago. And that is significant because it is all in the private sector's hands.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

6.35 p.m.

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: So broadband, for it to be used, it must be accessible, so it must have it everywhere. We already know who the normal providers are in our network. In the budget presentation, the Minister of Finance touched on two new entrants into the broadband space. Those are LEO-based or low Earth orbiting

satellite-based companies, and those companies bring an additional dimension to what we are doing. They have very different business models. I am sure there will be others that will be coming in as well, and there are opportunities for exploitation of their services based on what it is they can provide for us. But all it is, it is another way to ensure that broadband is available across all of Trinidad and Tobago.

Internet must be affordable. Broadband services and access must be affordable. And you would recognize that in the open competitive market, in which we are, those of the haves, the cost is not really that important. Those of the have-nots, or the less fortunate in terms of financial circumstances, need to be catered for. We do that in a number of ways. Apart from providing services and providing machines and so on, providing training and providing all of that, these ICT centres that we are opening across Trinidad and Tobago have a key role to play in the affordability of the—I will tell you an example.

Anyone can walk into any one of those ICT centres now with nothing in their hands; no phone, no computer, no laptop, no tablet, no anything. And what would you do? You simply go there, it is a staffed facility, there are computers there, there are laptops there, there are training facilities there and the people there will assist you in anything that you need to do. So even if you do not know what you want to do, you just want to ask a question to get something done, you can go and do that. And those ICT centres are spreading out all about. I will tell you about the numbers in a little bit.

The TT Wi-Fi programme is one that is also going on across that space. What does that mean? It means that you have Wi-Fi available to you when you go to these places at no cost to you. It is not free. The Minister of Finance knows that

very well because he fits the bill from time to time. It is not free. But you, at the point of consumption, there is no cost to you; none.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: And as we continue to roll these out, we have somewhere close to 240 sites currently available in Trinidad and Tobago, and they are in really important places, libraries, transport hubs, hospitals and health centres, government offices and high-traffic areas, PTSC buses and the terminals, and a number of schools for which the Ministry of Education has deemed that they should be inside of there.

What is the benefit to you, the citizen? Well, people would say, well they only putting that there for people to play games. But imagine you go into a hospital, not having the ability to communicate and tell people what is happening with you. Imagine you are at—somewhere where you have an issue where, for some reason, you lost your transport money and you are sitting in City Gate, you have access to things to be able to communicate and tell people what is happening to you. These things are not frivolous and there for the playing of games. These things are there and in a number of cases, they have become not only lifesaving, but comfort-giving things for people who require the services that we have; 240 of them and we are going to continue to improve on the numbers of them.

The ICT centres, I mentioned before, we have a number of them. The numbers just keep adding every day. We have a number of them that are already prepared and not yet opened, and I must thank the Minister of Sport and Community Development and, of course, UDeCOTT, for we are tenants of their facilities that they are building. A lot of these new multipurpose facilities all over Trinidad and Tobago now have inside of them—I also should thank the Minister of Communications because the NALIS sites are also being made available for us to

put these ICT centres inside of it. What does that do? It means that we are going to have lots of them all over.

We have a number of them—10 of them all now. We have 23 in the process of being operationalized; 13 of them are just finally being put in with furniture: Tacarigua, La Pastora, Edinburgh 500, Gonzales, St. James youth facility, Harmony Hall, Navet, two in Arima, Bon Air Gardens, Malabar, La Horquetta, you name it. We probably have a site coming there at a, you know—to a place near you.

How are these sites being used? I mentioned what is happening with ALTA, but you have access to government information and e-services in there, again, whether you know how to do it or not, because it is staffed and the staff comes from within the vicinity in which the centre is placed; online education, you could use it for research for training—well, ALTA, of course, is using it. They have a number of private people who come in from time to time to ask to use it. They, of course, have to speak to the agencies that manage them to be able to do that, but they have things, hackathons, stress tests, et cetera, et cetera. There is computer literacy training in there. I know we have done a number of homework activity places inside of there, all again, they get the permission to do it. A local private company is using one to do computer repair training—this is in Penal. A local business there donated the machines and they continue to do the work inside of there. Early childhood centres are now going into them to start to introduce early childhood students to technology. All of this is happening within the spaces that we have inside of there. So this is significant.

They have an online youth camps, Girls in ICT, online sensitivity, SEA pass assistance, all of that is happening inside of those places. So it is important to

know that those things, as we roll them out, provide significant benefits to the people of Trinidad and Tobago at a granular and individual level.

They are not only frequented by young people and students. A number of our older generation people go there to get what they need to get. And, of course, I mentioned the areas of partnership that we had with Ministries, but for content, ALTA is one; YTEPP is there; the Microsoft foundation; the Linux Foundation; RBC robotics, that is local inside of there. And, of course, all of the people who manage those centres for us, that speaks, again, to the partnership that we have.

We Learn TT, another one of our initiatives, well underway, started in 2023. It continues—it targets citizens of Trinidad and Tobago at three levels. People who want an introduction to just to be able to do something in the ICT space, scared of computers, do not know anything about it, never used a computer in my life, laptop, tablet—come, we will show you how to do that. There is a place where we can deal with you for that. Seniors tend to like it because they do not know how to use some of the new fandangle things that come on these phones. But when they are done, you see the delight in their eyes when they recognize that I can, you know—I can call my, whoever it is, and they can see me and I can—and I know how to do it for myself. There is still a level of independence to be gained when you are operating even at an advanced age.

Group two would be people who are fairly computer literate, able to know what they are doing and want to get their skills even better, either to promote themselves, in terms of upskilling for work, changes. So those are the kinds of things that will happen to, for example, anyone who joins one of our programmes that we have and say, listen, I can do this already, but I need certification, I need something—you can do that.

Group three is for the real advanced technical guys. They are really good. They are already good at what they are doing but they need some additional seasoning and all of that. All of those are being handled in this We Learn category. We have done—the first cohort of 1,000 was done some time ago. We have another 1,500 coming up, including participants from Tobago. We have a number of people who have come to us who have sight issues, we are making special preparations for them as well in our centre. So what we have, no one is being left behind.

So this We Learn is being implemented as a collaboration between the Government, the academia, the local international partners. You have YTEPP and again, Coursera, Linux, Cisco, Simplilearn, et cetera. Our partnerships continue throughout what it is we are doing here. Partnerships such as We Learn and so on are mechanisms that will allow for ordinary citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to improve their lives.

Digital economy: Well, digital economy is an interesting one. I like to talk about this one, so I have manage myself. It is the exploitation of the most populous natural resource in Trinidad and Tobago: people, our people. And what are we doing with that? Well, what we are doing is we are harnessing all that talent that we have and channelling it into areas where ICT can help. This digital economy piece is really about increasing the contribution of ICT to the national purse. That is what it is. And the way we are going to do that is to ensure that we use them in spaces in the ICT sector. We built, launched—the developers of it—it is already launched, it is working, it is going to continue. It is built around a \$10 million funding that was made available again by the Minister of Finance, my thanks, for a three-year programme that deals with our ability to have our local developers register and join the D'Hub and from doing that, they will have access

to a range of training facilities, learning facilities, and other things within that space. It also allows them to communally connect with one another.

It also means that we know who you are. And when I say we know who you are—I do not know if you had asked the question a year ago, how many developers do we have in Trinidad and Tobago that could be made available to the Government and or to private sector businesses to do work on their behalf. No one could give us an accurate number. And how many of that cohort is willing to work, we now know that we have over 500 entrants and this only started in August.

What else have we done? Well, we have launched what is called the D'Hub challenge because once we have the people, what do you do with them? Well, what do we do? We ask around, find things that are affecting the society, things that could be solved through ICT, and we asked them through the D'Hub challenge to come up with ways to solve them. It is a competition. We did our first challenge awards on September 30th, and what that meant is that people were given challenges, specific challenges, and you had to make a presentation to an independent panel who will evaluate it and say, yes, this is something that can go forward.

What is the ultimate aim at the end? To produce commercially viable and available and a working application to solve the problem that was originally given to you. It is phenomenal what it was, 50 applicants came in for the five challenges that we had and those are going forward, the awards will be given to them shortly and the intent is they have three months, and we will help them to get to the point where we have viable things to do that. The challenges that we had were the liquor licence; things that we are dealing with, online passport tracking, for example, noise pollution, and measurement reporting and solutions, real-time address identification, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Our intention is to eventually allow this to grow to a point where it becomes and flywheels off on its own and it probably will end up with the Trinidad and Tobago software export company, but all on its own, nothing to do with us anymore because the enthusiasm and the number of people that we have seen there is significant. This continues to grow every day. So the teams are between one to four developers, and they have to develop these things, and they are going to continue to work in what we are doing.

The next part of the challenge, I think, is where we will get the most benefit. In this case, we gave the challenges. In the next case, we are going to ask that same cohort to look around Trinidad and Tobago—they are from here, they live here—and find things that you think that you can build that will assist the society and the economy at large, and we will evaluate those and then allow you to build them. So it is working, it is going down that road.

The last pillar, digital government. Digital government is the one I think that everybody kind of gets excited about because that is the one where all of these services that we are talking about live. And—but they are components to that, that people forget. There are really four components to transformation. When I first mentioned this, people still remember it, but one of those components is the law legislation. We talk about people, process, technology, but one of them is legislation. And I just want to touch a bit on what the legislative agenda for the Ministry of Digital Transformation entails. Some of this, I am sure, is music to the ears of, not only the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago but, in some small measure, to the Opposition as well, as they always speak about accountancy and availability and all the things that go along with that.

We are partnering, in this case, with the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, as you would expect, the Telecommunications

Authority, a number of the ICT sectors, civil society, et cetera. But what are we trying to do? Well, the first thing we have to do is to update the Telecommunications Act. It needs updating. Technology has moved beyond it. There are a number of things inside of there that we must update, we are working on that. We are close to bringing some things to Parliament where that is concerned.

This one, I am sure, will excite most, the full proclamation of the Electronic Transactions Act. It is something that has been asked for, we will continue to work on it, we working there assiduously, we will get there. And, of course, the similar for the Data Protection Act. Those two, I know, are the things that people look to when they speak about the transparency associated with ICT transactions and otherwise, those will form part of it and, of course, we are also working on the operationalization of the Office of the Information Commissioner.

So, we are working on those. We know what the Electronic Transactions Act will do. It is the framework for widespread adoption of electronic and authentication methods. It includes digital signatures in the public sector policies and electronic transactions, data protections and privacy, et cetera, et cetera. So, I do not have to go into that. It was subject to debate in the Senate. I am sure it will be here as well. So it is something that we are doing. We are going to continue to do that.

6.50 p.m.

The thing that worries most people about what I am speaking about today is cybersecurity. Cybersecurity is a serious thing. The Minister of Finance in his presentation put specific incentives for companies who embark on the utilization of cybersecurity in the projects of their business. People of Trinidad and Tobago, through you, Madam Speaker, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of

ensuring that your ICT and the products that you have are digitally and cyber secured. As with all types of businesses there are different types of risks. If you have a warehouse with cardboard, fire might be a problem, water might be a problem. If you are working in the electronic space, security and protection of your data is paramount. A number of the digital initiatives for which we are speaking across the Ministries, divisions and agencies will come to naught if we do not protect them.

In the private sector, the society at large is vulnerable. If you have private sector companies who are not paying the necessary attention and putting the necessary emphasis on cybersecurity, hence the initiative that was placed there by the hon. Minister of Finance, and I want to thank him for doing that. And I hope, and I implore through you, Madam Speaker, that the people of Trinidad and Tobago, private and public sector people, understand the importance of it and take advantage of what is being provided for you. It is very important if we continue along this train of where we are. There have been high, very high profile cybersecurity breaches in Trinidad and Tobago, both in the public and in the private sector. We are doing a lot of work to fix that at the Ministry of Digital Transformation.

The cybersecurity strategy is coming, but more importantly than that, we have already embarked on the necessary things to assure that any Ministry, division or agency that suffers one of this that there is a reaction force that they can be dealt with that can deal with those issues. We had a fairly good and live example of what can happen if you do not have that in place, and of course, we are seeing what can happen when you do have it in place based on things that happened at the Ministry of Attorney General and Legal Affairs.

I also want to speak to another part of what it is. So we deal with legislation,

we talked about cybersecurity, but I want to talk about two flagship projects that were also mentioned in the presentation of the budget, those are e-ID and interoperability. Why is it important to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago? Interoperability is the platform that allows for the exchange of information, relevant information, specific information between Ministries and agencies to allow for the services that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago need for it to work. There are very few services that start in one Ministry and ended there, very few. The frustrations felt by people who have to go and register themselves across provide the same information from Ministry to Ministry to Ministry—

Madam Speaker: Minister, your original speaking time is now spent, you are entitled to 10 more minutes to wind up your contribution. You may proceed.

Sen. The Hon. H. Bacchus: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The idea of having to have this information duplicated across all of this is not necessary.

The intention of having information validated across things is key. It stops malfeasance. It allows for deduplication. It gives the power for you to start a transaction if you wish. The simple one would be the renewal of a driver's permit. In one Ministry, because the Licensing Division is under—licensing is under the Ministry of National Security, I think—and then you have to pay; some money has to go to the Ministry of Finance. We have to validate your information to make sure that your birth certificate pin is correct. All of that can be done in the blink of an eye if places are interconnected and only zero-code, no-code information is shared, so all you have is a response. That is all you have. It is this person, this person, yes; it does not care who you are, what you are doing, why are you using it for. Those are the kinds of things that we have to implement, and the XRoads facility is what is going to allow for that to happen.

E-identity is a closed-eye thing. We have to be able to identify everybody in

Trinidad and Tobago at a unique level. There is no other way we are going to be able to do things, but think about the benefits to you. If you want to apply for something or benefit from social development, you alone could apply for it and only you can receive it. If there are people who do not exist inside of there, we will find them and they will be removed. What is the benefit of that for you? Well, it means that more resources are now available for you to use. Think about individual-level subsidies. We all get gas subsidies regardless of “whey” you drive; the largest vehicle or a small motorbike. If it could be channeled only to these specific people who need it and make sure that only those specific people get it, that is the benefit for what we are doing, and that is why we are embarking on these types of things that we are doing here. We are getting help from Estonia to do the XRoads and we are getting help from the UNDP to do the—sorry—Estonia, XRoads; UNDP dealing with us with the e-identity.

One of the last things that we are building also is a Tier 4 modular data centre. Why are we building a data centre when they have three Tier 3—at least three Tier 3, maybe four Tier 3 data centres in Trinidad and Tobago? There are reasons for that, there are some things that you want exclusively in your hands. You do not want them in private hands; you want them where they are. Tier 4 is probably the most secured thing that we can have and mission critical services must be housed somewhere. It is interesting that we are embarking on building one and a number of Caribbean islands have already expressed interest in creating data embassies and having their information here. We are going to build it. The evaluations are pretty much complete for my information. I expect an award will be coming soon and coming back to where it is, of course, in accordance with where we are. Data protection I have spoken about and open data I have spoken about.

So, Madam Speaker, in conclusion, I have outlined a number of things in the digital agenda. I have outlined what we are doing. I have outlined how some of the initiatives that were placed in the national budget will contribute to where it is, but I hope I have also outlined the benefits of what we are trying to do for the average and ordinary citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. This is not just about being efficient and being new, and being participant in the rest of the world, what the rest of the world is doing. This is about conserving resources, making the most of what we have, developing the people of where we are and transforming this economy where we can for increasing our contribution to national ICT. With those few words, I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me to join in this debate on Budget Statement 2024. Madam Speaker, I almost thought I might not have had the opportunity to contribute. I am the last Member of the Opposition on this side, the nineteenth Member of the Opposition to have joined the debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And my colleagues who have gone before me, I want to congratulate them on some very comprehensive, well-researched and powerful contributions in this budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And especially, I want to congratulate the Member for Siparia for one of the best budget responses debunking the claims of the Minister of Finance—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—with respect to his budget statement. Madam Speaker, the population have seen that we are the alternative Cabinet of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Dr. Moonilal said that the PNM is in the departure lounge, well, Madam Speaker, it is about time that we come in the arrival lounge.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: The last time we met here, Madam Speaker, it was just about 24 hours ago, under 24 hours ago, there have been some very critical issues that were facing our country.

Just last night a semi-nude body of a female was found thrown on the highway in the vicinity of Trincity. Last night, in the busy Ariapita Avenue, a vehicle was gunned down with three occupants in it, the driver having been shot and he is dead, a 28-year-old young man. Tragedy hit my constituency this morning, Madam Speaker. The area of Barataria, it was an attempted assassination on the Deputy Commissioner of Prisons. Madam Speaker, this is where this PNM Government has taken Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They keep saying that we like to “bad talk” Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, that is absolutely untrue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We just speak the truth about the PNM. We speak the truth about the PNM, Madam Speaker, because I want to condemn that action of the attempted assassination on the Deputy Commissioner of Prisons in my constituency, Madam Speaker. I want to condemn that. And what is even more irking is that I have in

my possession, a letter dated the 9th of October, 2023. A letter that is circulating on social media, Madam Speaker, two days ago before this attack from the Prison Officers' Association of Trinidad and Tobago to the Minister of National Security.

Dr. Moonilal: What?

Mr. S. Hosein: And the title of this letter, Madam Speaker, is:

Hon. Minister, no authorized phones for inmates in all prisons is a threat to the lives of prison officers.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of National Security, the Member for Laventille West, was warned by the Prison Officers' Association that there could be a threat on the lives of prison officers and he did absolutely nothing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Absolutely nothing. Imagine they have had this information in their possession and they did not do anything whatsoever. Madam Speaker, in any other democratic country with a properly working Cabinet, there would have been an urgent and immediate summoning of the National Security Council to deal with this matter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Because now we have to beg the question, "Who is next?" If the criminals are so brazen at 6.37 a.m. in the morning to show up by a man house, none other than the Deputy Commissioner of Prisons, and spray down his vehicle with bullets, who are we, Madam Speaker? Who are we? The question is: who is next in this country?

This Minister of National Security has done nothing to protect the citizens of this country. The Minister of Finance in reading his budget statement wait until about the third or fourth hour before he talked to us about crime and security in this country. What a shame.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: What a shame.

Hon. Member: Shame.

Mr. S. Hosein: Had we been living in a country where government cares for us, it would have had CCTV cameras to detect those persons. It would have had rapid response to intercept those individuals, Madam Speaker. What we have, a breakdown of the CCTV infrastructure in this country. And they will come—last year I remember in the budget, “We are going to allocate millions of dollars to install 2,500 new cameras”, Madam Speaker, they probably did not even install a single new camera.

They have not told us where that money went, and the existing infrastructure of CCTV cameras is down by about 50 per cent.

Hon. Member: Correct.

Mr. S. Hosein: And then the Minister of Digital Transformation comes here to tell us about all the websites and all the infrastructure, just give us CCTV cameras.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Just give us that. It is a nice talk to come here and talk about ICT infrastructure, and it is so frustrating to go from one Ministry to a next and—Madam Speaker, we just want to be safe.

Mrs. Haynes-Alleyne: Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Just protect the citizens of this country. Just protect us. That is all we are asking for at this stage, Madam Speaker. That is all. And I want to tell the Minister of National Security, through you, Madam Speaker, an apology does not save lives.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Apologies do not save lives. The criminals are at war with us but the Minister of National Security is asleep.

Madam Speaker: Okay.

Mr. S. Hosein: He is asleep.

Madam Speaker: So, just by way of warning, Member for Barataria/San Juan, as you quite rightly said, you are the nineteenth Member to speak and you are the fortieth Member to join the debate. Crime has been flogged so you are really bordering on tedious repetition, so that if you are going to—

Mr. Padarath: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Member, you have a problem?

Mr. Padarath: Madam, I was saying that the—

Madam Speaker: Well, I am on my legs. Okay?

Mr. Padarath: You asked a question.

Madam Speaker: I am on my legs in any event. Okay? So, Member for Barataria/San Juan, as I was saying, crime has been flogged and therefore, while I will allow you some leeway on new issues, please let us do not rehash for at least the nineteenth time things that have been said on crime. Okay?

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I will wind up this point by saying that the hopeless, hapless, misinformed, waste of time Minister of National Security has to go.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: He has to go. He has to go.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the theme of this budget debate is “Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth”. Now, there is something called the diversification index and it is measured on a scale from zero to one, and the closer

you are to one, that is the less diversified you are. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2022 Trinidad and Tobago ranked 0.75 on that scale. So I do not understand how the Minister of Finance could have come up with a theme like this, “Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth”, when they have crashed the economy and they have no plans for diversification.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: You have decimated the energy industry so what you expect in the non-energy industry to happen? There must be growth in that sector.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have destroyed this economy. This is this Government’s eighth or ninth budget—eighth year of governance, they have spent over \$420 billion, well, what have we seen for \$420 billion? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: In five years, police officers never complained for pen and paper in the police station. Hospitals never complained for beds and medicine, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Children never complained for surgeries because we were doing it when we were in Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

And the problem here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is not resources. They have money. The problem is management.

7.05 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: The problem is management. They have mismanaged almost every, single sector of governance. Not one sector they can point at that is properly functioning, and then they will come budget after budget and complain about the same exact issues as though they are not in Government. Sometimes

when they stand up to speak, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am in awe because I think this is their first appointment. I thought they were appointed right before they came to the budget presentation, because they identified all the issues but not a single solution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the expiry date of this Government is nearing very soon—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—and there is a foul stench coming from that side, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Joseph Stalin was a dictator in the Soviet Union and Mr. Stalin controlled the narrative, Mr. Deputy Speaker. He would ensure that the narrative that goes out there is propagated. They would invent statistics, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They attempted to control what we call the truth at that time. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not casting any aspersions, but I see similar conduct here. This Government will tell us we have first-class health care; they will tell us that the economy is growing; they will tell us the crime situation is not that bad, we just complain too much; and they will tell us that the energy sector is booming. That is their reality, that is their truth. Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is the reality of everyone else? High food prices, a crime situation that is out of control with home invasions, the highest murder toll, brutal killings of young people, roads filled with potholes, and skilled graduates without jobs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: You see, they want to propagate their truth, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but we will propagate the reality on this side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And they will try to control the truth because that will encourage debate, that will encourage us to question their story, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but we will expose this Government for what they really are.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We will expose them. Because not too long ago the Member for St. Ann's East contributed. I think she was the shadow of the shadow of the Minister of Education.

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

Mr. S. Hosein: And the Minister said that we should be grateful for the bursaries. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the bursaries that these students got were based on their own merit, their performance, and their circumstances.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And they want the Government—they are forcing these children to tell the Government “allyuh tell we thanks inno”. Some of these students I am made to understand who are studying in universities abroad have been locked out from being able to register for courses because the Government has not released the funding for the bursaries.

Hon. Member: Shame.

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister said what? “Education did not collapse”. Well the schools are in fact collapsing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Right in San Juan concrete was falling from a school. St. George's College is going to celebrate 70 years in 2023. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that school has been moved out since last year and we do not know when they will go back in their building. One whole year St. George's College has moved out and today I am advocating on behalf of the students and the parents of that school in

my constituency. Minister, please get that school up and running.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Get that school up and running. They have been housed in the constituency of I believe my friend from—the Member for St. Augustine—at the Valsayn Teaching College.

7.10 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to make a comment with respect to what the Minister of Digital Transformation said. And what he said is that they are integrating services. So you “doh” have to jump from one Ministry to a next Ministry to provide the same information, that in health care they are trying to integrate the services. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we “doh” have chairs, beds, medicine in the hospital but “dem” talking about putting computers in the hospital, you know. This is the reality that these people have, you know. They feel as though that everything is working properly, you know, and that everybody else is just bad talking the Government. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is the propaganda we speak of.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: That is the propaganda. And we will engage in this budget exercise, days, after days, after days and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we on this side could say what we want, it will change nothing because the Government will have their way. They do not listen.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They do not listen. It is time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we think whether or not we have to reform this entire system on this budgeting exercise, because we understand on this side the value of consulting with people before we come into this Parliament with respect to budgetary allocations. Because you understand what the ordinary man on the ground, the issues that he faces, and that

is called participatory budgeting. And we have to determine whether or not all of this time we are going to spend here, five days in Standing Finance Committee, five days' worth of debate. We normally pass one Bill per sitting in this Parliament. We are engaging in 10 days here, and whether or not we can put this towards more productive time because we understand parliamentary time is expensive and it is scarce, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So we have to look at whether or not this entire system is in need of reform, whether it is in need of reform, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move on to this point about the announcement of the 1,000 SRPs that the Government wants to introduce in fiscal 2024, the 1,000 recruits. Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again, I will give you a certain leeway. Right. Let me see what avenue you are going down, but remember the ruling with regard to tedious repetition and with regard to crime and policing and so on.

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I give you the assurance, I would not be breaching the Standing Orders. I am going to raise a very new issue with respect to this matter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, when the Government announced the 1,000 additional recruits for 2024 for the TTPS, it sounded as though as soon this budget is passed, we will have 1,000 new police officers on the streets. That is what they make it out to be. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it takes about six to nine months for that entire passing out to happen. And before that, it will take even more time for the recruitment process because you have to screen the candidates, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and then you have to advertise in newspapers, you have to take the exams, you have to go through all of the training at the Police Academy. So this is

not going to happen overnight. You have to get a certificate of character, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that is not even working in this country. That is not even working.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are SRP officers in this country who have had the experience, well-trained officers and I must say that based on the set up of the system there are two streams of officers. There are SRP officers and there are the regulars, and the regulars have a more favourable terms and condition in terms of their remuneration package as compared to SRPs, yet they do almost the identical job, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and there is a disparity with respect to their salary.

And I have a copy of a memo dated the 3rd of August, 2022 with respect to how many SRPs are in the system. There are over 3,435 SRPs in the system and they are placed in almost every single department of the TTPS, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In fact, right here in this Parliament most of the officers here who are very hard-working officers who keep us safe are SRP officers. And SRPs have been asking year after year, why do you not make us regulars, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: So instead of having to go over this entire recruitment exercise, you can just absorb the SRPs into the system, 1,000 of the 3,000 because you have the officers who are well-trained who have been given the experience, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and who know the system and give them the opportunity to be absorbed within that 1,000 recruitment exercise. And this is nothing new, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This was already done in 2008.

I have a Legal Notice No. 175 of 2008 which speaks of the police service recruitment of Special Reserve Police Regulations 2008, and the name of that project was called SRP 1,000 project. It is the same thing I am proposing here, Mr.

Deputy Speaker, absorb these SRPs into the system, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: The crime situation is urgent and we need all hands on deck, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The criminals are at war with us. And it is not an automatic recruitment exercise. There are various thresholds where you have to meet in order to be recruited with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is the point I wish to raise with respect to that recruitment exercise.

I want to also go into what the Government has done with some millions of dollars in this country when they had a crime symposium in the Hyatt. What were they doing? Guzzling whiskey or champagne and eating shrimps. That cost us—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, hon. Member, I will prefer you do not go down that road. Move on to a different point, please.

Mr. S. Hosein: That cost us \$3.4 million, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, a different point.

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I am not mistaken, I do not believe anybody raised the crime symposium as a public health emergency. And that is the point I want to make.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Hon. Member, I have ruled.

Mr. S. Hosein: Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will move on. And I will move on to say that there are issues with respect to human trafficking in this country. If I am not mistaken, I do not think any of my colleagues raised that issue.

Dr. Moonilal: No. Nobody.

Mr. S. Hosein: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would have seen that under the law the Minister of National Security has an obligation in order to lay annual reports with respect to the Counter Trafficking Unit according to section 45 of the

Trafficking in Persons Act. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Minister must lay that report within three months at the end of every year. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister has failed to lay that report since 2017 in this House.

Dr. Moonilal: What a shame.

Mr. S. Hosein: He has been in breach of the law and we must call him to account for that. We have taken the Minister of Finance to court with respect to a similar matter like this and we have no fear that we will do it to the Minister of National Security because he has to account to the people of where the money has gone and what this Government is doing with respect to human trafficking.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Because we have been on the Tier 2 Watch List by the US for several years and my friend from Naporima continuously raises many of these issues.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move on to another area which is of grave concern, very, very grave concern, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When I looked at some documents that were presented in this Parliament, in particular the Annual Report of the Integrity Commission.

Dr. Moonilal: “Ohhh.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I did not hear the last one. The report of—

Mr. S. Hosein: The Annual Report, the 35th Annual Report to the Parliament for the year 2022 of the Integrity Commission. That Integrity Commission has a specified line item in this budget. And in this Integrity Commission report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a shame on this Government of what I will reveal as I go along. The Prime Minister has in an incarnation before said that the Integrity Commission has no integrity. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will demonstrate that this Government is intent on collapsing the Integrity Commission. They are going

to starve the Integrity Commission to death.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They have no moral authority to speak of integrity. This Integrity Commission was established by an UNC Government in the year 2000 under the Integrity in Public Life Act. And for those who are listening, this Integrity Commission would have been in charge of reviewing the declarations that members in public life would file in terms of their assets and their liabilities.

Now, I looked at this report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the 35th Annual Report of the Integrity Commission. And it is signed off by the Prof. Rajendra Ramlogan as Chairman; Frederick Gilkes, Deputy Chairman; Eleanor Bridgeman-Volney, member; Sandra Honoré, member; and Lyndon James, member. And this is what the report says under the item “Budgetary Constraints” and I am going to quote: The members of the Integrity Commission are informing this country of the following.

“The Commission faces a financial stranglehold, owing to the deficient and significantly depleted budget, which suffocates the efforts of the Commission to perform its statutory duties. The drastic depletion of the budget can be observed by comparing Twenty-Six million...allocated to the Commission in 2015....”

—that is when we were in government.

Dr. Moonilal: Correct.

Mr. S. Hosein: “...with the figure of eight point six...million...allocated...”

Dr. Moonilal: What?

Mr. S. Hosein:—“...in 2023.”

Dr. Moonilal: What?

Mr. S. Hosein: From \$26 million, they have reduced the budget of the Integrity

Commission to \$8.6 million.

“Though the Commission”—it—“received a small bump from eight... million...in 2022 to eight point six...million...in 2023, the latter and most recent figure is woefully short of what is required to ensure the implementation of the Commission’s mandates.

At present there are several open positions in the Commission which cannot be filled due to lack of funding. This has severely affected the progress of”—what?—“the Investigations Unit in particular.”

Dr. Moonilal: “Ohhh”. That is the objective.

Mr. S. Hosein: Why is the Government starving the Integrity Commission of resources that the Integrity Commission now has to complain that it may not be able to function?

“...the Commission has been provided with a restricted budget that cannot carry the Commission to meet its staffing expenses for the year 2023 and beyond. The Commission predicts that the failure of granting additional funding will lead to the end of contract employment for several staff members as the Commission will not be”— able to be—“in a position to remunerate persons.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Commission, the Integrity Commission, is telling us that the Government is not giving them money to even pay their own staff. What a shame. Why is this Government starving the Integrity Commission to death? What is their problem with the Integrity Commission?

Dr. Moonilal: They have no integrity.

Mr. S. Hosein: What is their problem with the Integrity Commission? Mr. Deputy Speaker, they are complaining that under Act they go to court and get ex parte orders in order to serve members in public life. They do not have money to

pay the people to serve the orders. They are called process servers, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They do not want this Integrity Commission to function. They say that:

“Another example that signals the arrested development that the Commission must contend with...legal fees necessary to ensure that decisions...”—that they have are properly—“...supported by...legal guidance.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this move by the Government to strangle the Integrity Commission is something that must be condemned.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: A government rooted in strong democratic values and principles of accountability and transparency should throw money at the Integrity Commission to ensure that persons in public life are compliant with their obligations under the law. Yet this Government is seems as though is intent on shutting down the Integrity Commission by starving it to death, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They are starving it to death. And why I left the last point on the Integrity Commission on legal fees, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have some very interesting matters I want to raise with respect to legal fees in this country.

Dr. Moonilal: “Ah ha.”

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we went—

Dr. Moonilal: Drop it on them

Mr. S. Hosein:—in the mid-year review, I asked the Attorney General who I almost had to haul before the Privileges Committee for misleading this Parliament and he had to apologize to this Parliament about legal fees, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Would you believe that in 2023 according to the Revised Estimates, this

Government in one year under the Office of the Attorney General, has spent a whopping \$195 million in legal fees?

Hon. Members: “Whooo!”

Mr. S. Hosein: \$195 million, the highest ever spent on legal fees in a single calendar year in this country, in a fiscal year in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker. \$195 million in legal fees. And then when I asked the Attorney General, well, give us a breakdown of these individuals or these lawyers who collected these legal fees, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could pass the document to you. It is two pages long with names on it. Not a single allocation of who got the money.

Dr. Moonilal: What?

Mr. S. Hosein: How much they got, what they got the money for.

Dr. Moonilal: That is contempt.

7.25 p.m.

Mr. S. Hosein: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we know this is unacceptable. So was had to now—according to other documents I received, a freedom of information application had to be filed on the Office of the Attorney General and other Ministries and state enterprises to then disclose how much legal fees or where these fees were allocated.

Dr. Moonilal: “Aha”.

Mr. S. Hosein: Now, Ravi Balgobin-Maharaj, through the Freedom Law Chambers, Mr. Anand Ramlogan SC, would have filed the necessary freedom of information application to get this information, information that should have been readily available by the Attorney General in public.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We now had to invoke the provisions of the law to get this information. And based on the compilation that I have received, Mr. Deputy

Speaker, I want to now disclose or report to this Parliament “where de money gone”. Because if the Government does not want to report “where de money gone”, where this \$190 million in one year has gone, I had to now account to this Parliament because we had asked for the period 2015, to the period 2023. And for that period, these are the top fee earners for this period: Fyard Hosein, \$28.5 million; Fitzwilliam Stone, \$23.3 million; Dr. Claude Denbow SC, \$22.7 million; Roger Kawalsingh, \$18.2 million; Gilbert Peterson SC, \$18 million; Reginald Armour SC, \$17.5 million.

Hon. Members: “Ooh goood”.

Dr. Moonilal: The Attorney General.

Mr. S. Hosein: One Kerwyn Garcia, \$14.2 million.

Dr. Moonilal: Penny Beckles.

Mr. S. Hosein: Netram Kowlessar, \$12.5 million.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, the Member is doing well, he needs no assistance. Go ahead.

Mr. S. Hosein: Jason Mootoo, \$10 million, Douglas Mendes, \$10 million; Michael Quamina, \$8.5 million; Farai Hove Masaisai, \$6.5 million; Justin Phelps, \$5 million; Elton Prescott, \$4.5 million; Raphael Ajodhia, who I believe is in a chamber well known to the Attorney General in his former employment, \$4.4 million; Terrence Bharath, \$2.7 million; Keith Scotland, \$1.8 million—

Dr. Moonilal: “Ohhh”.

Mr. S. Hosein:—Hinds and Company, \$1.55 million, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the grand total of legal fees for the period September 2015 to May 2023 is \$1.1 billion.

Hon. Members: “Ohhh”.

Mr. Ratiram: Shame!

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$1.1 billion. And today, the Integrity Commission is complaining for a dollar to pay staff at that commission. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I call shame on this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Shame! Because most of the names I called here were in defence of the Attorney General when the Motion of no confidence was brought against him. Mr. Deputy Speaker, under the Office of the Attorney General alone for the period 2016 to 2023, the Attorney General Office alone would have expended \$649 million in legal fees; \$649 million in legal fees. And then they will tell you that, listen, we have no money to buy dialysis machines. We have no money to give—what? We want to give the students a \$1,000 school grant and they must do means test. And then you tell us about, we must pay property tax and we must give back the Government, we must loosen our belt. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is a crying shame in this country for children who died because they do not have life-saving surgeries.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, when police officers have to write the Members of Parliament to ask for fundraisers for laptops, for paper, for toilet paper, I want to remind them that this Government spent \$1.1 billion in legal fees for the last five to six years. It is a crying shame; crying shame.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move on to another very important matter, and this matter has to do with a legal notice that was filed or promulgated through the hand of the Minister of Finance, and this is Legal Notice No. 268 of 2023 and it is called the Water and Sewerage Authority (Tax Exemption) Order of 2023. And what it says, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that on the 16th of April, 2021, WASA entered

into a loan agreement or arrangement with one NCB Merchant Bank Trinidad and Tobago Limited formally known as NCB Global Finance Limited, and this is the amount of the loan, US \$35 million. And WASA had entered in this loan in 2021, and what it says is that WASA is now liable to pay something called a “withholding tax” on the interest payments on this loan agreement. And then the Minister comes and says that WASA is exempt for the payment of all taxes with respect to the loan. So WASA is being given a tax exemption on a loan of US \$35 million.

And what is suspicious is the bank, it is NCB Global Finance. I have a couple questions to ask the Minister of Finance. Firstly, Minister of Finance, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, do you have the authority under the WASA Act to even do this tax exemption? Because the Minister in charge of WASA is the Minister of Public Utilities. So I want to know, firstly, whether you had the authority to even promulgate this Legal Notice?

The second is, why did you exempt this particular loan arrangement between WASA and NCB? Have you exempted any other similar loan arrangements? What were the consideration before you exercised your discretion with respect to creating this exemption order? Also, I want to ask the Minister, how much money is this withholding tax going to benefit the taxpayers? Because I would not want a situation where this company is being given unfavourable treatment with any other banks. And the simple answer is, we have to now question whether or not this gives a competitive advantage to this company as compared to other companies. Because local institutions and local banks would not have to pay withholding tax. That is something for companies that are non-resident in Trinidad.

So a local bank will bid, and they will bid based on interest payments and the principal. Whereas, if NCB bids, it will be principal, interest, plus the

withholding tax. Now, if the Government exempting the withholding tax, will it now give NCB a competitive advantage over any other financial institutions? And I want to tie in this point, and I do not want to anticipate a debate, but do you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is also an exemption order from the procurement Act for the Ministry of Finance to exempt, for all financing services, procurement from his Ministry? So they could now hand select who they want to finance, Ministries and public bodies.

Hon. Member: Sole select NCB.

Mr. S. Hosein: Sole select, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so there will no longer be any procurement. But that debate will be for another day because I have filed a Motion on my name to negative that order, because it goes against the grain of transparency and accountability.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: It is best, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they take the procurement Act and throw it in the Gulf of Paria, because they have exempted almost every sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They have almost exempted every sector of government expenditure so that there can be hand select, sole select of contracts and government benefits.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to go back into some other issues. One issue that has featured very prominently in this debate is that of property tax, and I want to bring some clarification to this issue of property tax. Under the law, there are four categories of property tax. There are commercial taxes, residential, industrial and agricultural taxes. And we have amended the law several times, and the Minister announced that the valuations will take effect on the 4th of October, 2023, for only residential lands; only residential lands. And then the Minister said,

well, I do not know why they complaining because you will only be paying \$2,000—sorry, \$648 per annum in property tax. He said that will be based on an annual rental of \$24,400. Well then that breaks down, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that someone—the rental of someone’s house has to be at least \$2,000, you know.

In this day and age, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with soaring inflation and high prices of properties and rentals, whose house is going to be rented for \$2,000 per month? Let us look at a three-bedroom/two-bedroom house, will that be rented for \$2,000 a month? The Minister must come clean with the population. He went to the lowest threshold to calculate what will be calculated on property tax, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Dr. Moonilal: What is his rental value at home?

Mr. S. Hosein: [*Laughter*] And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the issue is that particular point where the Minister would have indicated with respect to property tax. And there is a provision in the law of something called a “valuation tribunal”, and this is a due process provision that we had placed in the law. So how it works, the Minister has now given effect to the valuations of persons’ properties who have filled out and submitted their property tax forms. The next step is that the Board of Inland Revenue will now send out the assessments for property tax and tell you exactly what you have to pay. Now, under the law you have a right of recourse, which is through the Valuation Tribunal. So let us assume that citizen X’s property tax came in and he has to pay \$10,000 and he has a two-bedroom house and he wants to object to that, there is a Valuation Tribunal that must be set up with respect to this.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in last year’s budget statement, and I want to quote the Minister when he raised this issue. He said, and I quote:

“Members of the Tribunal have been appointed, with the recruitment of the

Chairman in progress.”

Now, the Minister has to appoint four individuals and the fifth one is the chairman who will be appointed through the JLSC. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I did some research and I went to the Parliament Library, and do you know that the Parliament Library has confirmed that there is no *Gazette* or the members of the valuation tribunal have been appointed by the Minister?

Dr. Moonilal: What! So what is he saying?

Mr. S. Hosein: I do not know who these individuals are. I wish the Minister in his winding up would tell us who these four persons he appointed on the valuation tribunal are and he must tell us the date on which these persons were appointed. Because I also checked with other persons in the industry and they have no idea of who are these members of the valuation tribunal that the Minister is speaking of.

Dr. Moonilal: He “dream up” that.

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, they are ghosts. They have ghosted him or either they are ghosts. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to raise another point with respect to property tax, which they are not telling us. My colleague for Princes Town will normally raise issues of public utilities, but do you know in this country your water bill, your WASA bill is calculated on your annual taxable value? So it means that the higher your property tax value is, it is more money you will have to pay in WASA rates, and they do not have to go to “no” RIC, they do not have to come to Parliament.

This is something confirmed by the former CEO of WASA, Mr. Poon King, who told us that once property tax takes effect, water rates will also be higher. It will be higher. So now citizens are faced with property tax, higher water rates and impending increase in T&TEC rates, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but they are not lucky like the other persons to get tax exemptions that I just read out, you know. They

have to fork out that money from their pocket in order to fund this Government and fund the mismanagement, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And there is another point of property tax, because they are creating an argument that property tax will go towards local government reform. That is absolutely not true, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the local government reform Bill—well, the Act, sorry, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Act, I want to read a provision of this and then I will explain it. It says at subsection (6), which amended section 108:

“Where estimates have been approved for use of a Corporation for a particular year and the Corporation is in receipt of sums collected from Property Tax for use by the Corporation, the sums shall be off-set from releases due to the Corporation for that year.”

So that simply means this, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If a corporation is allocated \$10 million—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, before you go into the point, you have just approximately two more minutes of your initial speaking time. You have an additional 10, you care to avail yourself?

Mr. S. Hosein: Yes. Definitely, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed. Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I was at the point, if the corporation is allocated \$10 million through the budgeting exercise now and it is estimated that the corporation is to now receive \$2 million worth in property tax, the Government wants us to believe that the actual revenue of the corporation or moneys allocated for expenditure will be \$12 million. That simply is not true, Mr. Deputy Speaker, according to what I just read. The property tax will be an offset on the estimates

provided for them in the budget. So if the corporation is to receive \$10 million based on our allocation, and they are to collect \$2 million, the Government will only release \$8 million, and the \$2 million will come through property tax.

7.40 p.m.

So is it the Government now keeping more money for central government and not to give the corporation to spend on “road, drain, bridge”?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is not for that purpose. And the other categories of taxes, such as commercial, agricultural and industrial are not going towards local government. That is going towards central Government. And that is the whole mamaguy with this whole local reform.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They must speak the truth on these matters, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they must speak the truth. Because that is why the Opposition is here when the Government tries to control the truth we are here to bring the reality and the facts to the country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is one issue that one particular group has asked me to raise publicly through the Parliament and that is to deal with the forex issues. A group called Hajj Umrah & International Tours Limited had written to the Minister of Finance on the 03 October, 2023, asking that the Minister provide some relief to those persons, those Muslims who have to go towards the Hajj. That is one of the pillars of Islam. And they have had severe difficulty in accessing forex to pay for their packages in order to travel to Saudi Arabia. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am made to understand that the letter was delivered to the Minister and he has not formally replied to the group. I ask the Minister whether or

not he can in fact look into this situation and provide some relief to those citizens who want—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—to ensure that they oblige with their religious obligation which is one of the five pillars of Islam. And that is one point I wish to raise with respect to that.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know you do not want me to go too much into crime, but I think I am compelled because there is one matter of the Forensic Sciences Centre—

Dr. Moonilal: Nobody raised it.

Mr. S. Hosein:—that nobody raised. And this matter deals with, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of something that all of us had the pain to read in the newspaper when the four Peterkin murder victims' bodies were left to decompose because of what has taken place at the Forensic Sciences Centre. Imagine the Association of Funerals Professionals of Trinidad and Tobago's President, Keith Belgrove, had to advise the parents of these children to take legal action against the Government because they found the bodies of the siblings to be swollen and discoloured. These children were brutally murdered, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the last you would have wanted was a proper send off for these children, and due to what is taking place at the Forensic Sciences Centre this is what the family members of the children had to endure and this is totally unacceptable. In any other country, the Minister of National Security would never even be seeing the doors of a Cabinet, yet today he is being protected by the Prime Minister and the other Members of the Cabinet.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We are calling for this Minister to go. He must go, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to also go into some matters in relation to my constituency, and I want to thank the people of Barataria/San Juan for their continued confidence in me as their Member of Parliament.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And I came in here in the 12th Parliament as the youngest Member of Parliament and I think I may not leave as the youngest Member of Parliament.

[*Laughter*]

Some of the complaints that we have received at the constituency office ranged from youth unemployment, poor infrastructure, utility issues and respect to infrastructure in the educational sector.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I raise the issues of the St. George's College in terms of they were relocated in October 2022. This year they will be celebrating their 70th anniversary and they cannot even occupy the building that they started off in. One year now that building has been under repair.

In terms of unemployment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in my constituency we have seen an increase in criminal activities, we have seen that throughout the country in fact, but I am pleading that the Government engage the Members of Parliament to ensure that we give opportunities to the young people. There are so many young people that come into my office, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with degrees, masters and they cannot get a job, because apparently the system is designed, is who you know and that must never be. We must be in a government where you are promoted, where you are selected based on your merit, your qualifications and not your credentials.

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

Mr. S. Hosein: A party card should not be a consideration when somebody—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members.

Mr. S. Hosein:—is selected for employment, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: A party card should never be.

With respect to issues surrounding works and transport, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Drainage Division is located in El Socorro South which forms part of my constituency. In the last year, my constituency, in particular El Socorro South, was under water for about five to seven days, simply because the pumps are not working. Year after year I will complain about the flood pumps and the floodgates in El Socorro South and they will do nothing. They have allocated \$6 million under that line Item and they probably spent \$2 million. Why are they punishing the people of Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: If my seat was held by another party they may have gotten the pumps apparently, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but that should not be so. There must be equitable distribution of the wealth of the State.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: That is not the PNM Treasury, that is the people of Trinidad and Tobago's Treasury. And it is a simple fix. The Minister told us that these pumps will cost less than \$1 million. All they have to do is install three to four or more pumps for us instead of having citizens to endure massive flooding for days, for days.

With respect to public utilities, we have had a replacement of an aging pipeline in Second Street, Barataria, that work has been almost been done. We have commenced with WASA, I have some dialogue with them, hopefully we get it done. They have promised us and I will be holding them to their promise that there are issues with respect to some long service pipes on Ibis Avenue and also on

the Don Miguel Road too, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and some of the other side streets along that road. We are asking the Government, through the Minister of Public Utilities, give people relief.

My debate here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, focuses on two things, security and a simple thing like water. This Government comes here to boast about ICT and boast about all of the nice things that they are going to do.

Dr. Moonilal: Probably go email de water.

Mr. S. Hosein: This Government is very good at announcements but they are bad at implementation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They have announced for eight years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have announced for several years that they are going to do X, Y and Z. Implementation gap, TTRA, statistical institute, all of these other things that you want to do and it will never see fruition. It will take a UNC government to implement in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Because for five years we have provided for this country and pushed this country 10 years forward. In the last eight years—they have sent us back almost a decade or two decades in this last eight years, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My friend from Princes Town has raised a very serious issue with me. They have cut the Children's Authority's budget by \$30 million, \$32.5 million, the same children that they claimed to care and protect, they have cut the budget by \$32 million and they must account for that. I hope the Member for Tobago East contributes to this debate and tells us why the Children's Authority has experienced this massive cut of over \$30 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: That is totally unacceptable. While the Office of the Attorney General—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member you have two minutes.

Mr. S. Hosein:—is benefiting from \$195 million in legal fees in a single fiscal year, a single—PNM briefs. That is what it has to be, but this year I hope, I expected the Attorney General he would have come to this Parliament and at least contributed in this debate, but it seems as though the Attorney General will now have to shadow me.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I end my contribution by saying, that the people of Trinidad and Tobago have had enough. The people of Trinidad and Tobago are ready for a change. Based on what took place at the local government election, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they should pack up their bags, leave the Cabinet and we are the Government in waiting, they are the Opposition in waiting.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Long live the United National Congress and soon, Mr. Deputy Speaker, maybe next year's budget we will be sitting on that side of the Chamber. I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Penelope Beckles): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I know the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan is eagerly awaiting to be on this side. I heard that he made reference to being—the hon. Member for Oropouche East spoke about being in the departure lounge and he, the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan, wants to be in

the arrival lounge. You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a lot of people who sit in the departure lounge they are on standby for a very long time. And I strongly suspect the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan is going to be on standby for a long time, because we on this side, the People's National Movement, we intend to be here again come next general election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: So, unfortunately you have to remain in the departure lounge. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I take note of the fact that you have indicated that we should not speak unnecessarily about crime. I just want the opportunity to just respond to some comments made by my hon. colleague, Member for Barataria/San Juan. And one of the things he mentioned was the fact that the Minister of National Security, that there are a number of cameras that should have been installed.

I recall hearing from the Minister of National Security that there are some 75 cameras being installed daily—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. P. Beckles: The hon. Minister made reference to the fact that infrastructure is necessary for the installation of those cameras and I think we could look forward—there are five areas at present where work is being done and we can be certain that we will see a number of those cameras, the installation being completed shortly.

I also want to make mention of the fact that the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan also condemned the attempted assassination of the Deputy Commissioner of Prison. Let me just say that I—the information that I have is that at the time that this incident occurred the Deputy Commissioner was inside of his home and therefore I know the hon. Member is an attorney and I am therefore not going to make those similar statements. What I would say that I am reliably

informed that this matter is under active investigation. And I do not think anyone of us here, whether it be Opposition or Government would want to do anything else but not only condemn, not only whether it is an act of assassination, on whether it be the Deputy Commissioner or any individual for that matter, I think nobody in this House wants to see anybody in a situation where somebody attacks them, especially under any kind of circumstances that relate to some form of assassination.

And having said that I want to say that, just quickly, as it relates to my own constituency on this issue of crime, because I know when the hon. Member spoke about cameras it is really an issue of us having what you call real time evidence. And we all saw the recent situation in Charlotte Street where you could have actually seen the faces of the perpetrators. And what is it telling us? It is telling us that people are becoming brazen-faced, bold-faced, reckless and they really do not even care.

I mean we have had the situation in my own constituency there of the Peterkin family where four persons were killed; four minors as a matter of fact and there is also the disappearance of Mr. Oreon Gomez from Morne La Croix. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just wanted to say that one of the concerns that I have had within recent time is that a number of people tend to focus a lot on the victims and blame the victims when some of these things these situations occur. If we think about the one on Charlotte Street, most people were focusing on, why did this person have this money, as distinct focusing on these reckless, heartless and savage persons that are making the life of honest people very, very, difficult. That is all I want to say on that particular issue.

I want to also use the opportunity to thank the police service for the meetings they held in Blanchisseuse Community Centre—

Hon. P. Beckles (cont'd)

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. P. Beckles:—because we have had quite a few murders for this year, as well as the meetings in Pinto Community Centre and the Arima Community Centre, where they allowed themselves to be available to the public to be open to criticisms and also recommendations from the public. And that is the fact that crime has been discussed extensively that is what I would want to say.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

7.55 p.m.

Hon. P. Beckles: Having said that Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to, of course, use this opportunity to congratulate the Minister of Finance and the staff of the Ministry of Finance for this national budget presentation 2023/2024, and also to thank my own staff in the Ministry of Planning and Development for their contribution to this budget through the work of the *Public Sector Investment Programme*. I also, of course, wish to thank the hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley, for the opportunity to serve in my capacity as Minister of Planning and Development, and I must commend him for his astute leadership and guidance throughout the last fiscal year in which we overcame many challenges and celebrated many achievements.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government continues to work for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And let me just quickly just give a little overview as to the role and function of the Ministry of Planning and Development which drives development and implementation of social, economic and environmental policy, delivers essential services in spacial planning and national statistical data, manages the public investment programme for sustained national development, and has the responsibility for development of an innovation ecosystem to further the diversification of the national economy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we all know that during the COVID pandemic there were a number of challenges that existed and, as result of that, the Ministry had to rethink, adapt and amend pre-existing plans and strategies to meet the challenges of a new environment. The Ministry of Planning and Development is responsible for the National Development Strategy *Vision 2030* and its current revision, the National Development Strategy 2020 to 2025, and this incorporates the strategies and initiatives of the Roadmap to Recovery and the community recovery report in a revised national vision supported, of course, by updated and revised goals and strategies.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on Tuesday, the Member of Parliament for Caroni East stated that enough is enough, and made reference to the fact that enough is not being done about climate change. And I want to indicate that since I assumed my portfolio as Minister of Planning and Development I have, on several occasions, spoken on this matter, and I strongly suspect that it may be that my colleague may not have heard me or may not have heard the several statements that have been made by this Government on the issue of the national climate change policy and issues related to climate change.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, contrary to what the Member claimed, Trinidad and Tobago has fulfilled its international reporting obligations to the United Nations, particularly the Third National Communication and the First Biennial Update Report of 2021, which are reports that outline our mitigation and adaptation actions

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: These reports are available online and the Ministry of Planning and Development is willing to point any Member of this House who does not know where to look in the right direction. I am also pleased to inform this House that we are also in the process of initiating the Fourth National Communication and new

reporting requirements under the Paris Agreement.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this House is being asked to believe that this Government has not reported on the national climate change policy targets and, therefore, has no measurable achievements, no updates, and no nationally determined contributions nor mitigation and adaptation. Trinidad and Tobago's national climate change policy continues to be implemented through various policy and project-based actions consistent with our policy objectives of low carbon and climate resilient development. Under the Paris Agreement we have indicated the Government's intension to reduce cumulative greenhouse gas emissions in the power generation industrial and transportation sectors by 30 per cent by 2023. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this statement was made by the hon. Prime Minister in Glasgow during COP26 and that was also attended at that time by the then Minister of Planning and Development, the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis.

So to this end, Trinidad and Tobago has implemented the Nationally Determined Contributions or NCDs under the Paris Agreement, and this has resulted in two EU funded projects that seek to implement a commercial scale solar farm at the Piarco International Airport as well as the installation of 12 packet solar photovoltaic installations on public buildings around the country. And just to give some examples, we have installed solar panels at the main ridge in Tobago, Charlotteville, Brasso Seco, in addition Mathura, Freeport, Guayaguayare, and both projects, that is at Freeport and Guayaguayare both are nearing—Mathura, sorry, and Freeport, they are nearing completion, and eight of the 12 packet installation are already in operation and they are now benefitting approximately 11,000 persons.

There are approximately 112 megawatt solar plant for which negotiations to develop are completed. The sod has been turned, and that is under the Ministry of

Energy and Energy Industries. There is also the development of the roadmap for a green hydrogen industry in Trinidad and Tobago and that is in collaboration with the IDB, and this initiative aims to transition from using hydrogen sourced from natural gas to hydrogen from renewable energy, effectively reducing carbon dioxide emissions. Again, this is an initiative under the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. There is also the development and adoption of a feed-in tariff policy to allow households and commercial entities to feed renewable energy generated power into the national grid. There will also be the procurement of the 240 electric buses by the Public Transport Service Corporation. The NCD transportation component aims to reduce emissions with a notable shift towards electric vehicles, surpassing the initial focus on CNG buses.

There is also a note that is currently before Cabinet seeking to incorporate greenhouse gas reporting as well as mitigation plans and actions into the legislative framework. And finally, the just transition of the workforce policy. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we recognized the potential socioeconomic impacts of energy transitions and are focused on addressing the anticipated and unexpected consequences on the workforce, ensuring retooling, re-schooling and reskilling for current and future workers.

I would like to take this opportunity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to highlight a major adaptation project funded by the UN Adaptation Fund which is the South Oropouche River Basin for flood relief. The objective of this US \$10 million project is to increase the resilience of the South Oropouche River Basin's population and ecosystem to flooding, sea level rise and expected increasing water deficit events. This project is being coordinated by the Ministry of Planning and Development. The Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) serves as the implementing partner, and the University of the West Indies serves as an executing

entity.

The project was recently launched at the Debe High School and received full support from the several stakeholders that were present. It is therefore rather difficult, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for anyone to honestly say that this Government is not fulfilling its obligations on a matter of such importance as climate change, but then again, we continue to do what we are elected to do undeterred and, of course, undistracted.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is an old aboriginal quote that says, “Look after the land and the land will look after you. Destroy the land and it will destroy you.” These are words to be lightly taken and I am sure that all of us in Trinidad and Tobago have either been impacted by or are now more aware than before about the threat that is being posed by climate change. The Ministry of Planning and Development continues to work to ensure that measures are put in place for the protection and sustainable management of the environment, recognizing the fundamental role that environment plays in the development of all our sectors of the economy. We also continue to fulfil our international obligations under various multilateral environmental agreements as a responsible member of the global community regarding contributing to solutions for critical environmental problems.

Trinidad and Tobago continues to play a leading role at both the regional and multilateral fora in discussions and negotiations that shape international discourse on the environment and climate-related matters. I was honoured to join the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the hon. Keith Rowley, when he met with His Excellency Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary General, in the margin of the 45th Regular Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community held in Port of Spain in Trinidad in July of this year.

The Secretary General, during a visit commemorating the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Chaguaramas seized the opportunity of his engagement in the country to discuss climate change as well as elements of the upcoming conference of parties, that is COP28 meeting, in anticipating our continued efforts to meet our Nationally Determined Contributions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and combat global temperature rise.

In fiscal 2023, therefore, the Ministry of Planning and Development continued its partnership with and through its agencies and local and international partners to fulfil Trinidad and Tobago's environmental obligations in the areas of climate change; building climate resilience in Trinidad and Tobago's health care system; promoting resilience in the Oropouche river basin; mitigating the impact of climate change on the agricultural sector by diversity, chemicals and waste; and ozone depleting layer.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to share information of Trinidad and Tobago's long and acclaimed history of involvement in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and that actually dates way back to 2000, Trinidad and Tobago's significant role in global climate negotiations; leading negotiations and technology transfer on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States; negotiating the establishment of an expert group on technology transfer; chairing the group on technology transfer. We also convened the first-ever seminar on adaptation techniques under the UNFCCC and that was held in Tobago. We chaired the subsidiary body for scientific and technological advice. We also chaired the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform. That is the body charged with negotiating what was to become of the Paris Agreement; tabling, championing and adopting the Nationally Determined Contributions, which today is the bedrock of the Paris Agreement; successively tabling and

adopting by decision what can be considered as the zero draft of the Paris Agreement; and, of course, co-chairing the discussions and negotiations on the new collective quantified goal on the climate finance having been appointed the presidency of COP26.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I really hope that with such an impressive track record, which also includes the chairing and co-chairing of numerous negotiation groups on various issues under the UNFCCC, and negotiations on behalf of AOSIS, Trinidad and Tobago has a respected place in the UNFCCC negotiations and is usually looked at for leading sometimes very difficult negotiations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: It is therefore unfortunate that anyone would come to this House without the benefit of doing proper research, or as we say in the legal profession, due diligence to take pot shots on our national accomplishments.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, rather than leave them shooting in the dark, I have done them the favour of turning on the lights.

8.10 p.m.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago takes its duties and obligations to the people of Trinidad and Tobago very seriously. I now turn to speak a bit about the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, and I will just say to the hon. Member for Caroni East that you indicated that your leader, the Opposition Leader, selected you as the person to shadow the Ministry of Planning and Development, so with that lesson that I have given you for the last couple of minutes, I think you should be in a better place now to understand that Trinidad and Tobago has been fully complying with all its responsibility in the area of climate change.

So let me indicate that the Ministry of Planning and Development is tasked with managing the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, which I think everyone

knows is the key development instrument and strategic management tool that identifies and creates viable programmes and projects geared towards achieving the national outcome that is envisioned in the National Development Strategy 2030. We are charged with the responsibility of preparing and monitoring the PSIP which stands at some \$6.2 billion for 2024, and over the next two years, the Ministry of Planning and Development will focus on enhancing PSIP implementation by assisting Ministries, divisions, agencies to address their challenges to their PSIP implementation.

To implement this, we have developed and instituted something called a project screening brief, a project planning tool to assist the Ministry in identifying projects that are ready to be executed. This will assist with a higher rate of execution projects and in 2020, we will plan what we call a better and faster implementation.

In fiscal 2020 to 2023, we therefore trained some 613 project management officers in the Ministry's department across the country using the said project screening brief and we can proudly say that over the next two years, several measures will be taken to improve the PSIP implementation, which would include development of a public investment management guide manual, the development of an integrated project management information system and the establishment of an integrated bank of projects which aims to help the transition from project-ready idea to shovel-ready projects towards improving implementation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have heard over and over about the concerns about the implementation of projects and therefore the Ministry of Planning and Development is well on the way to assisting Ministries to improve and we are expecting over the next two years to reap the benefits of the training to which I have referred.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: I now want to turn to national statistics and to say that the Ministry of Planning and Development continues to provide the necessary support to ensure that a reliable, functioning national statistical system is established and national surveys and censuses are effectively planned and executed. Through the Central Statistical Office, we are preparing to roll out the 2023 population and housing census from May 2024. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the population and housing census will provide key data and national socioeconomic landscape. It is the only comprehensive source of small area statistics and it ensures compliance with international statistical guidelines while providing benchmark data for revising methodologies and improving the quality of statistical products.

As it relates to the National Physical Planning Authority, the Government has adopted a holistic approach to spatial planning and national development, ensuring cohesive land use and socioeconomic planning. This strategy encompasses various sectors like housing, transportation, health, education, employment and national security.

Recognizing spatial planning's vital role in sustainable national development and economic diversification, an 11 Member Interdisciplinary National Physical Planning Authority Board was appointed in July of 2022. The NPA is responsible for creating and updating the National Spatial Development Strategy, guiding decentralized planning to municipal planning and authorities and furthering sustainable development goals. With a budget of \$3 million, the NPA is working on organizational designs, transitioning the Town and Country Planning Division to the NPA, hiring key personnel and enhancing its operational capacity. The Planning and Facilitation Development Act is projected to be fully proclaimed by 2024 with efforts being made to involve local communities in the development

process.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as it relates to spatial planning, the Government is committed to orderly planning for the best utilization of our physical spaces in Trinidad and Tobago. We continue to advance spatial planning transformation in alignment with the recent legislative reforms through the Town and Country Planning Division. The Town and Country Planning Division continues to be modernized and streamlined to offer increased transparency and facilitation of development while protecting conservation areas as well as agricultural lands.

Over fiscal 2023, the TCPD continues to lead the management of the automated construction permitting system DevelopTT. This is intended to standardize the processing of development applications and ensure there is visibility at every step of building, planning, as well as the development process. Automation and digitization assist with reducing processing times for the public who uses DevelopTT platform and allow everyone to efficiently research, assess and determine development proposals in a paperless environment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, just to share some information. Between its roll out in 2020 and September 2023, the DevelopTT platform received approximately 12,790 online and final planning applications with approximately 3,430 applications submitted to the THA and all 14 municipal corporations. To date, an overall figure of 920 building permits and 255 completion certificates have been issued on the DevelopTT digital platform. We are, of course, doing our part as it relates to digitization and dealing with the issue of addressing the ease of doing business and we look forward, of course, to the feedback from our users of this platform as to how the Ministry of Planning and Development could improve in terms of its delivery of service.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to turn now on to the issue of innovation

and business development. Innovation also is one of the remits of the Ministry of Planning and Development and we understand that this is key. The application of innovation is important in every sphere of our lives and this may define the difference between progress and stagnation. The Caribbean Industrial Research Institute directed its effort in fiscal 2023 primarily at supporting small and medium enterprises and large enterprises via innovation and facilitation. The provision of a suite of analytical and engineering testing services, as well as fostering entrepreneurship development. At the end of the day, this is about putting people first and supporting small businesses.

In collaboration with the European Union, the IADB Lab sponsored project which is called “Shaping the Future of Innovation”, and this project comprises three components that targeted the SMEs as well as large companies and resulted in 19 enterprises including three large enterprises being awarded grant funding for their business innovation projects and that amounted to some \$11.8 million and these projects, of course, range from manufacturing, agro processing and the environment and this brought a total number of grant beneficiaries for the end of fiscal 2023 to 34.

CARIRI, of course, continues to accord priority attention to entrepreneurship development and business sustainability via training in the area of solar PV installation and maintenance benefiting some 48 entrepreneurs in three rural communities as well as the provision of seed grant funding to over 80 potential entrepreneurs for undertaking of project initiatives outside of the scope of the STFOI.

There is also what is called the Trust for the Americans and in collaboration with the Organization of American States with part funding from Citi Foundation and CARIRI as the implementing partner, the DIA programme is intended to

empower vulnerable, at-risk youths between the ages of 16 to 30 years through access to state-of-the-art technology training, collaboration spaces, specialized curricula mentorship and financial resources. That programme is called “Democratizing Innovation in the Americas”.

In keeping with the theme of the budget, I would like to speak now just a bit about economic diversification, which is an important driver in promoting and engineering economic growth and development in the country. That construct continues to underpin the work of the Ministry of Planning and Development as we do our part to contribute towards economic diversification, particularly through niche tourism. To this end, the Ministry through its agencies, particularly the IMA, the EMA, the Chaguaramas Development Authority, the Green Fund, as well as the National Trust, continues to develop tourism activities based on the green and blue economy and our extremely varied natural and cultural heritage.

It is well accepted that tourism attractions are not only based on the usual sun, sand and sea, but also focus on diverse aspects of national heritage, leading to the pathways from trails in the Northern Range and the Main Ridge, Tobago, to, of course, fishing or yachting experiences in the Gulf of Paria, to the visiting of caves in north and south, as well as, of course, the mud volcano in south Trinidad and the pitch lake as well. The cultural heritage includes a built heritage based on our varied history to enable visits to the cathedrals, the mandirs, the mosques, all of these, of course, being organized by the National Trust. .

The tourism companies, both in Trinidad and Tobago, can be confident that all of these can be marketed internationally as these products are already developed and can respond very quickly to the demand. The National Trust, with the Ministry’s assistance, has developed Nelson Island for visitors. It also looks forward to partnering with the CDA with respect to the development of the

offshore islands, in particular Chacachacare. The IMA is also working to revitalize our reefs and improve the fisheries in Trinidad and Tobago and the National Trust is partnering with the IMA to rebuild the reef and seagrass around Nelson Island and Five Islands to expand the fishing nurseries and the development of our other products like our crabs, oysters, “pacro”, to name a few. The Green Fund is also assisting the NGOs involved in turtle conservations and the improved infrastructure in these locations will increase visitor participation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, just to deal a bit with the multilateral developing financing and the Caribbean Development Bank. The CDB and the Inter-American Development Bank continue to provide critical support for the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago towards the achievement of its development agenda through technical assistance and multilateral financing in key transformative areas. On March 29th, 2023, a grant agreement between the CDB and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago amounting to US \$49 million was signed by the Minister of Planning and Development to finance consultancy services for the project entitled “Establishment of an Interoperability Ecosystem”.

8:25 p.m.

The grant agreement will aid the Ministry of Digital Transformation to streamline government procedure and create an enabling environment for emerging forms of e-government.

As it relates to the Inter-American Development Bank, a loan contract between the IDB and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, amounting to US \$80 million was signed by the Minister of Planning and Development to finance the National Water Sector Transformation Program to be executed via the Ministry of Public Utilities. Mr. Deputy Speaker, an overarching objective of this programme is to improve the efficiency, quality, sustainability and resilience of

portable water supply service and water security in Trinidad and Tobago.

More specifically, the programme will seek to improve operational efficiency and reliability of water supply services by implementing a non-revenue water reduction strategy and programme, improving the quality of water services for underserved communities via the development of a programme to urgently stabilize water supply services to prevent further decline throughout the country, and transforming the water sector by developing capacity and providing institutional strengthening to the Ministry of Public Utilities, and the Water and Sewage Authority, to improve governance and sustainable management of water resources.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

The anticipated outputs of this programme will contribute towards attaining high-quality, modern public services, and high-quality and resilient infrastructure public utility systems, which are two of our national development goals encapsulated within the thematic areas: “Delivering Good Governance and Service Excellence” and III: “Improving Productivity through Quality Infrastructure and Transportation” of *Vision 2030*.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I therefore would like to take the opportunity to congratulate the Minister of Public Utilities for the work that he has been doing over the last couple years to improve the water supply to many communities in Trinidad and Tobago

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: And whilst we know that he has not been able to get to the stage of 24/7 in many communities, based on his contribution today, we know that WASA is well on the way to being transformed and improving delivery of service in the water sector to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We also recognize from

his contribution the issue of the impact of climate change on the delivery of water to the entire population of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is why the concern was expressed by me when it was raised by the Member of Parliament for Caroni East that the Government has not been indicating its position on climate change.

I was very pleased when the Minister of Public Utilities was able to share with the public the information shared with him by the methodological services as it relates what is likely to happen over the next month or two, as it relates to the possible increase in heat in Trinidad and Tobago. And that means that for us, we understand what will happen to the Hollis Reservoir and all the other areas producing water—or holding water, I should say, where the issue of evaporation is likely to take place, therefore causing an unfortunate situation where we can have a reduction in available water to distribute. And I do hope that that is a matter that every single person in the House took seriously so we can understand the challenges that the Water and Sewage Authority will face over the next couple of months.

8.30 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to use the opportunity to raise and deal with some issues specifically, as it relates to my constituency, as it relates to the issue of water. I would like to particularly thank the Minister of Public Utilities again for the several projects that have been implemented in the constituency of Arima, notwithstanding the fact that over the last couple weeks in particular, there have been some concerns raised in Santa Rosa Heights, in Calvary and in the heart of Arima, as it relates to irregular supply of water. Of course, I am advised that there were some challenges with the Guanapo Water Treatment Plant. I have been informed now that the works have been completed and there should be, therefore, an improvement in the distribution of water, of course, recognizing, of course, the

challenges that are facing now, because of the fact that we have not had rain as regularly as was expected in the last couple of months.

From the information received from the Water and Sewerage Authority, there has been the completion of phase two of the Lalaja intake and pipeline project, the completion of the Beckles Lane well, Arima Well 14, as well as the completion of the Brazil booster project, which will all impact on an increase of water supply for the Arima constituency. I am informed that in fiscal 2024, the Ministry of Public Utilities has proposed projects for Sanchez Street, Farfan Street and Subero Street booster stations.

In addition to that, I have been informed for the residents of Tannis Lane, where a well was drilled to improve the supply of water and that it has now become necessary to change the waterlines. And I have been advised that those lines should be—the project should be starting sometime this month, and that should, therefore, address the concerns of the people in Tannis Lane.

Madam Speaker, I have the good fortune of representing the First Peoples, the Santa Rosa First Peoples Community, and in the next couple of days we will celebrate the Day for the Indigenous People. As you are aware, that the ancestral home, of course, of the First Peoples, is in Arima. And I am pleased to report to this House that under the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, the Santa Rosa First Peoples Community can look forward to the upgrade of the administration building, which works include roof repair, ceiling works, electrical upgrade, air conditioning at the allocation of \$0.65 million. This, Madam Speaker, is in addition to the development of the First Peoples site, which should include drainage works, as well as road works, construction of washroom facilities, the payment for the master plan, which I am advised, would be at the cost of one some \$1.5 million.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank, again, the hon. Minister of Public Utilities for the completion of the water project at the First Peoples site, as well as the implementation of the electricity project. And I am advised that that project should be completed before the end of this fiscal year.

As it relates to the computerization project at the Arima Borough, which will consist of an upgrade to hardware network infrastructure and the acquisition of software in support of Government reform, that is expected to cost some \$1 million. The borough corporation will also benefit from an investment of some 20.4 million in capital projects for the year 2024. And that will include works on drainage and irrigation, roads, bridges, acquisition of new vehicles—

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

Hon. P. Beckles: Thank you kindly, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: Thank you very much. I would also say that one of the concerns of the residents of the borough, as well as the wider Arima, is the issue of the market. I am also advised that there would be upgrade works of some \$5 million, and also the Arima Administrative Complex, they are close to the completion of the architectural drawings. And that, of course, will bring great relief to the burgesses of the Borough of Arima, as that facility is expected to provide several social services. So that, there has been some complaints that several of the services have left Arima and gone to other district. So with the availability of the administrative complex, we should have the return of several Government services to Arima.

As it relates to the Arima District Health Facility, that facility will benefit

from refurbishment and minor infrastructure works under the hospital refurbishment programme, at the cost of some \$2 million.

I would also like to add that the hon. Member, I think it was, again, for Caroni East, if I am not certain, made reference. Yes, it was the hon. Member for Caroni East mentioned that, I think it was in 2013 that the Government of the United National Congress took the decision to construct the Arima Hospital. And, of course, he was complaining that the People's National Movement is taking credit for the decision of the United National Congress. So let me just indicate that, so that if you took the decision in 2013, to construct the Arima Health Facility, the fact is that it was the People's National Movement who did the financing for the facility and who actually constructed the Arima Health Facility. So I do not know why you have the difficulty in giving credit where credit is due. I, therefore, want to take this opportunity to acknowledge and congratulate the good work of the Minister of Health—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles:—who continues his work, and we should soon see that the project of the digitalization of the records of the persons who use the Arima Health Facility, that would be the next project. So Minister, on behalf of the people of Arima, I just want to say thank you very much.

Finally, I just want to take this opportunity to also just quickly speak about the Arima Connect project. We are on our way to a digitized Arima. And I am proud to highlight an ongoing project at Arima, which is being spearheaded by the Minister of Housing and Urban Development. I would like to take the opportunity to thank and congratulate the hon. Camille Robinson-Regis for her support in this respect—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles:—and so say that the first phase of Connected Arima focuses on Queen Mary Avenue and the Arima General Hospital, which is the four wings of the Arima Health Centre and the County Medical Office. This part of the network will remain isolated from the rest of the Connected Arima project, for privacy and security consideration. The vision is to create a model of the health care described as “one patient, one record”, and will integrate radiology, laboratory, records, pharmacy, and wards into a unified similarity for Arima health care. Pairing the Arima hospital with the Arima Velodrome, the tennis courts, cricket fields and football field on the opposite side of the hospital cluster, to create a wellness and well-being zone is the vision for health and well-being cluster with the Minister of Health.

Madam Speaker, the rest of the Connected Arima network will be driven by two separate server rooms. One server room is located at the newly-designed town hall. This server room adjoins a new 24/7 command centre, with a wall of screens to monitor activity around public safety, using cameras and the municipal police and has a back-up supply.

The second server room is in the borough corporation office. This design centres around resilience and redundancy. Through my intervention, we have identified 20 smart poles in Arima. The Ministry of Digital Transformation, T&TEC and the IDB are exploring this part of the Connected Arima project. Smart pole locations would provide a range of services to the public, as well as function to make Arima a greenlight district. Madam Speaker, the vision is that these poles will also monitor traffic congestion and air pollution. It will involve the installation of better quality, more reliable LED light fixtures on the streets to increase safety, reduce energy cost, and reduce the carbon footprint in Arima. Madam Speaker, we are connecting Arima.

Let me just quickly deal with the issue of land settlement. The constituents in the community of Demerara can look forward to the continued progress of the Land Settlement Agency home and improvement programme. The project will see the development of 260 residential lots and other areas designated for commercial, recreational and institutional use.

Madam Speaker, in 2023 financial year, the LSA undertook and completed lead remediation works valued at some 653,000. Also the LSA commenced infrastructure development works in the fiscal year 2023, at a projected cost of 35 million, which will be completed by first or second quarter next year. This programme ensures that no one is left behind, and it encompasses the construction and rebuilding of communities within the Arima constituency.

Final, I would like to just express my gratitude again to the Minister of Finance for this special project that deals with tax incentives for the farmers, especially because I represent the Wallerfield area, and they are extremely pleased about that project.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: We recognize that—I think we all recognize that there are still some issues relating to the renewal of leases, and we understand that if that matter is not addressed, then the farmers cannot benefit.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: I would like to thank the Minister of Youth Development and National Service and Member for Parliament for La Horquetta, for the meeting that we had earlier this year with the farmers. And that meeting specifically was to bring farmers together, have the relevant departments from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the ADB, the Commissioner of State Lands, attended by hundreds of farmers who brought their challenges, and we are

committed to have a follow-up meeting with the people of that area to deal with some of the pending issues for the farmers.

Finally, Madam Speaker, I cannot close without extending my appreciation to my staff at the Ministry of Planning and Development and the staff of all the divisions and agencies of the Ministry—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles:—for their steadfast work in preparing the PSIP for fiscal 2024. I also, of course, thank my own staff at my constituency office, the staff of my Ministerial Secretariat for the tremendous work accomplished over the fiscal year.

Again, I would like to take this opportunity to say that it was a pleasure to have the opportunity to represent the constituency of Arima, and to serve as the Minister of Planning and Development. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Arouca/Maloney.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Thursday the 12th day of October 2023, at 10.30 a.m., p.m.—a.m. Sorry Madam. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: 10.30, I heard?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: 10.30 a.m.

Madam Speaker: So I should correct the record, Leader of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.45 p.m.