

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, April 26, 2024

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the hon. Stuart Young, MP, Member Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, who has requested leave of absence for the period April 26 to May 03, 2024; the hon. Shamfa Cudjoe-Lewis, MP, Member for Tobago West, who has requested leave of absence for the period April 23 to 30, 2024; and from Mrs. Anita Haynes-Alleyne, MP, Member for Tabaquite, who has requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave Members seek is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Immigration (ICC Men's T20 Cricket World Cup 2024) (Mutual Recognition of Visas) Regulations, 2024. [*The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds)*]
2. Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Persons With Disability Parking Permit) Regulations, 2024. [*The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh)*]
3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to the Thirteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an examination of the Management and Operations of the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) including the restructuring of the HDC into three distinct State Enterprises. [*Hon. T. Deyalsingh*]

UNREVISED

4. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of National Security to the First Report of the Joint Select Committee on National Security on an inquiry into the Criminal Justice System of Trinidad and Tobago to determine the strategies to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness. [*Hon. T. Deyalsingh*]

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Finance. Minister of Finance?

Dr. Moonilal: Papers 5 and 6.

Hon. Members: 5 and 6.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Dr. Moonilal: What?

Mr. Hosein: Are you defying the Speaker?

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, we have a Supplemental Order Paper with Papers 5 and 6:

“The Report of the Auditor General of Trinidad and Tobago on the Public Accounts...”—committee.

Madam Speaker: You cannot lay that Paper, can you?

Mr. Hosein: I know that—[*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: No. No. No. No. No. You cannot lay that Paper. I have called on the relevant Minister. The Minister has not done anything. We proceed.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, is the Minister not laying the Paper today although it is on the Supplemental Order Paper? We are just seeking some clarification on this matter.

Madam Speaker: And we proceed. The Minister was called. The Minister has not laid the Paper. Let us proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]—any action against this delinquent Minister?

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. Moonilal: He is being called upon to lay the Papers and he refused.

Madam Speaker: Members, the Minister is the one to lay the Paper. If the Minister has done nothing, we continue, and I so rule.

Mr. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, I refer you to the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago—

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, I refer you to the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, which at 116(5) advises that the Auditor General will supply a report—a copy of the report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker. And 115—sorry, and 116(5) suggests—states in fact:

“The President of the Senate and the Speaker shall cause the report to be laid before the Senate and the House of Representatives, respectively, at the next sitting of the Senate and the House of Representatives after the receipt thereof, respectively.”

We have an Order Paper in which it is clear that said report has been received, Madam Speaker, and we would like to get some ruling or clarification on this matter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: The Constitution allows for the Speaker to lay the Paper.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West, and all Members, I have already ruled. The Paper is here on the Order Paper, as you have said, that

mandates the Speaker, so I have cause it to be laid—to be placed on the Order Paper. The Minister has done nothing. I have already ruled. Let us proceed. Member for Oropouche East.

URGENT QUESTIONS
Fire Service Headquarters
(Repairs to Dormitory)

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*): Madam Speaker, I am just composing myself after that scandalous event. To the Minister of National Security: In light of the reports that Fire Officers at the Fire Service Headquarters (HQ), POS have had to use the ‘appliance bay’ for resting purposes, can the Minister indicate when will the dormitory at HQ be repaired?

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it behoves of me as a citizen, and as a citizen with access to information, that there is a group of persons in our country who can only be properly described as “confusionists”, “bacchanalish” and scandalous, and there are those who take every opportunity to rise matters to raise bacchanal and scandal, which gets in the way of the serious development efforts in this country—

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, 48(1). What is the relevance of all this to my colleague’s question?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member, the Minister is answering the question.

Mr. Indarsingh: That is relevant?

Madam Speaker: Excuse me? Let us just have a little order here today. Alright? I do not think as of anything prior to now that any of those outbursts are intentional. Let us comport ourselves properly and let us proceed. Minister

of National Security.

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you. Madam Speaker, the matter to which the question directs our attention was the breakdown of a couple air-condition units at the fire service headquarters on Wrightson Road in the dormitories. The matter was first brought to the attention of the Chief Fire Officer by his Assistant Chief Fire Officer, North, on Tuesday 23rd of April, 2024. He, the Chief Fire Officer, immediately actioned the repairs to the air-conditioning systems. All parts were acquired by Wednesday the 24th and the work commenced. As at last evening, last night, four out of the six units that malfunctioned were completed and the other two are un-serviced, as we speak, and are expected to be completed later today.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Minister, your time is now spent.

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. To the hon. Minister: Minister, are you aware that those air-condition units indeed were not operational for two to three months prior?

Mr. Hosein: What? What?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: Are you aware of that?

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, I have given information, according to which was shared to me by the Chief Fire Officer, and I stand by that. Let me continue to say, those that are not—those that are well-meaning, patriotic, mean well for the fire service and the country, they decided in the circumstances to take the opportunity to clean out and to paint, self-help application as it were,

the dormitory, and that work is expected to be completed by Sunday evening. I thank you, Madam Speaker. Let the bacchanal and confusion die, and let us get on with the development of the business of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, my supplemental to the Minister: In the context that the population is aware that the Minister can fall asleep anywhere but the fire officers cannot, could you indicate whether having fire officers sleeping in a parking lot is OSHA compliant?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, as far I am concerned, I will remain focused on the development—

Hon. Members: “Ahhh”.

Hon. F. Hinds:—issues of this country, and will not be derailed by the bacchanal and scandal and confusion that persons outside of this Parliament—

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]—parking lot.

Mr. Hosein: What about OSHA?

Hon. F. Hinds:—know that they can use the parliamentarians here to execute and—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Members. We are only allowed two supplemental questions under this item. Member for Princes Town.

**Death of 18 NICU Babies
(Counselling/Assistance for Families)**

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, Question No. 2: In light of reports that eighteen (18) babies died as a

result of contracting a bacterial infection at the NICU, POSGH, will the Minister of death indicate—I mean, health, indicate—

Madam Speaker: Member. Member.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Member, could you kindly withdraw that and read the question as approved?

Mr. Padarath: I withdraw, Madam Speaker. Will Minister indicate whether the families have been receiving counselling and other assistance from the State?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Health.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, on occurrence of the events, very early, the North West RHA, through its social workers department, were indeed in contact with the parents of the affected babies, and may I once again offer our deepest condolences to those parents. The purpose of reaching out to the parents by the social workers was to do exactly this, to provide the necessary support and counselling.

However, Madam Speaker, a pre-action protocol letters were then issued, which asked the NWRHA to have no contact with the parents. That was stated in a pre-action protocol letter. What the letter also asked was for the NWRHA to agree to pay for independent counselling, and the NWRHA has agreed to that. So at that time, those arrangements are being made to facilitate the independent counselling. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Madam. Madam, can the Minister confirm that the families affected have expressed no confidence in the public health system and

have opted for private counselling based on that reasoning?

Madam Speaker: I am not certain what the question is, so could you rephrase the question?

Mr. Padarath: Madam, I am asking for the hon. Minister to confirm that the families who have been affected have expressed no confidence in the public health system and that is why they have refused counselling in the public sector?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Health.

1.45 p.m.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, I want to stand behind every single health care worker in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: And it is this type of dialogue that, unfortunately, the UNC is trying to tarnish the reputation of every single health care worker, and you know what? They are smarter than that. I stand behind them. The fact is that by a pre-action protocol letter, issued by Freedom Law Chambers, the NWRHA asked specially for contact between the RHA and the parents to stop. The letter also said that they requested private counselling to be paid for by the RHA, and they are doing that. And may I close by saying, again, in the face of all these unwarranted attacks—you can attack me, that is fine, but the system continues to function.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: We had one terrible incident in one ward and we continue to provide services to thousands of people across 109 health centres, 13 hospitals, on a daily basis to the satisfaction of these patients. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Madam. To the hon Minister: Is the Minister aware that parents are further devastated by allegations of information and medical reports being sanitized and destroyed as it relates to the death of their babies and in some instances, their only child?

Madam Speaker: Member, that question is out of order having regard to the relevant Standing Order. Leader of the House.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, there are 14 questions for oral answer. We will be answering 11. I respectfully ask for deferrals for Questions No. 65, No. 66 and 67. Thank you very much.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following questions stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre):

Calypso Gas Project

(Government's Consideration to Revisit)

- 65.** Given the recent statement by the CEO of Woodside Energy, that the company is seeking “improved fiscal terms” to develop the Calypso Gas project, will the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries advise if the Government is considering revisiting the project with Woodside Energy?

Niquan Energy Trinidad Limited

(Recovery of Moneys Owed)

- 66.** Given reports of possible wind-up petitions against Niquan Energy Trinidad Limited, will the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries

advise on the Government's efforts to recover the monies owed by Niquan Energy to state company Trinidad and Tobago Upstream Downstream Energy Operations Company Limited (TTUDEOCL)?

Monetization of Dragon Gas Field

(Detail of Payments)

67. Based on the recent granting and publication of a licence by the Venezuelan Government to Shell and the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago (NGC) for the monetisation of the Dragon Gas Field, will the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries indicate:

- a) what specific payments will the NGC be required to make to the Venezuelan Government before gas is produced, as required by the license; and
- b) when will these payments be made?

Questions, by leave, deferred.

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Siparia Community Swimming Pool

(Details of)

47. Dr. Lackram Bodoë (Fyzabad) asked the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development:

With respect to the Siparia Community Swimming Pool, will the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development state:

- a) when will this facility be reopened to the public;
- b) how long has the pool been closed to the public; and
- c) has there been a cost to the taxpayer during the closure of the pool?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Sport and Community Development.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Sport and Community Development, I answer the following question. With respect to part (a) of the question, a tentative reopening date for the facility is scheduled for July 2024. The reopening of the facility is contingent upon the completion of the following works required at the facility:

1. Separation of the filtration from pool A and B;
2. The provision and installation of a separate pump and filtration systems to increase the rate of filtration;
3. Supply and installation of two 10 HP pumps; and
4. Resurfacing of pool B.

The supply and installation of the two new 10 HP pumps, and the resurfacing of pool B remain outstanding and are expected to be completed before the tentative reopening date.

With respect to part (b) of the question, the Siparia Community Swimming Pool has been closed to the public, along with all other sport facilities, since April 2020, as a consequence of the COVID-19 restrictions. Following the lifting of restrictions in April 2022, assessments were conducted on all facilities.

With reference to the Siparia Community Swimming Pool, the domestic and swimming pool pumps were found to be malfunctioning. To address these and other issues at the facility, the following additional upgrading works were proposed:

- The installation of pool pumps;
- Electrical upgrades;

- AC servicing; and
- Replacement of minor plumbing works.

The Ministry began to embark upon these repair works and upgrades.

Part (c), the usual direct expenditure profile to maintain this type of facility is as follows:

- Electricity;
- Water and sewerage;
- Materials and supplies;
- Administrative janitorial security at \$55,000 per month.

The average monthly cost is around \$65,000. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima. **Commission of Enquiry 1990**

Attempted Coup Report

(Government Action on Recommendations)

50. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Prime Minister:

Will the Prime Minister indicate whether the Government intends to act on the recommendations of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the events surrounding the attempted coup on July 27, 1990, and in particular, the recommendation which suggested that compensation be given to those who were held hostage, traumatised and injured during the attempted coup?

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. On behalf of the hon Prime Minister, the horrific stain on our country and its democratic history that took place on July 27, 1990, was the subject of a commission of enquiry established on September 06, 2010, to enquire into events surrounding the attempted coup on the Republic on July 27,

2010.

After extensive public hearings before a panel of five Commissioners, headed by Sir David AC Simmons KA, BCH, KC, Chairman, the report was delivered to the then President of Trinidad and Tobago on March 14, 2014. The then Prime Minister, Member of Parliament, Member for Siparia, laid the report of the Commission of Enquiry in the Parliament on March 14, 2014, and thereafter, did nothing to take any decisions to compensate any person or persons who were held hostage—

Mr. Hinds: Wow

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—traumatized and injured during the attempted coup. From what we have been able to unearth, previous Cabinets took decisions related to assistance for victims of the attempted coup, the first being on August 20, 1990, which was never fully implemented, and the second, on January 10, 1991, which too was never fully implemented.

Notably, the previous UNC administration, after commencing a commission of enquiry in 2010, and laying the report in March 2014, did nothing to address the issue of compensation for those who were held hostage, traumatized and injured during the attempted coup.

This Government has asked the hon. Attorney General to have the reports studied and legal advice sought, after which he should advise Cabinet what are the various legal options available for consideration by the Government.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Thanks, Madam Speaker. Given that nothing was also done by the present PNM administration, the question is, was a time frame given to the hon. Attorney General to present his findings?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, it is correct to note that the UNC, who commissioned the enquiry, did absolutely nothing. We have taken the step to have the hon. Attorney General have the reports studied, and make and advise the Cabinet what are the various legal options going forward.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Given the history of this Government making studies and endless analyses, and no results, could we expect results, in terms of the compensation for those who have suffered on that day?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: It will be premature to presuppose what the hon. Attorney General will determine. We await the outcome of his studied legal advice.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Can the Minister advise this House the date on which the Attorney General was given this mandate to study this report?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Unfortunately, Madam Speaker, I do not have the detailed information with me at this moment.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Shooting of the Venezuelan Child (Update on Investigation)

- 51. Mr. Rodney Charles** (*Naparima*) asked the hon. National Security:
Will the Minister provide an update on the investigation surrounding the February 2022 shooting of the Venezuelan child by the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard, while on board a vessel in Trinidad and Tobago

waters?

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you, yet again, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, according to information provided by the Commissioner of Police, the investigation into the incident at sea, involving the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard and a Venezuelan vessel on Sunday the 6th of February, 2022, was concluded. And the file on the matter was submitted to the Director of Public Prosecutions for his directions, and such file was submitted to him on the 20th of October, 2023. We, like all else, await the further directions of the Director of Public Prosecutions. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Would the Minister be clear in advising whether that report of an incident by an agency of the State, paid for by t, will we be privy to the findings of the report?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

1.55 p.m.

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, as I have hitherto indicated, the police having completed their investigation exercise, moved the file seamlessly to the Office of the DPP. I thank you.

**Damen Offshore Patrol Vessels
(Number of)**

52. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Will the Minister advise as to the number of Damen offshore patrol vessels that are fully operational as at April 02, 2024?

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): I thank you yet again and more profusely, Madam Speaker. The Damen vessels are not fully operational due to the following: There exists an urgent requirement for equipment on board the vessels to be replaced due to obsolescence. A general refit of equipment such as the overhaul of the engines and required upgrade of the power generation systems are to be completed, and as well, dockings and quality surveys are required.

As a result, Madam Speaker, the Government has entered into a recertification and maintenance contract with Damen Ships Limited to return all the Damen fleet to full operational status. In this rectification exercise, the first Damen Vessel, CG 23, is programmed to return to Trinidad and Tobago from its docking and recertification, and into full serviceability in September of 2024. The remaining Damen vessels will as well be recertified and upgraded on a phased basis, with the last vessel, CG 27, returning to full operational status in early 2025

Mr. Charles: Is the Minister aware of the terms “break-down maintenance and preventative maintenance”? And is he in a position to tell us that what obtains in the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard is preventative maintenance to avoid the reoccurrence of things like breakdown of equipment?

Madam Speaker: So which question are you asking?

Mr. Charles: Is the Minister giving us the assurance that preventative maintenance is what obtains in the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard?

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, I have outlined, with great care and in thorough detail, the reasons why the vessels are in need of service. I do not think it serves any useful purpose to add anymore. If the Member has a difficulty with his hearing or is—

Hon. Members: “Aaah”. Please!

Madam Speaker: Member! Member! Let us please do not go down that road.

Mr. Charles: Finished?

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Could the Minister inform this House about what arrangements have been made to ensure that our borders are secured on a 24/7 basis while the action is being taken as he described?

Madam Speaker: Member, I rule that question out of order, in regard to the question asked and the answer given. Member for Naparima.

**Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service
(Investigation into Purchase of Wooden Ladders)**

53. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. National Security:

Given that the issue with the purchase of the twenty (20) wooden ladders for the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service arose in March 2022, will the Minister indicate why an internal investigation into the purchase of the ladders at a cost of \$1million was not conducted prior to March 2024?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): I thank you warmly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, according to information received from the Chief Fire Officer, no internal investigation had been conducted by the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service into the purchase of the 20 wooden ladders in March of 2022. Bearing in mind, Madam Speaker, that process with the acquisition began in 2019, or for that matter, at any time before or at all, no investigation into internal investigation had been conducted. The reason is because such an investigation was not previously deemed necessary by the fire service. Following a Freedom of Information request which was filed by a citizen, the matter generated fairly widespread public discourse. It was only at

this stage that the Integrity Commission and the Auditor General's office launched probes into the purchase of the 20 wooden vessels to the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service.

Dr. Moonilal: Ladders.

Hon. F. Hinds: Ladders. The Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service is fully cooperating with these probes, and will continue to do so.

Mr. Charles: Would the Minister consider it shameless and a dereliction of duty for you to be in charge—the hon. Member to be in charge of a Ministry and such malfeasance took place, and it took two years before action was taken?

Hon. F. Hinds: I cannot understand how the Member for Naparima would arrive at a conclusion of malfeasance when, as I indicated, when the issue came up in public after the FOI request, the Auditor General and the Integrity Commission instituted enquiries and they are ongoing. The Member has already come to a conclusion. It is typical of the UNC. I am not surprised.

Mr. Charles: Minister, we are not talking about external investigations. The question asked, what internal investigations, and I think it is sloth and dereliction of duty for you not to act.

Madam Speaker: Member, is that a question?

Mr. Charles: Yes, it is. The question is, is it dereliction of duty and sloth to remain two years and not conduct an internal investigation into a department run by your good self?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, as I earlier indicated, there was no issue with the ladders. They were functional. They are used, as they have been for decades, in the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service. There is no inherent dysfunctionality with the ladders, and therefore there was no need, there was no

dealing of any issue before an issue arose sometime later. Thank you.

Mr. Charles: Is the Minister aware that the ladders under reference have never been used by the Trinidad and Tobago Fire Service?

Hon. F. Hinds: I am quite prepared and in a position to say that that is false. That is wrong and it ought to be withdrawn.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

**Princes Town Regional Corporation
(Road Rehabilitation Works)**

55. Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Further to questions raised in this House on April 20, 2022 and May 26, 2023 regarding a major landslip adjacent to the compound of the Robert Village Hindu School, will the Minister indicate:

- a) if the Ministry intends to assist the Princes Town Regional Corporation with the road rehabilitation works; and
- b) if the answer to (a) is in the affirmative, when will these works begin and what is the expected duration of the rehabilitation?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Works and Transport.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in response to a question raised in this House on April 20, 2022 and May 26, 2023, I stated two years ago that the Ministry of Works and Transport collaborated with the Princes Town Regional Corporation to do some interim roadwork to make the road passable to facilitate access to the school. It must be emphasized that this road is not under the purview and control of the Ministry of Works and Transport but that of the

regional corporation. I am also giving the assurance that since 2022, that the Ministry of Works and Transport is always willing to assist all corporations once a request is made and funding is available. Madam Speaker, since the collaboration with the Corporation in 2022, no further request or assistance have been received by the Ministry of Works and Transport from the Princes Town Regional Corporation for road rehabilitation work. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Is the hon. Minister aware of correspondence dated October 12, 2023, of which I have a copy here and which was received by the Ministry of Works and Transport?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, on that specific landslip and the request for further advice and assistance, I have no information on that. Thank you.

Mr. Padarath: Can I ask the hon. Minister to give the House the commitment that he will go back to his Ministry and ask for the correspondence dated October 12, 2023, with, again, the Princes Town Regional Corporation?

Mr. Indarsingh: He does not reply to anything.

Mr. Padarath: Because he does not reply to anything, Madam Speaker.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, I will give a bigger commitment. I will liaise with the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government and the Corporation to bring assistance to the schoolchildren of that area. Thank you.

**St. Julien Road, Princes Town
(Details of Roadworks)**

56. Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*) asked the hon. Minister of Works

and Transport:

In light of the numerous landslips along St. Julien Road, Princes Town, will the Minister indicate the following:

- a) if the geotechnical work that was promised by the Minister since October 2020 has been completed;
- b) whether any contracts for rehabilitation works have been awarded;
- c) if the answer to (b) is in the affirmative, the names of the successful contractors; and
- d) when will the rehabilitation works begin?

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Works and Transport.

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

Thank you again, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, geotechnical investigation had been conducted on several landslips around St. Julien Road, the report of which has been presented to the Ministry during this financial year. Rehabilitation work on the landslip at 2.4 kilometre mark was completed by WBI Construction Services Limited in February 2024. A contract was awarded to Lutchmeesingh Transport Contractors Limited for landslips at 2.5 kilometre mark. Rehabilitation work is expected to commence in May 2024. The current status of other landslips around St. Julien Road is as follows: Tender documents are currently being prepared for four landslips located between the 3.5 kilometre and 3.8 kilometre mark. Designs and tender documents are being prepared for slope instability at the 2.3 kilometre mark and 5 kilometre mark and between the 6.2 kilometre mark and 6.5 kilometre mark. Subsequent to the tendering process, rehabilitation work, can reasonably be expected to commence by end of 2024, once funding is available. Thank you.

Sisters Road, Hardbargain

UNREVISED

(Deteriorated Road Conditions)

57. Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

In light of the deteriorated road conditions along Sisters Road, Hardbargain from the Triveni Mandir to Isaac Junction, will the Minister indicate:

- a) when will rehabilitation works begin;
- b) who are the contractors selected for these projects; and
- c) what was the process used in awarding these contracts?

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Works and Transport.

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

Again, Madam Speaker, between June 2023 and October 2023, road rehabilitation work was executed along Sisters Road between Hardbargain Primary school and the Triveni Mandir, approximately 1.3 kilometres. The contract was awarded to Lutchmeesingh's Transport Contractors Limited via selective tendering. Tender documents for a second phase of the road rehabilitation work have been completed for a section of roadway between Hardbargain Junction and Hardbargain Primary School, approximately 1.2 kilometres. No contract for these rehabilitation work has been awarded to date. Once approved for tender these works can reasonably be expected to commence two to two and a half months thereafter.

No road work has been currently planned for sections of the roadway between Triveni Mandir and Isaac Junction under PURE. It must be noted, however, that several slope instability, approximately 15, currently exist along Sisters Road between the Triveni Mandir and the junction. Of these landslip the PURE unit was mandated to address LP No. 133 landslip and commence

investigation work. The survey has been completed for a slope instability and the geotechnical report is scheduled to be received in May 2024. Completion of the designs for preparation of the tender documents will commenced upon receipt of the geotechnical report.

The Ministry has been advised that due to the severity of the multitude of ongoing land movement and all major slope instability should be addressed prior to the execution of any major road rehabilitation work. Thank you.

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Madam. Minister, in light of, you just stated that the geotechnical work will be completed in the report submitted in May of 2024. You also indicated that no contracts have been awarded. Can you say whether or not you envisaged that this project will be awarded in this financial year?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: I know the Member for Princes Town is very selective. I did indicate that certain packages would have been completed—awarded and completed, but road rehabilitation is done a phased basis with a planned programme. What we have to do before we do any road rehabilitation, we have to make sure the stability of the slopes are intact. So it is an ongoing work, as the Member will be aware that is a very challenged area. In one area alone there are 15 landslips, which could take the entire budget of the Ministry of Works and Transport. So work is ongoing. Work has been completed, and we will continue until proper relief is brought to the residents of the area. Thank you.

**Municipal Corporation Office Clerks
(Receipt of Minimum Wage)**

62. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government:

Will the Minister inform this House if office clerks attached to the offices of Local Government Councillors within the fourteen (14) Municipal Corporations, are being paid wages consistent with the Minimum Wages (Amendment) Order 2023?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Rural Development and Local Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you hon. Member for the question. Madam Speaker, pursuant to Cabinet Minute No. 902 of April 7, 2011, office clerks attached to the office of local government councillors within the 14 municipal corporations are paid, by that Cabinet Minute, a stipend of \$3,000 per month. Since then an assessment of the general level wages in Trinidad and Tobago and the cost of living, among other things, was conducted by the Minimum Wages Board, and consequently the minimum wage for workers under the Minimum Wage Act, Chap. 88:04 has increased from \$17.50 per hour to \$20.50 per hour pursuant to the Minimum Wages (Amdt) Order 2023.

At Appendix A, which is attached, if the hon. Member wishes to see it, which came into effect on January 1, 2024. This equates to \$164 for an eight-hour workday; \$820 for a 40-hour work week; and an average monthly rate of \$3,553.33. As a result of the increase in the minimum wage, there exists a disparity of approximately \$534 between the stipend payable to office clerks of councillors of municipal corporations and the new national minimum wage for workers under the Minimum Wages Act. The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has acknowledged the disparity and has taken steps to seek funding at mid-year supplementation, whilst it meets the payments now

due since the change in the Minimum Wage Order.

2.10 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, based on what information you have just provided to the House, has this been communicated to the chief executive officers at the respective municipal corporations throughout Trinidad, to give effect to what you have just provided?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you hon. Member for the question. In fact, Madam Speaker, we have discovered that there are discrepancies between the 14 corporations themselves. Some of the contracts are worded very differently from other of the contracts. Some refer to stipends, some refer to wages, therefore creating an anomaly as to whether it in fact was bound by the Minimum Wages Order or not. It is a very regrettable position but it is part of the exercise of reforming the accounting systems that we are engaged in. So as we take the next couple of days to confirm what exactly the 14 corporations were doing differently, we will give the instruction, (a), as to arrears, certainly they were bound to be paid since January 1st, 2024, as well as the go-forward position which should be shortly underwritten by the mid-year supplementation and virement in the meanwhile.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, given the Minister's statements and so on, and his commitment to local government reform and rollout, could you give an undertaking that there would be an evaluation or review of the job specification of these clerks attached to the offices of local government council.

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I think that is a very commendable recommendation which we share, in fact, it is part of the human resource underwriting that we are doing in the local government reform. As you will recall, the miscellaneous provisions local government package includes some re-designation of officers in the move from councillors to part-time to full-time, it is a very germane and critical and live issue. So the public administration arm, PMCD, the CPO, the Ministry of Finance and local government, are looking collectively at all of those provisions, because we do believe that people need to be paid fairly in respect to the work done. Perhaps it is quite similar to the SRC reviews that happen from time-to-time for other members of the public service.

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Augustine.

Ms. Ameen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Mr. Minister, in light of your response, where you indicated that different corporations had different wordings in the contract for these officers, the secretaries for the councillors, can you give an undertaking to provide legal guidance from the Ministry's legal department to each corporation to standardize the contracts that are given to engage the councillors' secretaries?

Madam Speaker: Member.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, in fact, an undertaking is not required, because that is exactly what is being done. So I welcome the suggestion, but just to put it on the record, it is being done.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

**Investigation into Alleged Sexual Misconduct
at the Ministry of Health
(Status of)**

63. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Health: Given reports of alleged sexual misconduct by a senior employee of the Ministry of Health on a junior member of staff, will the Minister inform this House if an investigation is being conducted into this allegation?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am advised that no investigation is being conducted, because there is no report to investigate.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Minister, are you aware that such an accusation was made in the Trinidad *Guardian* in relation to an article written by one Asha Javeed on the 21st of March, 2024.

Madam Speaker: But Member having regard to the original question asked and the answer, this is another question altogether and it is not related, so that I rule it out of order. Member for Couva South.

**Emergency Ambulance Services and
Emergency Medical Personnel Act
(Nursing Personnel in Response Team)**

64. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Health: Given that a nurse was seriously injured in a vehicular accident on March 16, 2024 whilst engaged in the ambulance transfer of a patient from the Port of Spain General Hospital to the St. James Medical Complex, will the Minister inform this House if nursing personnel are permitted under the Emergency Ambulance Services and Emergency

Medical Personnel Act to be part of the response teams of ambulances?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Health.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, we empathize with the nurse that was injured and performing duties relative to the ambulance facility provided by the Northwest Regional Health Authority when the unfortunate incident occurred. The NWRHA service does not fall to be regulated under the Emergency Ambulance Services and Emergency Medical Personnel Act, Chap. 29:02. Rather, the RHA ambulances are used for inter-facility transports of stabilized non-emergent patients and depending on the needs of the particular patient, the appropriate category of health personnel will accompany all patients during transports to ensure proper patient care.

I am advised by the NWRHA that the nurse was immediately seen and treated at the Accident and Emergency Department, Port of Spain General Hospital and was subsequently cleared to resume work by the Occupational Health team. All avenues for referral to the Employee Assistance Programme for counselling remain available to this valued employee. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Minister based on what you have just provided in terms of the information to this House. Could you inform this House what are the standard requirements in relation to personnel that are required to respond to accident from a first time responders point of view?

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South, I rule that question out of order in accordance with the Standing Orders. Hon. Members questions 65, 66 and 67 are deferred for two weeks.

STATEMENT BY MINISTER

Government's Financial Year

(Extension for Treasury Submissions)

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you Madam Speaker. I am authorized by Cabinet to make the following statement in relation to the mechanics of the Government's financial year.

It has become necessary to extend the period of time for the Treasury to submit financial statements to the Auditor General under section 24(1) of the Exchequer Audit Act and likewise extend the period of time for the Auditor General to prepare and submit reports on the same pursuant to section 25(1) of the Act. It is therefore important for the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago to understand the cycle of the Government's financial year in Trinidad and Tobago, and the rationale behind the time limits for the submission of financial statements and reports on same.

Prior to the year 1998, the Government's Financial Year was in line with the calendar year from January 1st to December 31st every year, however, in 1998, this was changed from October 1st, sorry, this was changed from January 1st to September 30th in every year pursuant to the Financial Year Act 1998. The policy behind the change was based on the need to ensure government's proper planning and implementation of programmes and projects, which was hindered by a January 1 financial year start that would normally lead to a period of

mobilization and implementation of three months thereafter. The decision to change the start of the financial year from January 1st September 30th, was grounded on recommendations made by a committee chaired by the then former permanent secretary in the Ministry of Finance, or by the former permanent secretary in the Ministry of Finance, Mr. John Andrews, and included a mix of senior public servants and members of the private sector.

Although the Committee's first recommendation was that it was not necessary to change the financial year, the Committee's second recommendation stated:

“If the change in the Government's fiscal year end to September 30th, is deemed to be desirable this can be done without changing the year-end of other agencies or the tax legislation. Tax collections after the initial period will revert to an annual cycle.”

Accordingly, the Government's financial year as it is now, is based on the need to implement construction projects as far as practicable during the dry season.

Madam Speaker, the Auditor General pursuant to section 116(2), of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, is required to audit and report on the public accounts of Trinidad and Tobago annually. The detailed process for conducting the audit by the Auditor General is set out under Part V of the Exchequer Audit Act. The process starts by the Treasury transmitting to the Auditor General under section 24(1) of the Act, accounts showing the financial position of Trinidad and Tobago on the said December 31st within a period of four months after 30th September in each year, or such longer period thereafter, as Parliament may by resolution appoint.

Next, the Auditor General is required to examine and audit the accounts and within a period of seven months after 20th September in each year, or such longer period thereafter, as Parliament may by resolution appoint, transmit the report to the Minister of Finance. One can clearly see, therefore, that it was the intention of the Parliament as far back as 1962, when the Audit and Exchequer Act was enacted at the time of our country's independence, that the timelines for the submission of accounts by the Treasury, and preparation of the report of the Auditor General could be extended, if necessary with Parliament's approval.

The reason for this is simple: The task of preparing the public accounts of Trinidad and Tobago is a mammoth exercise involving hundreds of public servants. There is the possibility therefore, that errors may be made along the way, and further time may be needed to correct these errors. For the financial year 2023, an extension of time has been determined by the various public officials involved to be required at this time and this will be addressed at a later stage in the proceedings.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West.

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo: Thank you, Ma'am. On the basis of Standing Order 25—24(4) sorry, can the Minister indicate whether or not the Attorney General sorry, the Auditor General is the one who requested this extension, or whether it was an act on the volition of the Minister himself?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: The Auditor General has in fact identified a requirement to extend the period if necessary.

**PUBLIC HEALTH CARE SERVICES
(GOVERNMENT MEASURES TO IMPROVE)**

[Third Day]

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Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [March 22nd 2024].

Be it resolved, that this House call on the Government to implement measures to immediately improve the delivery of health care services, to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and to address mismanagement in the health care sector.

Question again proposed.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members the debate on the following Motion, which was in progress when the House adjourned on Friday, March 22nd 2024 will be resumed. The Members who have spoken thus far in this debate, are as follows: Dr. Rishad Seecheran, the mover, Member for Caroni East; hon. Terrence Deyalsingh MP, Minister of Health Member for St. Joseph; Dr. Lackram Bodoie, Member for Fyzabad; hon. Lisa Morris-Julian MP, Minister in the Ministry of Education and Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara; Dr. Rai Ragbir MP, Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla; hon. Faris Al-Rawi MP, Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, Member for San Fernando West; Dr. Roodal Moonilal, Member for Oropouche East; hon. Ayana Webster-Roy MP, Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, Member for Tobago East; Ms. Vandana Mohit MP, Member for Chaguanas East; Mr. Roger Monroe MP, Member for Tobago—I am sorry, Toco/Sangre Grande; Mr. Ravi Ratiram MP, Member for Couva North; hon. Penelope Beckles-Robinson MP, Minister of Planning and Development, Member for Arima.

The hon. Minister of Planning and Development has 18 minutes of original time remaining and a further 15 minutes if she so desires to wind up her contribution. So I will ask the Member at this time if she wishes to avail herself

of the additional 15 minutes and if she so does I would not interrupt her contribution.

2.25 p.m.

Hon. P. Beckles: Yes, please, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: Thank you. Madam Speaker, as you indicated, I was on my legs on the last occasion, the 22nd of March, and following my delivery on that day, and as we convene in this revered Chambers, we are starkly confronted with the devastating news from the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the Port of Spain General Hospital where a number of fragile premature infants have tragically passed away. The term “premature” resonates deeply with profound vulnerability. These were infants born before their time, each struggling mightily for life amidst daunting challenges. These tiny lives, inherently delicate, needed the utmost care and vigilant protection, and while we strive to better our health care systems and indeed improve upon our response mechanisms, we must acknowledge the sombre reality, not all adversities can be foreseen or prevented. However, it is our duty and moral obligation to minimize such tragedies and shield our most vulnerable from penetrable harm.

Madam Speaker, no parent ever anticipates or deserves the profound pain and trauma that comes with the loss of a child. Our hearts are deeply aligned with the grief of the parents and families who, at this very moment, are mourning their precious little ones lost in this tragedy. We extend our most heartfelt condolences and assure them that their sorrow is felt in every corner of this assembly.

Madam Speaker, it has come to my attention, as I am sure that it has to both of us, that the circumstances as tragic as they are seem to be viewed as fertile ground for politicking in the national space. On the one hand, some people claim to be concerned and to care about the state of health care, while on the other hand displaying no qualms about playing games with the emotions of affected families by some reckless and unfounded claims made in full glare of the public. Madam Speaker, some persons have gone so far as to reach conclusions even as an official investigation into the circumstances surrounding this tragedy is being conducted by a highly competent technical team from the Pan American Health Organization, invited by Trinidad and Tobago, by the Ministry of Health, with the goal of examining the circumstances, identifying the facts and giving them expert opinion as to the cause or causes of this tragedy.

The armchair experts, Madam Speaker, those who take and present every rumor as a fact no matter how outlandish it may be, are having a field day, all in a bid to claim a space in front of a national audience with bogus half-truths in some cases, and no truths in many more. I have no intention of getting into this issue of blaming and naming, Madam Speaker, but I want to say that it behooves every single one of us in this House to responsibly approach this matter, especially since our words have weight.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: We can choose to be honourable, in keeping with the title that our position confers on us, or we can refuse to be honourable in how we speak about this matter disregarding the sensitivities of the affected families and the integrity of the ongoing investigation.

I am certain, Madam Speaker, that when the investigation by the team from PAHO is completed, the Ministry of Health, the North West Regional Health Authority, and all other regional health authorities will adopt the recommendations arising from the ongoing investigation in order to ensure that such circumstances are minimized if not reduced again or eliminated in Trinidad and Tobago. And specifically now, Madam Speaker, to continue as it relates to the Motion.

My key difficulty is that this Motion seeks to generalize, and to a large extent, trivialize not only the state of public health care, but also the good work of the hard-working men and women of our health care sector around the nation. From patient admission, to patient care, to clinical care, the cleaners, the cooks, the laundry staff, the security guards, the janitors, the phlebotomists, the library technicians, radiographers, the administrators, the plumbing maintenance personnel, the gardeners, the nurses, the doctors, the patient care assistants.

Madam Speaker, we are all aware that the health care system is not perfect. I am sure, and I said it on the last occasion, that every single Member of this House can give some indication or some experience, whether it be by virtue of family members or constituents that may have had challenges at our various health care centres. But, at the same time, to make general statements and to give the impression that the total health care system is in shambles is absolutely false.

I would like to take this opportunity as Minister of Planning and Development with responsibility for the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, because I am in a position to share information, especially—and I am going to

make reference to fiscal 2024, where the health care has been allocated the sum of \$606.7 under this programme for the purposes of modernizing and enhancing our health infrastructure and advancing the quality and accessibility of people-centred health care services throughout Trinidad and Tobago. This expenditure will be undertaken through the Ministry of Health and the nation's regional health authorities for hospital construction projects, health care, refurbishments, the enhancement of general hospitals, medical equipment upgrade and also specialized health care services.

Drilling down, Madam Speaker, this allocation and budgeted expenditure covered the following. One, the Hospital Refurbishment Programme under which four regional authorities in Trinidad and Tobago will continue improvement works to public health facilities under their purview. I can speak specifically of the constituency of Arima and I am happy to report this will involve the enhancement of the Blanchisseuse Health Centre under the auspices of the North Central Regional Health Authority.

Madam Speaker, another key item is the redevelopment of the Port of Spain General Hospital for which the sum of \$75 million has been allocated to continue the construction of the new central block building. This facility will have the capacity of 540 beds, providing radiology and diagnostic services, pharmacy services, laboratory services, intensive care unit services, pediatric care, as well as hematology services.

Madam Speaker, the sum of \$17 million was allocated for the newly opened state-of-the-art Sangre Grande Hospital which my parliamentary colleague will be informing this House about. Madam Speaker, I wish to draw to your attention another new project under the PSIP, the project enhancement

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of general hospitals for which the sum of \$34 million has been allocated to enable regional health authorities to undertake improvement works to the aged infrastructure general hospitals throughout Trinidad. Improved service delivery is also on the agenda and the sum of \$60 million has been allocated for the replacement and upgrading of medical equipment, health facilities under the Medical Equipment Upgrade Programme.

Madam Speaker, under the PSIP, the sum of \$187.4 million was allocated for the provision of specialized health care services through the External Patient Programme in the Ministry of Health. This funding enables patients with specific chronic diseases to access health care at private health institutions, which is paid for by the State. This programme covers renal dialysis, treatment of adult cardiac disease, as well as joint replacement surgery. This Government has outlined its commitment in the *Vision 2030* National Development Strategy to modernizing the health care via the use of information and communication technology which has been proven to enhance health care outcomes by improving medical diagnosis, database treatment, digital therapeutics, clinical trials, self-management, and care and personal centred care, as well as creating more evidence-based knowledge, skills and competent for professionals to support health care.

Madam Speaker, an ongoing initiative between the Ministry of Digital Transformation and the Ministry of Health is the health information system platform which will help to improve the facilitation of communication between health care providers, allowing for improved medication safety as well as for tracking and reporting. HIS functionality will support electronic medical records, inclusive of registration, scheduling emergency, ward and bed

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management, pharmacy and laboratory information services. Under the *Public Sector Investment Programme* an allocation of \$8 million has been provided for the implementation of HIS pilot in the Eastern Regional Health Authority and that would also be done as well at the San Fernando General Hospital.

Currently in the Ministry of Health, there is also the partnership between the Pan American Health Organization and the Inter-American Development Bank to develop a national digital health agenda that would serve as an integrated plan to advance digital health transformation, and that will be done in the entire Trinidad and Tobago. All mentioned allocations and developments are being faithfully executed by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in line with our development strategy, *Vision 2030*, more specifically, “Putting People First: Nurturing Our Greatest Asset”. One of the medium-term goals identified is the need for having a health care system that is efficient and provides quality services. This entails the maintenance of health infrastructure and ensuring that policies and standards are followed and implemented towards better delivery.

Madam Speaker, this Government’s investment in the health sector is yielding positive, tangible, measurable results at the level of the North Central Regional Health Authority. We are witnessing increased access of services year after year and increased levels of delivery. If I can just share some statistics as it relates to the accident and emergency attendance. There has been a 36 per cent increase over 2021; general practice clinic attendances, 24 per cent increase; radiology procedures, 17 per cent; diagnostic laboratory test, 5 per cent; surgical procedures, 40 per cent, clinic attendances, an increase of 51 per cent.

Madam Speaker, as Member of Parliament for Arima I represent part of

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the country that of course is served by the North Central Regional Health Authority and I am proud to represent the constituency that hosts, in my humble view, one of the finest public health institutions in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: I want to take the opportunity to recognize and encourage all the staff that work at the Arima General Hospital. While some may consider it all well and good to cast aspersions on the entire health sector, we must as a country and as a people continue to encourage our workers in the health sector. This facility was commissioned in June 2020. It is a modern 150-bed patient hospital with 10-bed ICU capacity offering nutrition and dietetics, pharmacy, operating theatre, laboratory, psychiatry, physiotherapy, social work, laundry, and radiology departments supported by state-of-the-art technology. It is undergoing what is known as the established practice of phased introduction of services and is in a state of continuous enhancement of service delivery to communities it serves.

2.40 p.m.

The Arima General Hospital was baptised under fire because we remember that that was during the COVID period—serving both adult and paediatric cases, and in April 2022 the Arima General Hospital went further in a hybrid system to serve both non-COVID patients as well as COVID-19 patients requiring dialysis, and now is fully integrated into the traditional health care system. The Arima General Hospital supports many of the services offered by the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, and in keeping with the practice in many jurisdictions, it transfers patients requiring further susceptibility

intervention, for example, thoracic surgery, invasive angiography. This standard practice of concentrating some specialities in speciality centres such as Mount Hope.

Madam Speaker, you may ask why does the Arima General Hospital stand out. I am proud to put it on record that the Arima General Hospital stands out because of the use of modern information technology systems to provide a smoothly run institution and facilitate excellent patient care. One feature is the patient care empathy, patient feedback and transparency, offering an initiative called Bedside Manners Initiative wherein every patient in every ward has access to QR codes on the ward to scan and give feedback to the hospital on the quality of care they are receiving, and that is what you call real time response. The system is monitored by customer service representatives several times per shift, to ensure quality and satisfaction, and immediate response to issues.

This facility features a modern intensive care unit with full data telemetry allowing a real time patient data to feed nurses and doctors stations to facilitate 24/7 monitoring care. This hospital boasts of the state-of-the-art radiology services which are supported by the picture archiving and communication system in which all radiology information, CT Scans, MRI, X-rays, et cetera, and their reports are uploaded to servers so that those medical staff and institutions with the appropriate secured servers and clearance can access the same in the clinical areas.

This hospital also boasts of a laboratory information system that enables doctors to access real time lab results from across different centres reducing repeated lab visits. At the hospital, the doctors and nurses use mobile computers on the wards to move about from patient to patient, and also there is

a demonstration of techniques, for example, the correct use of inhalers. All of the state-of-the-art functionality is maintained by the Arima General Hospital's in-house IT Department. So at the hospital they have established an IT Department, and speaking of infrastructure, through the Connected Arima initiative, Wi-Fi is available to all patients and all staff at no cost at the Arima hospital.

Madam Speaker, patient education is supported by the use of well-mounted television monitors which are able for health education purposes throughout the hospital. At the same hospital, they can conduct staff meetings virtually as well where appropriate with reliable IT infrastructure, and two modern teleconferencing rooms and the modern laboratory as well as diagnostic services at the hospital. For surgical procedures, the hospital boasts of a block of four state-of-the-art operating theatres and one same-day operating theatre which includes a phacoemulsification unit for the ophthalmology team. Security of communication is another highlight of the hospital as several clinics make use of secured emails to correspond to the RHA, ensuring integrity as well as confidentiality of information.

Madam Speaker, my pride in the Arima General Hospital extends to the scope of services offered at this facility including air conditioned clinics in the following areas: COVID executive wellness clinic, general surgery, paediatric surgery, urology, ophthalmology, internal medicine, paediatric medicine, atopy clinic, development clinic, paediatric lifestyle clinic, paediatric stress relief clinic, dialysis, nephrology, physiotherapy, psychology, medical social work, nutrition and dietetics, as well as anaesthetics.

The hospital offers the complete suite of radiology services to patients

inclusive of CT, MIR Scans, mammography, DEXA, modern bone density scan, ultrasound guided biopsies , and interventional radiology. The hospital also features a GE Revolution CT scanner with axial non-contrast image and 3D virtual reconstructed CT colonography, and the cardiology department utilizes advanced diagnostic tools.

Madam Speaker, whereas the majority of radiology services are done the same day, in some cases, of course, wait times may be extended to a week or two depending on the services required. There is no general or paediatric surgical waiting time. Once patients are cleared by the anaesthetist for surgery and have their radiology investigations done which is usually done within hours or days, they proceed to the next surgical list at their convenience once they are willing.

Madam Speaker, for the more specialized surgeries, example urology, there is an average waiting time of four to six weeks, fistulas which is four months. On the balance, the Arima hospital has been helping and continues to help reduce the waiting time of the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex. The Arima General Hospital has already made a huge impact in the delivery of the first-rate health care; medicine ward inpatient services. Between the period October '22 to 2023, ward capacity, 60; number of patients admitted, 2,723. During the period October 2022 for inpatients, non-COVID 434, COVID 434. Admissions from October 2022 to September 2023, medical wards, 2,722.

Madam Speaker, Arima General Hospital is also a place where health care workers' physical and mental stress is taken seriously, and they have put in place provisions also not just to deal with the patients, but also to deal with the workers. So I just wanted to share that information. One of the issues raised by

a number of the previous speakers, of course, had to do with the issue of diabetes. There is a diabetic wellness centre which will be opened, bringing interdisciplinary care to diabetic patients. The hospital also plans 24/7 surgery and a urology inpatient service.

Madam Speaker, as we say, self-praise is no praise, and I would like to share with you a letter written to the North Central Regional Health Authority from a patient of the Arima General Hospital. All I can tell you is that there are many more letters like this received at the medical institution, and I would not read the entire thing but I would just like to read just maybe two or three paragraphs. This person indicated that they wanted to openly praise the medical facility at caption for providing world-class service during the period the 8th of August to the 11th, 2022.

The Arima General Hospital exceeded my expectations in efficiency, expediency and service excellence.

And the person goes on to list exactly what were the details, and it will be true to say that there are persons who would write letters as well not being satisfied not just with Arima, but with other hospitals. But I think what is important is that there are persons who are satisfied with the service being offered not only at that hospital, but in some cases at other hospitals.

Madam Speaker, yesterday I had the opportunity together with several of my colleagues, both from the Lower House and the Upper House, to attend the Joint Select Committee meeting in Arima where the public was invited to give their own comments about the health care system, and those comments were not just restricted to Arima and environs, but you had persons from Chaguanas, San Fernando, Sangre Grande, Port of Spain, all over Trinidad and Tobago. Of

course, some of them expressed concerns whether it be about CDAP, whether it be about waiting time for surgeries.

In some instances some spoke about customer service, some spoke about in some instances not the time you would take to get medication, some spoke about not getting medication and the challenges. But what was interesting was a number of the speakers—and that was a thread that we saw running through the complaints, that they would go to the hospital and at the hospital several persons will give them cards for them to go to private institutions. And whilst some people indicated that they would say to you, your waiting time for an appointment may be six months, it may be two years, they would tell them if you come to this place you can get your surgery, or whatever it is you want could be done in a shorter time.

I just have to say that it is very unfortunate because it is not something that a lot of us have not heard, and they also shared, of course, the amount of money that they would have to pay to have those surgeries done in private institutions very often being the same doctor that they would have spoken to at those hospitals. And you would find that sometimes it is those same people that come and criticize the Government for not providing proper service to members of the public. It is so ironical and so dishonest.

I want to close by saying that both as an MP and someone who has used the Arima health facility, recently we went to San Fernando together with the Minister of Health to establish an autoclave down at the San Fernando General Hospital. As a Member of Parliament, my constituents would come, whether it is requests for assistance for those who have been waiting some time for surgery, or difficulties in terms of getting their documents and, therefore, I

would not stand here and say that the health care system is perfect. I have had the opportunity to live abroad and I have been to hospitals abroad and seen some of the differences, some of the best hospitals, how they operate. I have also had the opportunity to see and recognize that a number of our nurses in Trinidad and Tobago are sought over globally.

You can travel to Dubai, the Philippines, Europe, New York, England, where you see Trinidadians and Tobagonians, both doctors and nurses serving at the highest level, and I am sure that this is not anything that nobody in this room, not one of us Members of Parliament is not aware of. So we do know that we have produced some of the best nurses and doctors trained right here in Trinidad and Tobago that are sought after internationally. But at the same time, there are people that condemn those same practitioners and claim that they are either not worth their salt, they do not deliver, and some of us are very easy to criticize them for the work and their commitment that they do.

2.55 p.m.

There is no profession in Trinidad and Tobago, whether it be nursing, whether it be legal, whether it be police, engineering, where you have people working exceptionally or are committed to the point where we can all say that they are 100 per cent perfect. But we do know that there are a lot of people in health care in Trinidad and Tobago who are committed to delivering the best health care that we can ever want in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. P. Beckles: I just want to place on record that there are many nurses and doctors—even at the times when we have challenges and even at times where things are not working out the way we want to, there are men and women from

the entire of Trinidad and Tobago, and even people who have come from abroad who are committed—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two more minutes of full time remaining.

Hon. P. Beckles: Yes—to ensuring that we have a health care service that is second to none.

There are many persons from the Caribbean who would tell you that they would come to Trinidad and Tobago and they would prefer to come here to have the benefit of our health care. I have heard other people say that some of the migrants, for example, are not treated in the way they should be treated at the hospitals, but any nurse and doctor that you speak to—and there are many doctors here—would tell you that the hospitals in Trinidad and Tobago turn away absolutely nobody. And I want to finally place on record my acknowledgement and commitment to the many workers in the health sector who have been doing an excellent job, and those who are not so minded, to call on them to do better. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): Thank you. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and I thank my colleagues as I join this debate. It is a very important debate at this time in our country. We have heard from all the doctors on this side of the House. I do not think there are any on the other side of the House. I think we have a pharmacist

Mr. Charles: A druggist.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I do not think we have a doctor on the other side. I congratulate the Member for Caroni East on bringing this very important Motion—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and all the speakers from this side, the Member for Fyzabad, the Member for Oropouche East and the Member for Chaguanas East for their equally powerful contributions. And I take the opportunity, Madam, to endorse the contributions made by Members on this side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I think this demonstrates the UNC’s vision—ongoing vision and mission, always to be the people’s voice and represent their interests in and out of this Chamber. It also shows that we on this side remain ever vigilant on behalf of citizens. We will always hold the Government to account for every single action they undertake or do not undertake, and so I am pleased to support my colleagues on this debate.

Madam Speaker, several contributions from the other side, they called my name relating to several matters, and I will deal with them but I will tell you this. I remembered learned Prof. Selwyn Cudjoe, he says, “Great is the truth and it shall prevail.” And today, it is the truth I will share with respect to contributions from some Members on the other side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I feel have happy for the Member of Parliament for Arima, with respect to that Arima hospital. I feel very happy for the people of Arima for the Arima hospital and the matters raised by their hon.

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Member, but I cannot help but lament that that hospital was begun by us. I turned the sod.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And I cannot help but lament that they would have started the construction from scratch for the Arima hospital whilst a completed hospital at Couva remains unopened up to today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Member made some contributions about allocations for several things in the health sector. Again, we do not believe and we do not trust, because we always say, PNM means “promises never materialize”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So I turn now to the Motion at hand. This—the late great American civil rights activist, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., once said, and I quote:

“Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health...is the most shocking and inhumane.”

“Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and inhumane”

And I can think of no better description of this Health Minister and the Government when we reflect on the deplorable state of our health care sector today under this sitting Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This Motion, in essence, notes that the Government has failed to provide the necessary:

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“...human resources...
...modern...”—IT—“...systems...suitable drugs, equipment and
facilities...”—to meet the public demands, causing tremendous suffering
to citizens.

And not only to citizens, but also to health care workers seeking to access the
health care.

I want to state on the onset, Madam, that whatever I may say today, I cast
no aspersions on the hard-working health care workers in the public health
sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No aspersions whatsoever. And because we
have raised these issues, it cannot be taken that we want to do what the
Government does, so it is the blame game. I cast no blame or aspersions on the
hard-working health care workers of our country.

This Motion calls on the Government to improve delivery of health care.
And they accuse us always of politicizing matters, but when we raise issues of
national importance, let us say from the outset that these are matters that are
close to the people of our country. This is a matter—it is a human one, it is a
matter of life and death. Access to health care is considered a human right
enshrined in our Constitution and we are now experiencing a national crisis in
the health sector.

I agree with the Member saying the health care system is not perfect. I
can agree with that. It definitely is not perfect or anywhere near perfect, but
certainly much could be done to improve health care in our country; much
could be done.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I continue, Madam Speaker. This is not the first time that the Opposition has brought a Motion about health or the health sector. This is the third time—fourth time, I believe—the fourth Motion on the failure of the health system we have been bringing here since 2019.

According to *Hansard* in 2019, then MP for Caroni East, Dr. Gopeesingh, brought a Motion with the resolution:

“...that this House condemn the Government for its mismanagement of the health sector and call for an implementation of remedial measures, policies and programmes.”

That did not happen.

We came again in 2021, the sitting Member for Caroni East, with a resolution:

“...that this House express a lack of confidence in the Minister of Health and call for his immediate resignation.”

That did not happen.

In 2023, the Member for Fyzabad brought a resolution:

“...that this House take note of the failure of the Government to deliver on its health sector mandate.”

And now, here we are again, none of that has been done. The performance and services being delivered have worsened since then—since 2019 to now.

Once more, another Motion by the Member for Caroni East condemning the failure of the health sector. A failed health sector under this Government. Why? Why is that so? It is said that history repeats itself because no one ever listens. Almost nine years now, our MPs, centres and our doctors have

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consistently complained and warned about the devastating state of the public health care system under the Member for St. Joseph, the Health Minister. We have outlined problems. We have been saying for years that our hospitals under the PNM have become virtual killing fields, where people go in for simple procedures and come out as corpses because of the grossly improper health care they are receiving.

Our major hospitals—San Fernando, Mount Hope, Port of Spain—are plagued with lack of medicine, insufficient nursing personnel, insufficient senior medical staff, non-hiring of junior medical staff, no surgical supplies, lack of operating theatre time and space for doing surgeries. Very ill patients still have to be kept in emergency departments of hospitals, sometimes two to three days waiting for a bed in a ward.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Many of them died whilst sitting in the A&E waiting for a bed. We have been asking the Prime Minister to fire the clueless Health Minister.

3.05 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And of course, the Prime Minister does not listen and all this time hundreds of thousands of citizens who access the Port of Spain hospital have been suffering because there are only a few functioning wards now, and several speakers have talked, even today, about the Central - Block. Since 2015, the Prime Minister promised to build the Central Block at the Port of Spain General Hospital. Almost nine years later, we are now being told, well look for it in 2025 after elections I presume. So promises never

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materialize.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The issues plaguing the health sector have been brought forward in several ways in the media and in a Joint Select Committee—in a Town Hall Meeting held last year, a *Newsday* article written by Narissa Fraser, November 30, 2023, tells us:

“Public healthcare system slammed at JSC town hall Meeting”

I quote from that article:

“LONG wait times, bad attitudes from staff, and disappearing patient files were some of the complaints from the public about the local healthcare system at...”—that—“meeting...”

An article in the *Express* published December 1, 2023, reporter Melissa Maynard writes and I quote:

“A nursing manager waiting for two years to get an...(ECG) appointment for an urgent heart condition is the reality and experience of patients in the public healthcare system.

One retired doctor said many young doctors are awaiting jobs to no avail after their studies were funded by the government. She mentioned that young people are forced to take up opportunities outside the country...”—because of the—“lack of employment”—right—“here at home.”

For nearly nine years, citizens have been practically begging the hon. Prime Minister to act, to do his duty and fire the incompetent clueless health Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: These pleas have been ignored persistently by

a callous, dismissive Prime Minister and look at what that indifference from the Prime Minister and his Government has caused today.

Look at the headlines that confront our nation today: Eighteen babies die, horror in the health sector. For the two weeks, the nation has been traumatized, horrified and left baffled as day by day, more and more parents emerge in the public domain confirming that today, 18 newborn babies have died and most of it happened between the period of April 04 to 07, 2024. It is a tragedy of unparalleled proportions.

The media reported that two weeks ago, seven babies at the Port of Spain NICU had died from neonatal sepsis. One week later, that number climbed to 11. By this week, it had jumped further to a reported 18 babies, 18 babies. Our condolences, of course, to all the families. And now, climbing, I am told, to 21. When that first baby died, okay, act of God maybe, when the second died, still maybe act of God, when the third baby died, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, the seventh, what happened? What was done? Was anything done?

Hon. Member: Nothing.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Nothing done and now we are counting to 21.

You know the last time I spoke, I say well oh it was so many, seven and I pray God, no more. Each time the number climbs, I pray, God, no more. Now I am being told it is 21, 21 babies newborn, one week later. I am saying from the eighth to the seventh to the 11th, we do not know how many more babies have died and let us hope, God forbid, that no more—no more die or are killed in those hospitals.

Reports are emerging that babies also died under similar circumstances at the San Fernando General Hospital. I say without fear of contradiction that this

lies solely in the hands and the utter failure of this incompetent Minister of Health and his Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We are witnessing with abject disbelief and horror, pain that the effect of this Government's deliberate, systematic and systemic malicious and crucial dismantling of every project undertaken by my Government, including shutting down the Couva Children's Hospital and I will come back to that. I will come back to that in a minute.

Response to previous PNM speakers—you know, I am sure the Members meant well when they spoke in the debate at the previous Sitting and I am sure they meant very well. The Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, others speaking and talking about—boasting, in fact, about the health sector and I wonder what they would say today. If they had a chance to speak again, would they still be boasting of how great they are, how great is the PNM, how great is the PNM without shame? What would they be saying now?

A *Guardian* headline on Thursday, April 18:

“Mother of NICU baby struggles ‘to get out of bed’ after...”—the baby died.

Moving along:

“During an emotional interview with Guardian Media yesterday...”—21-year-old Danyelle—“Samaroo said the death of her baby is so overwhelming she finds it hard to even get out of bed most days.”

Madam Speaker, I also believe that when the Member for Tobago East spoke, boasting of the commission of an autoclave unit to safely treat with 1.8 tonnes of medical waste per day. And when she said that could be done with or

without hazardous chemicals on March 22nd, 2024, Member, you could not have known that so many parents were already grieving over their own newborn babies. They had suddenly died, questionably again, at that NICU due to a lack of proper sanitation, non-functional boiler.

When the Member for Toco/Sangre Grande spoke and boasted about his Government's mandate to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity, he could not have known that according to a *Guardian* report:

“Expectant south moms cagey about...”—San Fernando General Hospital—“too”

And when the hon. Member for San Fernando West spoke on March 22 boasting of, and I quote from the *Hansard*:

“Diagnostic services in Trinidad and Tobago...”—the hon. Member said—“that was free.”

He could not have known about the death of baby Aleem at San Fernando General Hospital according to yesterday's *Express*.

“Mom of 4 pleads for answers from Sando hospital after son dies...
 Baby Aleem ‘let down’ after defying odds”

Thursday April 25th, 2024 by Khamarie Rodriguez in the *Express*. So these are the stories, the horror stories, and I ask the Members again, if you had the chance today to speak in the light of all that has come forward, all that has emerged, would you be boasting?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Would you be boasting about this great health care system under your incompetent, clueless Minister of Health?

You see, I may excuse them because they will say well we did not know

but we cannot excuse them completely. You know why? Unlike every other member of the population, they have the power to speak up. They sit in Cabinet and Government alongside their colleagues. They have looked on and played the dangerous role of enablers for almost a decade now, enabling what was happening with a front row seat to the utter destructive collapse of a health care system, under the watch of their colleague, the Member for St. Joseph and they did nothing and they said nothing. Some people may say they all have blood on their hands but I would not say that. But they sat down quietly in the Cabinet knowing what was happening and said nothing to force the Minister of Health and force the Government to improve the health care system.

When we look at the San Fernando General Hospital, there is a series of corruption, scandals, money for friends, financiers while babies are dying. Regarding the NICU deaths at the hospital, I now have in my possession several documents, board notes and purchase orders dated a few months ago in late 2023, and all of these come from the South-West Regional Health Authority Board. I got them in my mailbox, if you are wondering.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I have verified that they are authentic. I have also received information from very reliable sources explaining to me what these documents show. I am told that this collective information point to a horrendous situation. Major sanitation and other equipment at the San Fernando hospital which are crucial for ensuring the NICU and all others functions optimally to save newborn lives or to save not-so newborn persons are deliberately being left unmaintained or inactive state to facilitate the South-West Regional Health Authority giving out millions of taxpayers' dollars in

rental contracts to selected private companies to do the same job that the equipment there can do.

I speak to one of the documents for the Sando autoclave. I am reliably informed that the incinerator at San Fernando is down. Under my administration, under the chairmanship of the Member for Fyzabad, who was then the head of the South-West, Dr. Bodoë—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—in 2019, our Government procured a new incinerator for the San Fernando General Hospital.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That system is designed to meet international standards and EMA requirements for emission. I am reliably informed that the incinerator was not functioning efficiently, but in August last year it went down due to lack of maintenance and again insufficient funds, lack of funding. As of now, repair works to this incinerator are 60 per cent completed. The incinerator will cost about \$250,000, I am told, to fix but the South-West Board keeps claiming they cannot do this because once again, insufficient funds, lack of funding.

Whilst they cry that they do not have the money to do it, what are they doing? A tender document for a South-West evaluation committee dated November 2023, under the heading: Conclusion and Recommendation for a Ward. So you do not have money but look what you are doing, you are outsourcing. You do not have the money to repair but you are outsourcing. Listen to this: The Board is using taxpayers' dollars to pay Guide's Funeral Home to incinerate body parts at a cost of \$40,000, to remove 32 bins of body

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parts weekly. Weekly, \$40,000. They pay for the removal and disposal of needles and other biohazards to a company called Piranha International Limited - Waste Management Services. I am told this is one example of this type of outsourcing and there are many others with the same jobs for different areas.

This includes a company called Sanitec Limited. This company according to documents I have in my possession was registered on June 9th, 2021. Its three directors have the same last name and one lists her address in North Valsayn. Perhaps the Member for St. Joseph will know these people. I believe he lives in that area after all, maybe he is even their neighbour. I will not reveal their names because I do not want to attract negative attention to anyone in these crime-ridden times.

Again according to the South-West Board, another note, the South-West Regional Health Authority, another tender evaluation committee report dated November 29th, 2023. Tender evaluation report: Piranha International Limited was awarded \$718,875 VAT inclusive. Sanitec Limited was awarded \$834,750 VAT inclusive. Both contracts are for the removal and incineration of biohazard waste for the San Fernando hospital for a period of how long, Madam? Two months. Two months. These companies are given that contract two months payment, \$718,875 and \$834,750 for two months. Two months and you would not fix the thing, you would not fix what you have. Both contracts are for removal, as I said, of waste. A total of \$1.5 million for two months.

This is signed by SWRHA senior managers between November and December 2023. They are Gerard Badree, supply chain officer; Michelle Salandy-Cupid, accounting supervisor; Dale Jaimungal, GMSS new wing

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engineering department; Crystalina Ganese-Charles, HSE technician. What this shows is that since 2023, the South-West Board has been paying millions of taxpayers' dollars to selected companies to do the job of an in-house incinerator at San Fernando. That incinerator I am told could be repaired at an estimated \$250,000. So is it that they are deliberately not fixing this and keeping it malfunctioning?

Mr. Lee: Shame, shame.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am also reliably informed that the Plant Engineer, Acting Jovan Ramnarine, was sent on administrative leave in January 2024, for failing to do the senior management bidding on this incinerator. Why? Why? We need answers. We probably need a forensic audit and further investigations to find out why taxpayers' dollars are apparently being misused and abused.

Mr. Charles: Squandermania.

3.20 p.m.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Further, they are outsourcing generators as well. The new wing of that hospital, I am informed, is serviced with two standby generators to provide power in the event of T&TEC power fails. One generator is a primary backup and the other is secondary. The primary generator, I am told, failed in April 2016. Attempts to have it replaced and repaired have been unsuccessful. Again, no sufficient funds, unavailability of funds. The secondary generator failed on November 25, 2023. As a result, what has happened? The South-West Regional Health Authority is renting a standby generator at a cost of \$75,000 per week—

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Hon. Members: Mmmm.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC:—per week, from a company known as Standby Power. This is a total cost to date of approximately \$1.35 million. This cost does not cover additional work to be done about maintaining the system. The matter is expected to be tendered in October 2024. By that time, based on the rental value, it would have cost taxpayers \$2.6 million.

Hon. Member: “That does get yuh vex.”

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: Your malfunctioning oxygen plant and other equipment. Another important matter is the oxygen plant at the San Fernando General Hospital. That plant has been out of service since November 2022. Again, the senior manager in charge failed to approve repairs. To date we have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars annually for the procurement of oxygen cylinders from Massy Gas Products Limited to provide oxygen to patients at the hospital to fill the void left by the malfunctioning generator.

Boilers, one of the two boilers in San Fernando has also been down since 2018. The other boilers have been experiencing mechanical failure over the last two years. Should this second boiler, which is limping along, now fail, it will result in the shutdown of sterilization services at the entire San Fernando General Hospital.

Hon. Members: Oooh! Mmm!.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: Such a situation can result in issues in all departments at San Fernando such as accident and emergency, operating theatre, ICU, and NICU. SWRHA is renting a standby generator, as I said, for the new autoclave since the incinerator went down, \$51,000 a month from Massy Machinery Limited. Today I call upon the Government and the Prime

Minister to commission a forensic audit into SWRHA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: A forensic audit.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: We want to see where taxpayers' dollars are going, and why is it that this outsourcing continues to take place.

I move along now, Madam Speaker, with some responses to Minister Deyalsingh, the Minister of Health—I am sorry, hon. Member for St. Joseph. I heard the Minister of Health talk about what they built when he spoke on January 26, 2024, in this debate. The Prime Minister promised nearly nine years ago that when he took office they would build the central block of the hospital in Port of Spain. Nine years later, serious issues regarding questionable contracts, and today only a promise still exists. An article in the *Guardian*, Carisa Lee, 24 October, 2023, titled:

“First phase of”—the hospital—“\$1.2B...Block completed”

Article says:

“Citizens should be able to access services in...”—this—“...Block...”
 —guess when?—“...by March 2025, Minister of Health...announced yesterday.”

All this time thousands are suffering in Port of Spain, because I am told that only a few wards are functioning. So, nine years later, promise never materialized.

In the A&E department, we have all seen the media images and reports, social media videos, where sometimes 50 to 60 patients, critically ill, all close together hoarded like animals in a pen, and dying right in the emergency

departments needing medical care and attention in these overcrowded departments. So, they promised in 2015, nine years later promises never materialised. And yes, they are boasting about achievements with respect to that hospital and that central block. Repeatedly doing so by the way. I turn now to something very close to our hearts, and I think should be very close to the hearts of all our citizens, which is the Couva Children's Hospital debacle.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: Before I go there, I just want to take a moment to answer some of the utterances of the hon. Minister of Health. In the *Express* today, today's *Express*, page—can I rest this here, please?

Mr. Lee: Sure.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: *Daily Express:*

“From COVID heroes to villains”

“Deyalsingh: Healthcare workers demoralised”

Mr. Charles: Hmmm.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: “Healthcare workers demoralised.”

Mr. Charles: Favourite man.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: Yes, Madam?

Madam Speaker: Just before you continue, you have two more minutes of original speaking time left. You are entitled to 15 more minutes extended time if you wish to complete your contribution.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: Thank you the very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: It is true that healthcare workers are

demoralised, but not for the reasons the Minister stated. It is because they are frustrated by a lack of resources, a lack of vision by this Government, poor decision-making, incompetent management, and nepotism at the RHA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: The 20,000 healthcare workers are waiting to exhale from the weight on their necks of this incompetent Government. The Prime Minister can assist healthcare workers and the hapless Minister himself, who is now clutching at straws following the revelation of incompetence at the NICU in Port of Spain. The Prime Minister can help all of us by immediately removing this Minister from the Ministry of Health.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: It is through the patients in the private sector, including patients of Dr. Bodoie and Dr. Gopeesingh, whom the Minister chose to single out because they are politicians also, but they are also brilliant specialist doctors and others like them. .

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: They are referred to as the public sector continued care. It remains the right of every single citizen to seek and receive treatment in the public sector paid for by taxpayer money. So, what is this point that the Minister is attempting to make? And then we come to the other article in this same *Express* which is on page—1, 2, 3,—page 4.

“NCRHA Couva Hospital Open”

You know, Madam Speaker, there is a saying, “One or two swallows does not a spring make.” I am not sure if you are familiar with it, one or two swallows, the birds when they come out in spring time. One or two does not—

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Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: [*Member raises her voice*]—does not—

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC:—does not a spring make. And so when—
would the hon. Minister please be quiet?

Hon. Member: Massa day done.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: You will have the whole day to speak if you
want to—

Hon. Member: Massa day done.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: You have not spoken on this debate yet. If you
have anything to contribute at all you will have your chance.

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: Just leave me alone please. Leave me alone.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]**Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC:** An article by
Carolyn Kissoon in the *Express*, 26th Friday, April, 2024. A few services,
Madam Speaker, does not a hospital make. Explain to the population why the
230 beds at the Couva Hospital remain unavailable to citizens—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC:—who continue to wait for beds at Eric
Williams and San Fernando. How can you justify having a few COVID
patients in a 230-bed hospital? That is our response to this article here:

“NCRHA Couva Hospital Open”

Madam, 230 beds that could have been available for nine years now, to people
suffering in this country you kept it shut down, opened it for the COVID. It
took a pandemic to open that completed hospital with all that equipment, and

now still trying to fool people with your open hospital. Excuse me, Ma'am.

So, it is clear that the strategy from the Minister and the Government is once again to blame the UNC—because we raised this matter in the public interest—blame the media, blame the population speaking about it, and the parents and their lawyers who filed the lawsuits. Remember on a TV programme, the Minister said that if he was one of those parents he would also have filed the lawsuit.

Ms. Ameen: Hmm.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: So, what is it? Blame everyone except himself and this incompetent Government. I could see a video clip with audio and visual when the Minister was saying, “This is my hospital. This is my hospital.” Minister no hospital is yours. They belong to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: They belong to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: I move along, Madam Speaker. As to respond to the Couva hospital debacle. The Health Minister talked about what they built, I say trying to build. It is a fact that it is a deliberate and now deadly refusal to open that hospital, built when we were in Government. We are seeing a situation, the health sector has been transformed into a place of horror. That hospital will forever remain, in my respectful view, a testament to this Government's anti-people nature, a symbol of their destruction of our nation.

When I became Prime Minister in 2010, a major challenge was to fix the

seriously failing health sector, where you could take your mothers and babies. And that is where that hospital was born, that is what we are, state-of-the-art—\$2 billion I think it was. It was to be specialized in medical care for women and children. It also had a much-needed burns unit because of the Point Lisas Industrial Estate close by, where industrial accidents could happen. It would have created hundreds of jobs for healthcare professionals, it would have opened up our country for medical tourism, thereby bringing forex much needed into our country. But they have refused to open it since then.

Initially, the Minister said there were insufficient doctors to open that hospital. That is not correct. To date over 300 qualified local doctors, hundreds of nurses are awaiting jobs. Then in 2015 the Prime Minister appointed the infamous Welch Committee, and said he was waiting for them to give a recommendation. That report took two years to be completed. It recommended that the Government find a partner to cooperate with the hospital, but they could not because no one wants to work this incompetent government. Four years later, 2019, fast forward, the Minister of Health said that an offshore medical school would be facilitated, initially. Facilitated there, and you had a 51 per cent share. When was that, 2019? Fast forward down the track none of that has materialized. Then they changed the name. *Express* May 16th:

“No longer the ‘Children’s Hospital’”

Then in the Pandemic and say open? From 2015 to 2020, this Government left a modern \$2 billion hospital. Just why? Because it was not built by them. How many lives could have been saved over the past eight years? How can anybody in this Government claim to have a conscience? They must all hang their heads in shame. In their shame. Shame

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: Then we have this ongoing saga of the denial of the NICU and maternity facilities at that hospital. What is even more damning, I had made the point that if the hospital was there, perhaps some more lives would have been changed. The Minister instead chose to gaslight and mislead us by saying the children's hospital had no NICU. Clear evidence.

At a news conference where we forced him to come out, made all these allegations, and to make matters worse the Minister of Health has officially posted a fraudulent document on its official social media site. There is a video circulating and they have put a big—there is Ms. Emily Carter, medical engineer, her picture as engineer, there are other people from UDeCOTT who were working at that hospital. That video that is circulated, the Government has caused to be put out, “fake” on the lady's face. Fake, fake.

Hon. Members: Ohh.

Mr. Charles: Hmmm.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: Shameless and shameful. And then when people called him out, they then come and say, “Oh, what did we mean by fake?” They sought to clarify, they said, “What we meant was inaccurate.”

Mr. Charles: No.

Hon. Member: Ohh.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: That is the report. So, the team—Madam Speaker, you were a part of a team, I do not wish to bring into the debate but there is a parliament site report, let us talk about it. The PAC report to the hospital—this site visit was undertaken in 2016, and there is a report of July 08,

2016. And what does it speak to? It speaks of NICU.

Mr. Charles: Ohh.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: It speaks to you about maternity.

Hon. Members: Mmm.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: In this report, there was a stack diagram listing all the specificities that that parliamentary team found at the hospital, found at the hospital.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: And then—

Mr. Charles: Where the equipment gone?

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: Well, I am going to give you that answer in a minute.

Mr. Charles: “Ahh”.

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: I will give you that answer in a minute.

Mr. Charles: Mouth open.

3.35 p.m.

So, that team comprised the Chairman, the Hon. Speaker of the House; several other parliamentary colleagues, and then that committee, the PAAC laid what is called the first report in Parliament, laid by the Hon. Dr. Bodoë, the Hon. Member for Fyzabad. That first report was laid on November 09, 2016, in this House, which again carries excerpts from that site visit showing that the NICU and the maternity and everything was there. That report is about 137/167 pages. There is that report too. Again, the Members: the Speaker; Dr. Bodoë; Ms. Nicole Ollivierre, member; Mr. Maxie Cuffie, member; Ayanna Webster-Roy, member; Clarence Rambharat, member; Daniel Dookie, member;

Wade Mark, member; Allison Baksh, member; Melissa Ramkissoon, member; committee staff; staff member serving, Ms. Keiba Jacob; Sheranne Samuel; Rachel Nunes; Ms. Rhonda Vincent. This report laid in this Parliament with all these people coming from opposite Members, Government Members and Independent Members. Are you telling me they all lied? When they laid that report to talk about what was to be found—

Madam Speaker: Could you just withdraw that word and find another word?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am sorry, untrue. Thank you, Ma'am. Was it that they were all being untrue and that these things were not what was happening at that hospital? That could never be. So, we have two reports, the site visit and then the first report of the PAAC.

Now, you asked me where did all these things disappear. Some people said they saw trucks and so on, leaving, filling up and going. Well, I have here a Twitter—I think it is now called X, Twitter. It is dated May 15, 2019, put out by the Ministry of Health TT and it says:

“The Wendy Fitzwilliam Hospital will receive all equipment related to childcare from the Couva Facility”

Hon. Members: What!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Wendy Fitzwilliam Hospital received all the equipment related to child care from the Couva—so, when you come to tell us the equipment is not there, it is because you moved it or you did not move it. Did you move it? Did you move it?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And then we have a letter dated July 22, 2019. It is written to PS Asif Ali, Ministry of Health. It is from the CEO, Acting, of

UDeCOTT and it is copied to Mr. Davlin Thomas, CEO, NCRHA; Nigel Romano, Chairman; Roshan Parasram; Ronald Koylass and several others. And what it is:

Re: List of Pediatric Furniture and Medical Equipment at the Couva Hospital

for transfer to—where—the NCHA.

Transfer to where? The NCHA. And then, there is an enclosure and the enclosure is entitled: Children's Hospital Biomedical Equipment listing, and it lists all the equipment that was there. Again, NICU equipment, maternity equipment and many others. That, in the letter, there is an enclosure and that enclosure is about 133 pages long, listing everything that was there. So, where did it go? Where did it go? Where that equipment went? Again, you have incubators, you have bassinets, ventilators and many, many pieces of equipment. I have it all here in that letter and in the enclosure.

Now, a *Guardian* report yesterday tells us:

“Ministry of Health clarifies what it meant by ‘fake’...”

Yes Minister, a *Guardian* report yesterday, April 24th says:

“Ministry...clarifies what it meant by ‘fake’”—with respect to the—
 “Couva Hospital video.”

It indicates that they are back-backing. They are backing down. They explained what it meant was that, it said:

“...a circulating UDECOTT video which shows Neonatal ICU beds in the Couva Hospital was ‘fake’.”

They said:

“The Ministry is now using the term ‘inaccurate’.”

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Total in contradiction to what they have been preaching and posting. And I want to warn public servants, I really want to warn them. I think Dr. Moonilal warned them once, that “fake” that you plastered on to that video and circulated all over, that “fake”, do not do the bidding of your Ministers. Do not do the bidding of the politicians—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—because that could end you into trouble. You could be committing some kind of offence of misbehaviour in public office. So be warned, be warned.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I can tell you clearly, when we were in government we were hands-on. We had hands-on Ministers and, of course, a hands-on government.

As I close, I want to repeat, this Government has spent about \$56 billion on health and has nothing but death, destruction and mayhem to show. They have the deaths of our innocent newborn babies on their hands. I therefore say that they have repeatedly proved they are incapable of improving delivery of health care services. In the past few years, you have seen many examples of health Ministers resigning or being fired for similar types of behaviour to manage the health sector. And it is around the globe, Tunisia, Senegal, Portugal, the United States, Chili, Ecuador, Peru, Britain, Scotland, New Zealand, Poland, Jordan, Argentina, Peru. Do the right thing, Minister, and resign. And if you will not do it, let the Prime Minister fire you. You should be fired.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: So why not Trinidad and Tobago, when across the world for such types of behaviour with such results people have resigned? Why is the Prime Minister keeping a failed Health Minister on the job after so much destruction and death? It is because maybe they simply do not care.

The Government has failed the citizens of our country time and again in the health sector and, indeed, in every other sector. They have failed and will always fail to do this as they have failed as a Government on the whole. The only thing they can and should do now, is to give the people a chance, a fighting chance to live, is to resign and call elections now. I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Port of Spain South.

Mr. Keith Scotland (*Port of Spain South*): Madam Speaker, if anyone should hang their heads in shame, it should be the Hon. Members on the other side for the “neglection” of the health care system, “neglection”. Madam Speaker, the Hon. Member for Oropouche East has learnt a new word; for the “neglection” of the health care system for over five years between 2010 and 2015.

Madam Speaker, this Government has always been faithful to its duty to provide safe, reliable and compassionate health care services for all of our citizens. For every death of a newborn baby, there is a profound feeling of loss, pain, and anguish by the parents. We join with the parents of every newborn baby who died at any of the public facilities in Trinidad and Tobago and we join in their grief and anguish at this time.

There is genuine pain felt by all and, Madam Speaker, what is important is the hon. Prime Minister, when he returned, he expressed his distress as it

relates to this situation and we know that the families are anxious for answers and so is the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. Let me assure the public, Madam Speaker, and the families that the Government stands committed in expediting the process and will leave no stone unturned in getting to the bottom of this situation. There will be full cooperation to ensure that there is a resolution of the issues in a timely manner.

This Motion calls on the Government to implement measures to immediately improve the delivery of the health care services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This Government, over the past nine years, has been doing just that. It is reflected and manifested in the allocations over the last nine years in the budget, as it relates to the health care system. And, Madam Speaker, I daresay that the health care system and the health care Ministry have received the lion's share of the budget for the nine years, and I want to put for the record the amounts that were allocated.

In 2016, \$6.088 billion, the third largest share in the budget; in 2017, \$6.250 billion, the third largest share of the budget; in 2018, \$6.0278 billion, the third largest share in the budget; in 2019, \$5.696 billion, the third largest share in the budget; in 2020, \$6.08 billion, the third largest share in the budget. But, Madam Speaker, here is where things get interesting. In 2021, \$6.054 billion, the second largest share in the budget; in 2022, \$6.395 billion, the second largest share in the budget; in 2023, \$6.892 billion, the second largest share in the budget; and in 2024, \$7.409 billion, the second largest share in the budget. These irrefutable, incontrovertible figures and statistics prove beyond a shadow of a doubt, Madam Speaker, that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is interested in the health care system of Trinidad and Tobago and is

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putting its resources where its mouth is. The other side cannot boast about that. The other side cannot boast about that. They say that they had a hands-on approach; we know, but we know where their hands were, not directing the country but in the jar, that is where their hands were.

So, Madam Speaker—

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

Madam Speaker: So, Hon. Member, could you find another way to say what you want to say.

Mr. K. Scotland: Madam Speaker, their hands were misdirected and sticky in nature. Yes. Madam Speaker, as I continue, that is not all. This Government recognizes that neonatal deaths, Madam Speaker, have consequences and this Government is not dead to that fact. There may be emotional distress associated with it, there may be complicated grief, there may be depressive symptoms. And let me say, and I am not subject to any pre-action protocol so I can say that those families who require counselling, let this Government give you some assistance and somewhere, where you can go and receive counselling.

Families in Action is one body that is available to families who are in grief; the National Family Services is another entity that is available to families that are in grief; and the Parent Support Group, under the auspices of the Ministry of Sport and Community Development. And, Madam Speaker, this comes under the Community Mediation Services and they are available for weekly meetings with families who are experiencing grief and they can find solutions and bring counselling to these families. So let me recommend those three, at least, to the families who are in grief and need genuine attention and

not hyperbole and insincere hype.

Madam Speaker, Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time for everything under the sun; a time to weep, a time to mourn. This Government says there is a time to act and to act we will. The Government recognizes that we must act now as it relates to the crisis that befalls us and is being used as cheap political fodder by others. We will not do so on this side.

On April 18, 2024, as part of the actions, Madam Speaker, the Hon. Prime Minister announced the appointment of a three-member PAHO team who and which will conduct an independent investigation into the unfortunate incidents of neonatal deaths in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, the integrity of that team cannot be challenged. There have been a lot of negative statements attached to it, but what they cannot say is that the team is not independent, and it comes from a leading world organization specifically dedicated to health.

Also, there is an air quality and surface water quality testing project being undertaken by CARIRI and that will assist in determining what were root causes of the unfortunate incidents of neonatal deaths in Trinidad and Tobago. That is happening, Madam Speaker, now. This is what good governance is all about and this is what the hon. Members on the other side lack. That is why they are on that side.

I say to you, Madam Speaker, that there is a situation that has posed challenges, but this Government is up to the challenge and we will not allow it to overwhelm us. In the circumstances, Madam Speaker, I respectfully submit that there is no collapse of the health care system in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3.50 p.m.

Mr. K. Scotland: They will want to say it often enough that it bears some fruit, but that is not what it is, far from the truth, there is no collapse in the health care system in Trinidad and Tobago. The Opposition, the hon. Members on the other side, they have mounted a smear campaign, in my respectful view, against this Government and the health care system, alleging that the Government is responsible for all the current deficiencies in the health care system in Trinidad and Tobago. Nothing can be further from the truth.

Let me begin by stating, when it comes to health care in Trinidad and Tobago, this Government has spared no expense and has left no stone unturned. The health sector of Trinidad and Tobago is founded on the principle of free universal coverage funded by the Government and taxpayers, Madam Speaker. Let me repeat, the health sector in Trinidad and Tobago is founded on the principle of free universal coverage funded by the Government and taxpayers. It is—that is why it is given one of the highest budgetary allocations in the past nine years, and much of it is spent on putting infrastructure for the health care system for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

What the hon. Members on the other side try to do, Madam Speaker, is that they try to dub our institutions as white elephants. But these institutions speak for themselves and the services that they provide also speak for themselves, and they were built in a way that allows them to operate fit for purpose. We cannot say the same for those institutions built by the hon. Members on the other side between 2012 and 2015, and they speak of the Couva facility.

Whilst we are on that topic of the Couva facility, let me elucidate a little

bit on it, Madam Speaker. The Couva facility, which the hon. Members love to beat and say that the Government is not opening it out of spite, this facility was officially commissioned by the current Opposition Leader on the 15th of September, 2015, in time for the general elections then. It remained a construction site until 2017. So they commissioned a construction site.

Hon. Member: Correct.

Mr. K. Scotland: Nothing could have happened in that hospital.

Mr. Imbert: Like the Mayaro Fire Station.

Mr. K. Scotland: Like the Mayaro Fire Station. Nothing could happen. They are—

Hon. Members: [Interruption]

Mr. K. Scotland: Madam Speaker, they are all about hype and no substance. So when this facility was commissioned in 2015, it was commissioned literally, as what you call in law, a *brutum fulmen*, there was nothing there.

In 2017, this Government took a decision in 2018 to partner with UWI and operate the facility with the following objectives: To clear liabilities owed to UWI by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago of over \$200 million. It is material to know that the cost of the facility was approximately \$1.5 billion, and this Government undertook to take that on its back and carry it through to see the facility to a place where it can be operational.

A new model of health care for both local and for medical tourism, that was another goal of this facility. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was used to treat moderate severe cases and it has also been used as a training facility, and it is currently being used by UWI for the past two years in the study of optometry and nursing. Madam Speaker, to date, approximately 400

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professionals have been trained at this facility. Why have not the hon. Members said that to the public of Trinidad and Tobago? To date, approximately 400 professionals have been trained at that facility.

Mr. Deyalsingh: A pharmacy to come.

Mr. K. Scotland: And there is a pharmacy to come—

Mr. Deyalsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. K. Scotland:—and it continues to serve the public, providing the following specialized services: Heart function cardiac rehabilitation clinic, young adult diabetes transition clinic, and ophthalmology surgery, and supporting clinic radiology examinations.

So what you have, Madam Speaker, is an unfinished structure commissioned on the 15th of September, 2015, purely for hype purposes—

Hon. Member: For “pappyshow”.

Mr. K. Scotland:—and a government who does not believe in hype but believes in action, opening the facility in 2018, an actual facility, with actual beds, and actual human beings, and actual patients, and actual doctors, and actual nurses, and now training actual professionals in four actual areas of medicine.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland: Yet the mover of the Motion has all his cohorts coming to support him, all of them, Madam Speaker, Rushton in the Paray—sorry, rushing in the parry—sorry, Madam Speaker. Sorry. Sorry, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: Member, just remember the rule. So while you might be doing some little semantical things, just remember the rule.

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Mr. K. Scotland: Yes, Madam Speaker. I withdraw that, sorry. Rushing in—it was Freudian slip of the tongue. I withdraw it. Rushing in the parry to enter the debate, not at all talking about facts in this debate. The Government has been looking—

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. K. Scotland: That is all right, I will ride to it, Sir. Madam Speaker, the Government has been looking to public and private partnerships to reduce the stress on the public purse. An example of this is the \$1.1 billion contract for the Port of Spain General Hospital, with the new Central Block signed in 2019, with a firm. In other words, what we are doing is that we are trying to take the strain out of the public purse and get things done with another model. This is the Government using its grey matter to improve the health system in Trinidad and Tobago and to find additional funding for its project.

The Ministry of Health commissioned a document entitled:

, “Towards a healthy nation...”

—to assist in defining—planning the reforms needed by incorporating the Ministry’s approach to reform the process. This document was developed following a lengthy period of discussion in which there would have been consensus by all the parties regarding the need for improvement of the health care services in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I ask rhetorically, how come none of the speakers on the honourable side of the Opposition have told the public about that consensus and that conversation?

4.00 p.m.

There was an investment by the Government, and therefore we say that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is investing in new hospitals, greater

training, and development for staff, as well as easier access for patients. This is what we are doing in order to ameliorate and improve the health care system in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. That being said, there is always room to make the health care and the public health care system better. But it is unfair to say that this Government has not been paying real attention to the health care system.

The Motion recites that:

The "...health care workers have endured physical, and mental stress in delivering the public health care services."

In fact, Madam Speaker, this is one time, before I go into this area, I would like to cite verbatim, the Motion in this regard. The fourth recital of this Motion says:

"And whereas the health care workers have endured physical and mental stress in the delivery of the public health care services"

What more physical and mental stress can a worker endure when every morning, when they wake up, they open up their newspapers, they are told you do not care, you are incompetent, you ought to be fired, you are not doing a good job. How does that affect a helpful attitude towards work? But, that is not the point I want to make, on this recital of the Motion.

The point that I wish to make, is whilst they are saying that, and piloting this Motion, they elided to tell the public of the actions of one of their activists, and persons, one Ravi Balgobin. Because in the past three years no less than nine court matters have been brought by this activist, who is self-proclaimed to be a tool, or a medium of the hon. Members on the other side. And what has this done to the health care workers? They have to take time off their jobs to go

and do research, to answer his frivolous and vexations claims. They have to take time from attending to patients in the Neonatal Department, and other departments, in order to depose to the affidavit. They have to take time to give attorneys instructions in order to prepare their case, and then, be it virtual or in physical court, as a deponent, they have to attend court.

Madam Speaker, court may not be stressful for us, because of our background, but for the layperson, there could be nothing more stressful than having to appear in court, particularly to answer ghost allegations. And this is what health care workers, hundreds of them, have faced over the past three years by the actions of this so-called activist. I have not experienced so much cognitive dissonance by understanding this fourth recital. It is an insincerity of epic proportions for the hon Member to come now to tell this honourable, august body, that the health care workers are under stress, when they themselves, and their activists and puppets, are putting them under stress.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland: And, where the rubber hits the road is this. In order to defend those over nine cases, this Government has had to spend over \$14,620,340 on legal fees, having to lawyer up before a court to defend the health system and the health care workers of Trinidad and Tobago. Could this money not be better spent in the health care system, getting needed drugs?

Hon. Member: Empty vessel.

Mr. K. Scotland: Madam Speaker, they really say that the empty vessel makes most noise. Even if it is in the water of Venezuela.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. K. Scotland: Even if it is in the waters of Venezuela they make the most noise.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland: Lo siento, Señor.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Scotland: Sorry, sorry.

Madam Speaker: This Chamber is English.

Mr. K. Scotland: Madam Speaker, I remember, and just so that the other side will know, I see, and I say no more. What has transpired here is that this money could have been better spent, Madam Speaker, on improving the health care system. But what we have is this so-called activist taking away these health care workers from their *raison d'être* and have them chasing ghosts because—The worst thing about answering a frivolous and vexations claim is you do not know what you are answering, you know. And all were defended successfully.

Hon. Senators: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland: I commend, I commend the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for having the fortitude to do what was right and to protect the integrity of the health care system at a time when they were under severe stress, but protecting it in a way that the courts actually came and validated, Madam Speaker. So I then say that that is the irony of ironies, that aspect of the Motion.

Then, Madam Speaker, we move to another aspect. This one that I would wish to deal with, with a tone of sincerity. Madam Speaker, the public attention now on the issues of the deaths of babies at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit has spawned a lot of speculation and a lot of misinformation in the public

domain. But I dare say that much of this misinformation emanates from the hon. Members on the other side, and that is just really unfortunate.

The fact of the matter is, Madam Speaker, that there is an investigation that is in train, and we have to await the results of that investigation to decide, and to understand what has transpired. I call on the hon Members on the other side, stop politicizing these deaths. It is beneath you. Stop politicizing these deaths. Stop spreading misinformation and propaganda. It does not do the families any good. It does not do the health care workers any good, and it certainly does not do the country any good. We on this side will approach this issue with resolve, but with a sense of balance, and what balance is, is that we will treat the issue with the empathy and the maturity that it deserves.

The first point in treating the issue is appointing an independent body to conduct an audit, and investigation as to what transpired. This will not be a cheap election campaign exercise as is being done by the hon Members on the other side. The Government and the Minister of Health recognize that the incidents have traumatized the families. It has affected the doctors. It has affected the health care workers. Why cannot the hon. Members on the other side recognize that? The hon. Member for Siparia stood up and spoke, Madam Speaker, and up to now—although saying, “Well I do not blame the workers”, went on to do that right thereafter. “I do not blame”, but went on to do it right thereafter.

4.10 p.m.

This requires an honest and mature discussion. I am wondering if any of those words can attach themselves to the hon. Members on the other side. We are trying our best. The health care workers are trying their best, and in order to

assist them—Madam Speaker, let me give you one example. In February 2022, the hon. Minister of Health issued a new manual on proper management—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, excuse me, you have two more minutes of original speaking time left, you are entitled to 15 minutes extended time to complete your contribution, if you so desire.

Mr. K. Scotland: Madam Speaker, I would only want to mortgage about three minutes from the 15 minutes.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Mr. K. Scotland: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: You have 15.

Mr. K. Scotland: In order to assist in the performance of their jobs, this manual was created since February 2022. In other words, the hon. Minister said, “Look here, there is a new modus operandi we are putting in place, here is the manual”, and we have tried to implement this manual and have this manual implemented as a system of work. That will go a long way in the reduction of the incidence of neonatal deaths in Trinidad and Tobago.

We say that the health care in Trinidad and Tobago is a multifaceted one, and in those circumstances, the Government has to adopt and is adopting a multifaceted approach to the health care system in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago, under the leadership—I want to go back to show the pedigree of the People’s National Movement. We are not fly-by-night. I want to say this, under the astute leadership of the late Patrick Manning, from 2001 to 2010, the health care sector witnessed significant development and transformation.

The initiatives implemented since back then are as follows, in 2003, the

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Chronic Disease Assistance Programme, which I am told, hon. Minister, is still in place. It is called, CDAP. It was introduced to reduce the burden on dispensaries in the public health institutions. The adult cardiac programme, developed to assist those who are unable to afford cardiac procedures; the School Health Programme, through which thousands of school students receive vision and hearing screening; the Medical Aid Programme, which provided assistance to the elderly and children of financially-challenged persons.

Madam Speaker, in 2015, coming to more contemporaneous times, the hon. Minister Terrence Deyalsingh, who they are trying to vilify, has been leading the charge in transforming and modernizing the repositioning, reinvigorating of our health sector with *Vision 2030* strategy, “Putting People First: Nurturing Our Greatest Asset”. Since that time, there have been strides in maternal and child health, non-communicable disease, prevention and control strategies across Trinidad and Tobago. I wish to say, the 2007 Declaration of Port of Spain, the Caribbean has taken it upon themselves to cooperate to improve the health care system.

We are not saying, Madam Speaker, that the health care system is perfect, we are not saying that, but what we are saying is the health care system is a laudable one. It is a good one. When you travel abroad, Madam Speaker, and you are ill, if you do not have that card that you put into a machine, you will not be allowed to go into an institution; that is not the case in Trinidad and Tobago, and will not remain the case.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland: We say, respectfully, that this is the responsibility of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago as it seeks to provide good health care

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service and as it seeks to provide safe, reliable and compassionate health care services for all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. With those few words, Madam Speaker, I wish, respectfully, to commend the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and by extension, the hon. Minister of Health for their unwavering commitment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the health care system in Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to the Motion currently before the House. I want to take the opportunity, Madam Speaker, to really thank my colleague, the Member for Caroni East, for bringing a very timely Motion against the backdrop of health care as a spotlight has been focused on health care in recent times as it relates to what is happening at the Port of Spain General Hospital. I also want to take the opportunity to thank the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, for fully ventilating in the people's House the truth as it relates to the Couva Children's Hospital and the equipment and work that was done to institutionalize that hospital in such a way that it would have brought a lot of benefit to the people of Trinidad and Tobago had the Government taken the time to make it functional.

Madam Speaker, I want to say this on the onset, and I have heard several colleagues, including the Member for St. Joseph, and just recently the Member for Port of Spain South, speak about the UNC and the Opposition Members vilifying health care workers. Madam Speaker, while this debate has been

ongoing today, the Ministry of Health put out a press release, and I just want read for you the last line of that press release, and to put that last line of the press release into context of what is happening across the length and breadth of this country, and how both regionally and internationally, because many news agencies have reported internationally and regionally and locally what has happened at the Port of Spain General Hospital.

The press release put out by the Ministry of Health in the last paragraph says:

“To the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, I urge you to resist the temptation to vilify our health care workers. Instead, let us rally around them with the support and encouragement they deserve.”

Madam Speaker, I want to say to this Government, and I am sure almost every right-thinking citizen in this country will agree with me, that when the Minister says that he stands with health care workers, it is more like the Minister is hiding behind health care workers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: I will repeat that, Madam Speaker, it is not that the Minister is standing with health care workers, you know, it is that the Minister is standing behind health care workers, because this situation falls squarely in the domain of the Government and at the feet of the Minister of Health.

Madam Speaker, this issue is a leadership issue. No one in the country is blaming health care workers, what they are blaming is the nine years of neglect of the health sector—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—with poor management and a lack of leadership in bringing

real tangible change to the health care sector. The citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are not blaming health care workers, Madam Speaker, they are blaming the lack of resources for nine years under this People's National Movement Administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: No one is blaming health care workers, Madam Speaker, what they are blaming is the lack of proper investment in health care.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just a few weeks ago with great pomp and pageantry, millions of dollars was spent on the headquarters for the Ministry of Health. Today, because of the lack of resources, the lack of investment, and the misplaced attention on vanity projects as opposed to ensuring that you have specialized equipment, particularly for the most vulnerable, it has cost 21 babies, and counting, their lives in this country.

So through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this has nothing do to with health care workers, it has to do with the leadership, it has to do with the lack of resources and it has to do with the poor management of the health sector as it relates to policy—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—as it relates to equipment, as it relates to investment on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I heard the Member for Port of Spain South speak about the Couva Children's Hospital, and he said, "Well, they commissioned it and they do not know what is commission". Well, I understand why the Member for Port of Spain South has a disconnect and a difficulty dealing with anything

as it relates to 21st Century advancement.

Let us not forget it is the same Member for Port of Spain South who told this country to cook on your coal pot and ride a bicycle to your jobs, and that is why I am almost certain the Member for Port of Spain South has a difficulty with 21st Century state-of-the-art equipment being used in the health sector to advance the interest of those who use those institutions, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also heard the Member for Port of Spain South speak about, that the Opposition is saying that health care workers are stressed out and that there are no health care workers who are facing stress, and that it is something in the minds of Members of the Opposition.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to turn your attention to the Seemungal report, because in the Seemungal report there are almost eight instances where the Seemungal report tells you, specifically, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that mental health, stress is one of the main features in terms of what is affecting health care workers in the sector right now. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Port of Spain South told us that politicians must stop politicizing what has occurred at the Port of Spain General Hospital. I want to tell the Member for Port of Spain South and colleagues opposite, if you missed the memo, 21 babies died in this country—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—and you are telling us do not politicize it. We are not politicizing it. We are the voices of the people—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—309,000 people voted for the UNC, but you want us to sit down quiet and put our fingers on our lips. We will not do that!

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: We will not do that inside of this House and we will not do that outside of this House. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have a duty, a constitutional duty to speak up and speak out. Mr. Deputy Speaker, Members opposite will tell you do not politicize, but it is Members opposite who are the first to jump on an airplane to get medical treatment abroad and leave citizens to suffer in the most deplorable conditions in the health sector.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know Members opposite in the Government have a penchant for children's illustrated books, and I want to put exactly what we are facing in this country in the context of a children's book called, *A Tale of Two Cities*. You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was the hon. Prime Minister who last week in a press conference told the country that, "You must have faith in the public health system". The Prime Minister went on national television and told the country, against the backdrop of 21 babies dying, not being able to give any specifics as it relates to what Government was doing to ensure that a reoccurrence was not on the cards, but it is the same Prime Minister who is telling the country to have faith in the public health system, who flies out every Monday morning to get his own medical treatment abroad.

I say this is the tale of two cities, because just as the Prime Minister said that, the next day in the front page of the *Trinidad Newsday* said—what? Registered nurse in the public health system—someone who is a medical professional who operates, who experiences on a day-to-day basis, is telling the country that she who operates in the public health system but also, she who experienced the trauma of losing a child, one of the 21 babies that died, has no expressed faith in the public health system, and that is the tale of two cities.

4.25 p.m.

And that is the tale of two cities, a Prime Minister who is like an emperor without clothes, walking around oblivious, oblivious to the plight of the average man, woman, and child as it relates to the public health sector. Telling us have faith, when our own public health officials are telling us they themselves do not have faith. And that is why we can say to the Member for St. Joseph and colleagues opposite, that the issue remains one of leadership. And where does leadership come from? It comes from the Government. You determine the policy, not the health care workers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You determine what resources they get. So when the Member for Port of Spain South stands up and tell us from 2016 to 2024, the amount of billions they have gotten, throwing money behind a problem without fixing the problem, will get you nowhere. And that is why I say the Member for Port of Spain South has a serious disconnect. A serious disconnect, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Scotland: Under Standing Order—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One sec, one sec.

Mr. Scotland:—48(4), I am the hon. Member, Sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Alright, okay, Member. Okay, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Mr. B. Padarath: You are referred to by your seat.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Princes Town, please, please, okay, he rose on a Standing Order; it is only fair. Alright, so again, Member, we know the rule with regard to how we identify with individuals, how we term them, let us keep

it that way please, that is all.

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was in no breach of any Standing Order. I referred to the Member by his seat, which is Port of Spain South. And that is in—listen, “If yuh cah handle de heat, get out. If yuh cannot handle de heat get out.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You raised these issues in this debate and you have been found wanting, both you and your Government, as it relates to health care in this country, particularly for children.

Hon. Members: The Speaker has ruled.

Mr. Indarsingh: But what is this?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Port of Spain South and other Members, Princes Town has entered the debate. You all know the rules; you all know the decorum of the House. So again, Princes Town, address the Chair please.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Me. Deputy Speaker, the contradictions coming from Members opposite does not stop there. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I refer you to an article, and this was printed by Beena Mahase, April 17th, on Loop News with the headline:

“Ministry moving ahead to digitise patients health records.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, and this is why I refer again to my colleague, the hon. Member for Port of Spain South. When the hon. Member spoke about the issues related to the hospitals and what is happening now, I say that the hon. Member has a disconnect with 21st Century, state-of-the-art processes to be used in medical institutions. And the Member is archaic and of the dinosaur

era—

Hon. Member: Yes.

Mr. B. Padarath:—and so too it seems coming from the Member for St. Joseph. You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you and I have been here probably around the same time, coming into 2015. I could recall like many Members in this House, the hon. Member for Siparia standing in budget debate 2016, 2017 and 2018 and telling the then and the current Minister of Health, the Member for St. Joseph, to introduce something called “informatics” into the public health system. The Member for Siparia did not come and complain and say, “Well, dey not doin dis and dey not doin dat.” What the Member for Siparia did on three occasions in this House in a budget debate, she stood and she said what were some of the possible solutions to fix the problems in the public health sector.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2024, the Minister of Health is on public record and saying, and I quote:

“Health Minister Terrence Deyalsingh says the ability for citizens to access health care in any part of the country, regardless of where they’re from remains of utmost priority to his ministry.

As a result, Deyalsingh said the aim is to have each patient own one digital record.

‘So if you’re living in Diego Martin and you go to Toco for a weekend, or you go to Mayaro, and you need medical care, we can access your information electronically...with your correct patient ID, that’s where we are going,’ he said.”

The article then goes on to elucidate what the hon. Member had to say with

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respect to computerizing patient records having one particular card, et cetera. The Member behaves, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as though this is novel, this is new, that this will make revolutionary strides this time around. But the Ministry was looking for a bogey because of all the challenges that are being faced in the public health system. The Member for Siparia just told us of many of them particularly as it relates to the South West Regional Health Authority, the North West Regional Health Authority. The challenges there as it relates to procurement, the challenges there as it relates to the collapse of equipment of surgeries. That is the reality that exists.

So when the Minister wants to change the conversation. The Minister says, "Well, politicians are politicizing." You can say that ad nauseam, but the reality that exists is that when people go to a public health institution there is no bed, there is no medication.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: They are met with hoggish behaviour admitted by their own, their own, their own colleagues. And what are you doing to change that paradigm after nine years? Nothing. Things have not gotten better, things have gotten worse. And if you listen to the pontification coming from the Member for St. Joseph, one might actually believe that a lot of what the Member speaks about will actually happen. It did not happen in nine years and we do not expect it to happen now, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker when the Member for Siparia spoke about informatics in 2017, 2018, 2019, it piqued my curiosity, you know why, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Around that time the continuation of several public health institutions were being constructed. You had the Arima Hospital, which was

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started under the UNC; you had the Point Fortin Hospital started under the UNC, and what we were saying, Mr. Deputy Speaker, through the Member for Siparia on those three occasions in this House, the Member said, “Listen, do not wait for these institution to be completed in terms of the construction phase. What we were encouraging you to do is exactly what the Minister is saying in 2014. So we told you in 2017, introduce the software of the technology. And when the Member for Caroni East piloted this Motion, there is a part of the Motion that says, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a part of the Motion that says:

“*And Whereas* healthcare professionals do not have access to modern information technology systems, lack access to suitable drugs, equipment, and facilities to deliver modern and advanced healthcare;”

This is exactly what we are talking about, but we were talking about this in 2017, and the Member for St. Joseph is talking about this in 2024.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And you can understand by that analogy alone, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why they are constantly playing catch up and why the public health care system is going to the dogs. So I want to congratulate the Member for Caroni East and the Member for Siparia, and that is what you call vision. That is what you call foresight. That is what you call having a plan for public health care. The most important things—and it is often said by the Member for Siparia to many of us, both inside and outside of this House, is, “If you do not have life, you do not have health, you can enjoy nothing else.”

So Member for Port of Spain South, throwing money after the problem without having a proper comprehensive plan like what was elucidated by the Member for Siparia in 2017, '18, '19, in terms of informatics using the

technology, using the technology to save lives could possibly have avoided what you are now cleaning up today, your own political vomit inside of the Port of Spain General Hospital.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: That is what you are dealing with today. And what would that have done, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Let me share with you what it would have done.

“What is health informatics?”

Health informatics is a specialized field within the healthcare Industry that combines communications, information and healthcare with the goal of improving patient care. It involves using resources such as health information systems in collecting, storing, retrieving, analyzing and utilizing healthcare information for a variety of purposes. Among the most common purposes served by health informatics are enabling better collaboration and coordination among healthcare providers, streamlining medical quality assurance processes, improving cost-efficiency in healthcare delivery and increasing accuracy and efficiency in facility/practice management.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“According to the American Medical Informatics Association, health informatics applies principles of computer and information sciences to the advancement of not only patient care, but life sciences research, health professions, education and public health.”

You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I reflect on one of the instances that the Member for Siparia raised as it relates to Ms. Samaroo, one of the parents

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whose child died at the Port of Spain General Hospital. And I will tie that in as it relates to informatics and what that could have done, and what other countries in terms of an international benchmark is utilizing informatics for.

So when you hear Members, both sides of the House speak about pediatrics and you speak about heart care and you speak about post-op in terms of surgeries and during surgeries, what is happening in many countries across the world, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who are using informatics, that same card that the Member for St Joseph speaks about, you can actually log on while a surgery is going on. You can actually be updated, whether it is through WhatsApp, emails, text messages. And I heard Ms. Samaroo speak about—she said this:

And we were told to come back in the evening, and that the child was not doing well.

And therefore, her husband went and stayed there all day to get an update. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the updates through informatics could have even gone to the Minister of Health and the doctors across the RHA, the board members of the RHA, anyone who is designated to have this information in real time. That is what informatics does. So the Minister of Health is playing catch up, when we told them, and it is a classic case of “We told you so.” But because it is coming from the Opposition UNC, because there is no vision and there is no foresight, and there is no proper planning.

You know, I heard the Member for Arima speak a little while ago and the Member for Arima carries the portfolio of Minister of Planning and Urban Development. At one point under the Peoples Partnership administration, I recall the then-Minister of Planning, Dr. Bhoë Tewarie, was part of an inter-ministerial team that dealt with the issue of this health card in terms of using the

informatics as it relates to what I just described, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But shelving plans and policies out of spite, out of malice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has them in the position—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—that they are in today. But Mr. Deputy Speaker, while they are telling us do not politicize, who is the one who is suffering? Who are the people who are suffering because of your spite, your malice, and your lack of vision in terms of shelving all of those plans that the UNC and the People's Partnership were advocating for? It is the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

You know I heard Deputy Political Leader of the UNC and she put it so right, Jearlean John, when she said, “You are telling people do not politicize but you are going home, in your air-conditioned comfort, with your pockets filled, enjoying your family.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), with your pockets filled.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you. Thank you Mr. T. Again, hon. Member, I would like you to retract and I know you can say it better than that.

Mr. B. Padarath: Certainly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I retract. What I would say is with your salaries intact, while persons' mothers are going home with empty blankets. I remember that Samaroo girl. And you know what she said, she said, “Every night, I cling to that blankie just to smell.” And you know, one of the things I said in this Parliament just a few weeks ago was that the PNM has systematically destroyed—they have shattered the national psyche of this population.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And that is not a joke, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you imagine doing everything possible to bring this child into this world and having to go through a trauma like what those families have endured? And the callousness, and the lack of empathy, and that is why I repeat. We have nothing against health care workers. We believe that the lack of leadership, the lack of resources has the Port of Spain General Hospital in the position that it is in today as it relates to the NICU.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the areas that I am very passionate about because I saw it while the People's Partnership was in Government, and I will give you story. I remember when we first instituted the Children's Life Fund, at 10 o'clock in the night Prime Minister then Kamla Persad-Bissessar was at her desk, and a family had written to her asking for life-saving surgery. The Children's Life Fund had just come on stream and they wrote asking Prime Minister could you intervene, we need the surgery to happen right away because the child just was given a few weeks to live.

4.40 p.m.

I remember Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar handing me the letter and she said, "Could you speak with the Minister of Health to make it happen, seeing how fast we can sort this out." It was 10 o'clock in the night. The child was not from Siparia. The child was not from Princes Town. The child was from St. Ann's East. I sat there 10 o'clock in the night and after a few minutes, she looked up and she said, "What are you still doing here?" I said, "Well, I will deal with this matter tomorrow." She said, "I want to ask you something." She said, "If it was your child, will you be sleeping at 10 o'clock in the night?"

I said, “No, Prime Minister.” She said, “I am almost certain they are waiting for a call within the 24 hours, whether it is day or it is night.” I remembered when we called at 10 o’clock in the night, that family from St. Ann’s East, the mother wept uncontrollably, but that it comes back to the point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of having the political will.

Mr. Indarsingh: Will.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And I heard the Member for Arima and I thought to myself, what hypocrisy. What hypocrisy coming from the Member for Arima. The Member for Arima had the audacity to stand up in this Parliament and tell us that the Arima hospital has a paediatric clinic for stress and the Arima hospital has a clinic for paediatric immunization. I do not begrudge the Member for Arima, but I said to myself, while you are boasting about that, the hypocrisy of not having one word said from your lips about the closure, and the continued closure of the Couva children’s hospital—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—where people in Couva and people in south Trinidad and people all across the country could utilize the same clinics for immunization and stress and all that as it relates to paediatric care identified by the Member for Arima, she sits in the Government and has not one word to say.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remember when we spoke about the Couva Children’s Hospital, one of the very first things that the Member for St. Joseph said, he said, “I do not know what is all this big song and dance about a children’s hospital. This is not the first children’s hospital in the country.” Mr. Deputy Speaker, if it was not parliamentary, I would have used the word, but if

it was not such a blatant untruth.

The Minister then said, we have the Wendy Fitzwilliam paediatric ward. It is not a hospital. The Wendy Fitzwilliam paediatric ward, it is a wing inside of the hospital. It does not provide specialty surgery and care. That is why two things, the Children's Life Fund and the Couva children's hospital—and I said to you, I have a particular interest in this because—I will tell you why.

The Member for Siparia many times she would get calls, both as Prime Minister and as Leader of the Opposition, it still happens up to today. And knowing I have had the history of going into the life fund, working along parents to get the applications done, one day a family contacted me and they said, “Well, you know, they told us we cannot get the form.” I said, “What do you mean, you cannot get the form? They do not determine whether or not you get the life-saving surgery or not. It is a board.” Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I went there myself, they had one OJT running the Children's Life Fund; one OJT.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second. Again, Member, you have just about two more minutes of your initial speaking time. You have an additional 15. You avail yourself?

Mr. B. Padarath: Yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. B. Padarath: One OJT, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I came back and I spoke with the Minister of Health, and since then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could report to you, nothing has changed, because I myself have gone back. And parents continue to go through that experience, not knowing whether their child will live or die, but the trauma of an inefficient and ineffective Minister of Health,

knowing—knowing very well what the problems are, drawing it to his attention, but having no political will to fix the situation and fix the system that exists at the Children’s Life Fund, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as it relates to paediatric care in this country, when we established the Couva children’s hospital, it was the intention—and Dr. Fuad Khan, I pay tribute to him today. You know why, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Because there was a system—and the Member for St. Augustine may speak about it a little bit later, about the El Dorado Nursing Academy to have the requisite personnel to man these hospitals—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—but particularly for paediatric care. The Member for Barataria/San Juan at that time, Dr. Fuad Khan, he told me, he said, “Barry, we were looking at bringing doctors from Malaysia”—because the Member for St. Joseph cannot tell me, with any good conscience, that we have a battery of specialists paediatric surgeons as it relates to heart care, as it relates to bone marrow transplants, as it relates to kidneys, as it relates to paediatric cancer, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is where the shortfall is.

The Member for Barataria/San Juan at that time, Dr. Fuad Khan, leaving the Government, he, I remember, stood up in the Parliament, this very Parliament, and he said, “Listen, this is what you can do. This is what needs to be done. This is what we had on books.” So when the Member for Port of Spain South says, well, they commissioned the hospital, it is the very Member for St. Joseph, just the other day when they opened the Sangre Grande hospital, told us, “Well, it takes a roll-out period of six months to have the hospital in full operation.” So they continue to play smart with foolishness by saying to the

people of Trinidad and Tobago that they opened the hospital and closed it in one day, but telling the people of Sangre Grande that it is six months—six months for it to be fully operational.

I want to get to the Couva Children's Hospital because the Member for Siparia, she mentioned two things; two things. She mentioned the burns unit, the burns unit at the Couva Children's Hospital, situated in the constituency of Caroni Central, I believe it is, but adjacent, Mr. Deputy Speaker, adjacent to the Point Lisas Industrial Estate. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in any modern, highly-industrialized country like Trinidad and Tobago, where you have an oil and gas sector situated, obviously—and it is no rocket science that when you look across the Commonwealth and you look across countries like the United States, that there is a hospital and a specialized burns unit. Again, that was the vision and foresight.

You cannot tell me that nine years have passed and you have done nothing to operationalize the burns unit, if nothing else, knowing that the Point Lisas Industrial Estate sits very close. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I say this against the context of the explosion that costed the life of a Massy worker because of the amount burns that he got that costed him his life, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Member for Siparia stopped short of saying, “Well, you know, we might not say that blood is on their hands,” but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how else do you explain incompetence for nine years, knowing that you have a facility there?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: That employee from Massy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was somebody's son, was somebody's husband. You know, I saw the three children that he had, their bodies draped over a coffin, grieving for their father to come

back, but let us understand the circumstance. They left the burns unit there unattended, “unoperationalized”. The gentleman had to have been flown to Colombia, nine hours away flying time to Colombia, when right across the road from the NiQuan plant, where the explosion took place, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was a burns unit. And you want to tell us, “Doh politicize what is going on in the public health sector,” while people continue to die at your hands? As a Member of Parliament, no fat chance. None.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: None, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You could say what you want, but while people continue to die, babies in this country, the elderly, industrial accidents.

I heard the Member for Port of Spain South pay tribute to Mr. Manning. God rest his soul, but I want to remind the Member for Port of Spain South, the failures in the health sector is what got Mr. Manning out of office in 2010, when mothers were delivering babies on hospital floors. Dr. Bodoie will tell you about that. You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to ask, eh, I saw in the *Hansard*—and maybe I will share it with the Hansard Editor and the Member for St. Joseph. I saw the Member for St. Joseph being referred to as the “hon. Dr. Terrence Deyalsingh MD” on the *Hansard*. I am asking—I will share the *Hansard*—if this is an error or if “MD” stands for something else instead of medical doctor, minister of something else. I do not know, but that is on the *Hansard* and that is something that should be reviewed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also, in the last few minutes, want to raise a document that the Member for Siparia touched briefly on, and that has to do with a letter dated the 22nd of July, 2019. It says, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

List of paediatric furniture...

This is from UDeCOTT.

List of paediatric furniture/medical equipment at the Couva Medical and Multi-Training Facility for transfer to the North Central Regional Health Authority.

I want to put on the *Hansard* the contents of this letter in its entirety; in its entirety, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

UDeCOTT notes the approval granted for Ministry of Health's instruction—by the Ministry of Health's instruction—to transfer the undermentioned list of items from the Couva Medical and Multi-Training Facility to the North Central Regional Health Authority. However, UDeCOTT notes that are significant discrepancies in the items listed thereunder. Please allow us to clarify these discrepancies in the quantities...

Then it goes to say what the quantities are that were transferred to the North Central Regional Health Authority. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in this letter it says:

Four warmers: warmer, infant care system; 30 infusion pumps: pump infusion, single; 12 cardiac monitors: monitors physiologic vital signs with pulse oximetry in paediatric departments; four small portable monitors: monitor physiological/neonatal; ventilators: ventilators, paediatric/neonatal; 14 portable nebulizers, nebulizer compressor, paediatric; 17 diagnostic sets; ophthalmoscope set; wall mount; bilirubinometer, handheld.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it did not stop there, and I will go through some of the equipment that was removed from the Couva children's hospital based on this

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document.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it speaks about—and I heard the Member for St. Joseph talk about, “There were no birthing suites.” No birthing suites for pregnant women to give birth? Mr. Deputy Speaker, this document tells us that there were six birthing suites that were gutted—

Hon. Members: No.

Mr. B. Padarath:—gutted by UDeCOTT on the instruction of who? The Ministry of Health. That is in the black and white there. But the Member for St. Joseph hangs his head in shame because he knows it is true. Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Indarsingh: They gutted, they butchered.

Mr. B. Padarath:—sterilizers and steams—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please.

Mr. B. Padarath:—for the neonatal ward, Mr. Deputy Speaker; sterilizers and steams, and we hear about the Port of Spain General Hospital that the sterilizer there is down. So we want to ask, did you take the sterilizer and steam from the Couva children’s hospital that you sent to the NCRHA and now you are sending it to Port of Spain? That is why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have butchered the equipment—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—coming from the children’s hospital, telling untruths on the public record that it did not exist, when this very Parliament has a document that shows that does exist, and thank God for honest and decent people in the health care system that left these documents in the mailboxes of Members of Parliament, that today, we can expose critical pieces of equipment—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—that should have been instrumental in saving the lives of those 21 babies could have been used, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the few minutes that I have, I want to deal with the issue of the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Member for St. Joseph and others have been talking about this. I want to say that—and this one of the things that the hon. Member for D'Abadie/O'meara in her contribution said:

The Opposition has perfected the art of criticizing without acknowledging the progress. We cannot forget the COVID-19 medical team.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I believe that the Member is referring to the Minister and his team of senior medical doctors who were responsible for misleading this country through the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I make no apologies for saying that the Minister and this team have been responsible for one of the worst medical and social calamities to have ever affected our country.

4.55 p.m.

Trinidad and Tobago became the worst country in the world with the highest incidence of COVID-19 infection per one million population, but falsely boasted that Oxford University was saying that you are number one in management, when you were the worst. As early as January 2023, months before the WHO officially proclaimed the COVID-19 pandemic, the Opposition UNC, brought five Motions to Parliament and the Member for Siparia spoke about that. They allowed over 22,000 foreign visitors to our shores for Carnival

2020, even as the rest of the world was guarding their borders.

They were grossly underprepared for the required COVID-19. I saw a video circulating where the Member for St. Joseph—and we must never forget—when asked when the pandemic now started, the Member said, well listen, realistically we do not expect it—

Mr. Indarsingh: To come to our—

Mr. B. Padarath:—to reach our shores in any significant way, and therefore, we will treat with it as it comes. And therefore, that was the problem in itself. They were underprepared, because of the utterances and the lack of leadership coming from the Member of St. Joseph.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And in a pandemic, treating a pandemic when the world was in hysteria, putting things in place—

Mr. Indarsingh: He tore up a jersey and made a mask.

Mr. B. Padarath: The public health system collapsed under the weight of COVID-19, because of the poor planning of the Member for St. Joseph.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You are then telling us “doh politicize the deaths of 21 babies, when mothers went home with empty blankets, but you sleeping high and dry in yuh house.” No! We will not allow that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: We will not allow that. Many were left suffering. Back then, they allowed MPs and so to return home, but what about the average man, woman who was left, Mr. Deputy Speaker, outside there. When we finally got vaccines the Government improperly managed the vaccination programme,

with massive confusion by the population as to where to go for the vaccines, forcing vulnerable elderly citizens to stand in the rain for vaccines that were never even available at that time. We must not forget that.

They had the elderly in rain, floods—high and dry in their air-conditioned offices. Millions of dollars for a new Ministry of Health, while the elderly were in the rain waiting for a vaccine that was not even available. And you want to tell us do not politicize the public health system? We will not remain quiet until you get out of office.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You have been the worst Minister of Health this country as ever seen. And that is why, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Indarsingh: All of them are.

Mr. B. Padarath: —in handling the COVID-19, they deprived loved ones, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of being able to dispose of their families' remains, and they took a high court judgment, years later to give validation to illegal and unconstitutional action taken by the Member for St. Joseph, on behalf of the Cabinet, of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Indarsingh: They appeal it, you know.

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am being told it is appealed, so I will leave it right there. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I heard the Member for Port of Spain South, also spoke about NCDs. Mr. Deputy Speaker, very little has been done in that regard, and I am sure the Member for St. Augustine will pick it up. As I close, there is one other issue. One other issue, and it has to do with the Children's Life Fund.

The Member for Siparia and myself, have been calling. If you are a

caring Government, we have been saying that there are children who fall outside the remit of the Children's Life Fund, but deserve lifesaving surgery. Many of them are suffering from a condition called beta thalassemia. They come to our offices and we have been telling you, if you care about children in this country, review the legislation. Legislation, is not in stone you can do that but you have to have the political will, the political will to save the life—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And if you cannot save the life of children and babies, then God help us in this country. I am calling on the Minister and any Member opposite, to give the commitment that you will review that legislation to save more lives. You have already killed so many babies in this country. Today, you are known as the Minister of death—

Mr. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48—

Mr. B. Padarath: —in this country and I am asking you—.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Member.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: I am asking you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, Member.

Mr. B. Padarath: —to ensure that our children are safe from further death and destruction.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Princes Town. Alright, in your last phrase there, you used a word, I would like you to just retract it and I think you could put it better than that. I am sure.

Mr. B. Padarath: I retract, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the MP for Lopinot/Bon Air West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for recognizing me. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise to make my contribution in this debate on health care in Trinidad and Tobago, to represent my constituents of Lopinot/Bon Air West, to represent the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and to defend the track record of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. In so far, as it relates to the management of our health care. But before I do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I looked up in the public gallery and I saw a very young citizen.

Ms. Webster-Roy: That is my son.

Hon. M. Gonzales: And I understand that, that young person, and that young citizen is the son for Member of Parliament, and in particular it is the son of the Member for Tobago East. I drew reference to the presence of this young citizen in this Chamber, because having listened to the Member for Princes Town, I must apologize to this young man.

Mr. Ram: Apologize to the mothers.

Hon. Member: The baby mothers.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Caroni. Caroni Central, I am hearing you. I am hearing you, Caroni Central.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please. Please. Please, proceed only the MP on his legs is recognized.

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

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apologize to our young people who just listened to the contribution of the Member for Princes Town. The name calling, the scandalous statements in reference to Members of this House.

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48 (4), he should be apologizing to the mothers of those babies.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thanks, Member. Overruled.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, what we have just noticed in this House by the previous speaker, is the very reason why so many of our citizens are offended by politicians, especially those on the opposite side, who takes serious matters of governance and hoped “to ride it as a tiger” into political relevance.

It is very sad, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that on this very important issue of health care and the management of our health care, that Members opposite will descend to this very unfortunate level, referring to Members of Parliament in the most degrading and disgusting manner, hoping to score cheap political points. Perhaps, the intention is to damage the Minister of Health to the extent that his own constituents, his own constituents may turn against him in their quest to wrestle the St. Joseph seat.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is their objective. And you would notice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that whenever we have serious issues in this country, from time to time, we do not get informative, well research proposals from the Opposition, as they call themselves “the loyal Opposition, or the Opposition, or the permanent Opposition.” “They ride it like a tiger.” Making statements appealing to our base instincts as a country.

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Creating instability—

Hon. Member: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1) the relevance of this, to the Motion before the House, please.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—thank you and concerning the Minister of Health, proceed.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You see Mr. Deputy Speaker, they could give, but they “cah” take.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: They could give, but they “cah” take. They had their opportunity to speak, and the Government will also have our opportunity to speak and we shall so do. We will not be deterred by them. And we will not be deterred by scandalous, reference, and degrading reference to Members of Parliament, especially to Members of this House. On this side of House. We reject it out of hand. We reject it out of hand.

5.05 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, over the last couple weeks we have had some very unfortunate incidents taking place at the Port of Spain General Hospital, in Port of Spain. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and first I think it is incumbent upon me to offer sincere condolences and sincere support to all of the mothers, the fathers, the families who would have endured, and continue to endure pain as a result of the loss of their babies. I also want to take the opportunity as a Member of Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to offer support to our health care providers, who themselves would be reeling under tremendous pain for what is happening at the Port of Spain General Hospital.

They have been under attack. We have also heard calls for resignations, we have heard name calling, we have seen an Opposition that has become very restless and hoping that this thing continues so that they can become politically relevant in the political sphere of this country. But, as a government we have to be responsible. The Minister of Health and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago have given the assurance that the appropriate investigation will take place and that we shall get to the bottom of what transpired so that the appropriate action will be taken so that the long and lasting legacy of good health care at the Port of Spain General Hospital will be maintained regardless and notwithstanding what has transpired

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is not the time for political gamesmanship. It is not the time for nauseating political hypocrisy as we are seeing by Members of the UNC. It is not the time for political name calling. As citizens and as Members of Parliament it is our responsibility to conduct ourselves in an honourable way, and to give support to an independent investigation so that all of us, all of us, not only as Members of Parliament, but for all citizens, that we can get to the bottom of what transpired, and that our health care, especially our neonates, we will not have a repeat of what happened over the past weeks. It is not the time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to continue this unrelenting attack on what is happening to the Minister of Health and to our health care workers. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the investigation will continue unimpeded and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, as assured by the Minister of Health, will be availed of the outcome of this report, and the appropriate action will be taken.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I prepared for this debate, I read in today's *Newsday* two letters to the editorial, one by one Michelle Preston from Cocorite

and the other from Suzanne Warren via email. Because you see, despite the attempt to preach and to convince citizens of this country that our health care has collapsed, thousands and hundreds of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago venture on a daily basis to all our health care institutions, our hospitals, our health care centres, in all communities all over Trinidad and Tobago getting good health care, despite the challenges. And we have two citizens writing letters to the editor, and I will quote what they are saying in today's *Newsday*. "My neighbour's NICU experience"—by Michelle Preston.

"I am writing on behalf of a neighbour who wanted to make sure her views were heard on the NICU matter.

She would have been in the NICU with her baby a few years ago and recalls with great joy the experience she had there.

Being of humble socio-economic means, she expressed wholeheartedly how grateful she was that the team in the NICU would never forget her and give her food hampers, clothes for the kids and toys

My neighbour says never has she been around such diligent physicians with such open hearts who made her difficult days very light.

She said she prays for each member of the NICU staff during this current very trying and stressful time and hopes the real message is heard through all of the noise. The NICU team, she said, is really wonderful."

I could just imagine, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how many citizens who would have ventured into the NICU at the Port of Spain General Hospital and shared this experience. This to me does not represent a health care or a health care system that is in shambles. It does not represent, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a health care system that has collapsed. But what we have seen, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is

a collapsing Leader of the Opposition trying to find her way in this political space.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: What we continue to see is a collapsing Opposition fighting against each other, trying to cause distraction from their own ills, and hoping that this unfortunate incident at the Port of Spain General Hospital is going to erase the attention that the population is paying on them.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Suzanne Warren:

“I grieve with those families who have suffered with the deaths of their babies. I pray this ache eases as time goes by. It is essential to get answers for these heartbreaking incidents.

I know there are hard-working and professional staff who put their best forward in this unit.

My first son was born there 37 years ago, my grandson and his mother survived a difficult birth where he had to spend his early days in the NICU in November, 2023.

Incidentally, I was born in this hospital some 63 years ago, the tenth child for my mother. I have always thought the neonatal unit offered the best hospital service.

Therefore it pains me that this is the sad situation that they are now facing. There are many wonderful stories of mothers who have had good experiences in the past at this unit, and continue to have good experiences in the past in this unit.

I pray that this challenge will be overcome and whatever went wrong is resolved. My best wishes to all the medical and hardworking staff of the

neonatal unit in this hospital.”

Two of our citizens representing the views of thousands of citizens in Trinidad and Tobago who would have had similar experiences at our health care institutions in this country

Mr. Deputy Speaker, despite our challenges, side by side we stand. We will go through our fires in hope and prayer, and we will rise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, stronger and stronger. We will deal with our issues in a very mature way. We will do so, and despite the howls and cries of Members of the Opposition trying to score cheap political points on this matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government will stand with all health care workers, we will stand with all citizens, we will learn from the mistakes of this particular incident, and we will have a health care that is second to none in this world.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: We will have and we will continue to have a health care that is second to none. Mr. Deputy Speaker, so many of our citizens would have travelled all around the world to the great United States of America, and they can tell you that despite our challenges here, Trinidad and Tobago has one of the best health care that any nation can offer its citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And it has not come about like that. It came about because of sustained PNM policies for the last 63 years, where we constructed the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, we constructed the San Fernando General Hospital, the Port of Spain General Hospital, and in recent times, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we continue to spend billions of dollars in constructing health care facilities so that our citizens can have world class health services on their

behalf.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Sangre Grande Hospital, the Arima Hospital, the Point Fortin Hospital, the Port of Spain General Hospital that is under construction will be commissioned in 2025, the Roxborough health institution, the Diego Martin health institution, Mr. Deputy Speaker, over \$5 billion being spent to construct these facilities so that we can offer good health care services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. How can the Opposition come to this Parliament, or go on their political platforms and say that our health care has collapsed?

Where in the world that we can spend next to \$6 billion in constructing world-class modern health facilities and you have Members of Opposition with a very straight face coming to Parliament preaching every single day, news conferences every single day, making themselves relevant, and trying to convince citizens that our health care has collapsed. It has not collapsed. What we have is an unfortunate incident that took place on a ward in Port of Spain General Hospital and this matter is going to be investigated, but it does not in any way represent the health care in Trinidad and Tobago. It does not, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It does not.

How many mothers are venturing at our neonatal facilities all over Trinidad and Tobago on a daily basis? We are not hearing of deaths. We are not hearing of fatalities. And on the point of fatalities, and in the context of a so-called collapse, as alleged by the UNC, Mr. Deputy Speaker, under the Member for St. Joseph and the Minister of Health, the maternal and child health statistics, we had a reduction of 50 to 60 per 100,000 live births in 2015 to under 30 per 100,000 live births in 2018 and 2020.

Our mortality rate for infants has been the most in the last 50 years. It has consistently declined since 2015. Does that represent a health care system that is in collapse? Absolutely not! But they believe that by coming here speaker after speaker after speaker, calling their “wasteless” news conferences every day, harassing the psyche of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and the population, they believe that by repeating that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago will believe them. It is not so. It is not so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the women’s health unit was established in May 2017, and as it stands today Trinidad and Tobago has already attained the sustainable development goals. Neonatal mortality, where Trinidad and Tobago has already attained its sustainable development goal status from 12.0 per 1,000 live births in 2015 to under 9.0 per 1,000 live births in 2017, to seven 1,000 live births in 2018 and 2020. This means, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that 100 children per year are alive due to this intervention.

5.20 p.m.

You compare that to the UNC period during the period 2010 to 2015, Mr. Deputy Speaker, compare those statistics when they were in government, and the facts are as follows: In 2010, 19.9 deaths per 1,000 live births, but the health care was not collapsing. It has reduced significantly now under the Minister of Health and the Member for St. Joseph in 2020, in 2017, in 2016, in 2015, in 2022, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In 2011, under the watch of the Member for Siparia, 19.3 deaths per 1,000 live births. In 2012, 18.8; in 2013, 18.2; in 2014, 17.7 and in 2015, 17.2, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So since the hon. Member for St. Joseph and the Minister of Health, being led and being given the necessary support by a government who has invested and continues to show its

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commitment to delivering good health care services in Trinidad and Tobago, we would have seen a consistent decline in neonatal deaths in Trinidad and Tobago, the lowest in 50 years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: What in that, hon. Members opposite, represents a health care that has collapsed? Only in your minds, because in order for you to have political relevance, you must paint a dark and unwelcoming picture of the circumstances as they are in Trinidad and Tobago, nothing good must happen in this country as far as you are concerned. But the facts and the statistics tell a different story. The facts and the statistics, Mr. Deputy Speaker, tell a different story.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is very important that those opposite when they speak, that it is very important to examine their record in the health sector. They love to call for resignation. Everything that happens, the Minister must resign, the Minister must go, this board must go, this chairman must go. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was an unfortunate incident that occurred in Tobago where a citizen or someone was attacked by sharks. Well, I am hoping and I am expecting that by seven o'clock, the UNC will be calling for the resignation of the Chief Secretary, the pace at which they are going. Anything that goes wrong and any unfortunate incident, their clarion call is to resign, to resign, to resign. But let us examine the records of the UNC because the people of Trinidad and Tobago must be reminded especially about those main spokespersons who like to harass the population on a daily basis with foolishness.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Saturday *Express* November the 22nd, 2014:

UNREVISED

“Baby Loses Arm, Mom calls for a probe after amputation of newborn sons limb due to rupturing of vein during IV procedure”—Mr. Deputy Speaker.

No resignation, no suspension, no investigation but today, the Member for Siparia and her team on the other side want to call for people’s resignations. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the *Newsday* of Friday, May 01, 2015:

Top gynecologist blames health authorities for poor care—top gynecologist blames health authorities for poor care.

Cover up in baby Saheed’s death—cover up.

A top medical practitioner in Trinidad and Tobago is telling or was telling the country that there was a major cover-up with respect to the death of a young citizen in the health care in this country. No one was suspended. No chairman was called to resign. No board member was called to resign. No Minister of Health was asked to exit the Cabinet of the Member for Siparia. But today, today she wants to call for the resignation of the Minister of Health—hypocrisy—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—hypocrisy, political gamesmanship, nauseating hypocrisy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and they come shamelessly every single day and calling for the resignation of this Minister and that Minister. Mr. Deputy Speaker, “Baby dies...”— another glaring news headline when the UNC was in government:

“Baby dies after C-section at hospital

Health Minister Dr. Fuad Khan was confronted by a...”—very disgruntled—“woman yesterday morning during a tour of the Mt Hope

Womens hospital...”—when—“she approached him begging for answers following the birth and subsequent death of her first grandchild.”

Did the Member for Siparia ask her Minister of Health to resign when this unfortunate incident occurred, did she called for an investigation, did she—?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, again, we need to be careful about the pronouns that we use, associate. So again, please call on the particular constituency or identify accordingly.

Hon. M. Gonzales: I am guided.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: As I am on my legs one time, you—at 5.30 p.m., your initial speaking time will end, you have an additional 15. You care to avail yourself one time?

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right, proceed.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I take your guidance. Children’s Life Fund investigation, Daily *Express* of July the 9th, 2018:

“Children’s Life Fund investigation...

Deaths Under Query...

Doctor raised concern after 2 children died post surgery at...”—the—
 “hospital.”

No resignation, no suspension, no investigation, but then we have Members opposite, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Members opposite want to come here and parade themselves calling for the Minister of Health to resign—political hypocrisy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the highest—political hypocrisy of the highest. They have nothing to offer to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: They have no track record whatsoever, Mr. Deputy Speaker, none whatsoever and the statistics and the facts bear it out. It bears it out. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to quote the *Guardian* of 2011:

“SWRHA boss ‘critical issue’ at South hospital: Maternal deaths ‘hurting’.”

“Chairman...”—and I quote, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“Chairman of the South Western Health Authority...”—one—“Dr. Lackram Bodoie has acknowledged that there is an unacceptable number of maternal deaths at the San Fernando General Hospital.”

Let me repeat it to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

“Chairman of the South Western Health Authority...Dr. Lackram Bodoie has acknowledged that there is an unacceptable number of maternal deaths at the San Fernando General Hospital.”

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence on both sides please.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Admitting it. Chairman of the health authority, he was not asked to resign. He was not suspended. As a matter of fact, he was promoted to a Member of Parliament by the Member for Siparia, promoted, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

According to him:

“‘My heart is hurting with what is happening with maternal mortality,’ he admitted during the SWRHA’s first public meeting at the Naparima Bowl last Thursday. He assured that no effort or resources would be

spared in dealing with the critical issue. His comments followed...by former head of the hospital's obstetrics and gynecology unit, Dr Jehan Ali, that the maternal mortality rate was 80 in 100,000..."

This Minister, Madam Speaker, was the then Chairman of this SWRHA, was promoted by the Member for Siparia, and this is the same Member that is parading himself up and down, calling on news conferences and calling for the Member for St. Joseph to resign. Political hypocrisy, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—political hypocrisy. These people have no shame whatsoever, none whatsoever. It is disgusting, Madam Speaker, that we have to come here and be regaled by people who have no track record whatsoever, who pretend that under them the health care was at its lowest and at the worst, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, there was an incident at the Mt. Hope Hospital where a child died in childbirth during a caesarian childbirth, where the skull of a child was cut. The independent report that was conducted by one Justice Ibrahim described the situation that they have never seen in any medical journal, any case of medical negligence of this order, they have never seen it. This has happened under the reign of the Member of Parliament for Siparia, the Leader of the Opposition when she was then Prime Minister.

It got so worse, Madam Speaker, that when the mother of that child was asked: Did you get support from the State? She said she got no support other than a food card, no psychological support. None whatsoever. They spent over \$1.5 million doing this investigation. And this mother of this child did not receive any kind of support from the Leader of the Opposition and the Member

for Siparia. She did not ask and the Member for Siparia did not ask—the hon. Member for Siparia and the Leader of the Opposition did not ask her health Minister to resign.

The hon. Member did not call upon the Chairman of the NCRHA to resign. But today coming to Parliament, hoping to grab headlines, calling news conferences, cannot even catch themselves, Madam Speaker, on their weekly meetings, hoping that this unfortunate incident at the Port of Spain General Hospital will somehow give them political life. That is what they are about. No reasonable proposal as to what we can do and what we can do to enhance what we have already done to get to the bottom of this incident. But when you examine their track record, Madam Speaker, just examine their track record and the political hypocrisy of the UNC stands for all to see. They have no morality, they have no moral standing to talk to us on anything with respect to governance in Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—none whatsoever, none whatsoever. Madam Speaker, let me go and continue to quote from the *Guardian* article of 2011 by one Yvonne Webb. ““The maternal’...”—and quoting from one Lackram Bodoie, Dr. Lackram Bodoie, I think, I suspect he is now the Member for Fyzabad promoted to the position of a Member of Parliament after this kind of track record in the health sector. And according to him:

““The maternal mortality rate has gone up.””

This is what he is admitting, Madam Speaker. He said:

““The maternal mortality rate has gone up. Why is it you cannot solve this mortality problem?””

And one Dr. Ali is asking the former head of the SWRHA, he is asking him:

““Why...”—can—““you””—not—““solve this problem?””

5.35 p.m.

“Ali said when he left the unit in 2007,”—under a PNM administration—
 “the maternal mortality rate had been reduced to 20 in 100,000 and the
 pre-natal mortality rate to 20 per 1,000 births. ‘What is it today?’”

He is asking one, Lackram Bodoie, who I believe and I suspect, Madam
 Speaker, is the Member of Parliament for Fyzabad—this is what he is asking.
 He said that:

““The maternal mortality rate is 80 to 100,000 and not on par...””

This is what he said, it is:

““...not on par with developed countries as fellow OBGYN Dr. Bodoie
 has said...””

—taking issue with a public statement that was made by the then Chairman of
 the SWRHA.

Madam Speaker, the article continues:

“Bodoie did not contradict Ali’s statement.”

Madam Speaker: So, Member, I know you are referring to some other
 document, but you are still bound by the rule with respect to when you are
 referring to a Member. Okay? So that you either refer to them by their portfolio
 or their constituency. Okay?

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, I take your
 guidance.

The Member for Fyzabad—“...did not contradict Ali’s statement. Ali
 blamed ‘young, inexperienced consultants,’ for the situation, saying he

had operated under similar conditions at the hospital with an improved rate. 'It is not the fault of the system, but the people who work the system,' he said, in reference to a statement made by Attorney General"—one—"Anand Ramlogan about the failure of the system in relation to the death of Chrystal Boodoo-Ramsoomair. Boodoo-Ramsoomair died on March 4 after giving birth to her third child, Danielle, by Caesarian section.

Since her death, three other women have died in child birth at the hospital, including Nyca Foster..."

—I will not call their names, Madam Speaker.

"Several women also lost their newborn babies."

The hon. Member for Fyzabad, who was the Chairman of the SWRHA then, said:

"...the hospital has made many inroads but the board was still not happy with the service..."

—admitting that the board that he chaired was not happy with the level of the health care service at the San Fernando General Hospital. He was not called upon to resign. He was promoted to a Member of Parliament to this House and today is calling upon the Member for St. Joseph to resign because of that unfortunate incident at the Port of Spain General Hospital. Political hypocrisy of the highest order.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: They ought to be ignored, Madam Speaker. They ought to be ignored. They are not serious about any serious issues in this country, but ride everything that happens in this country as a tiger or a donkey, and expect it

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to give it some kind, or them political relevance.

Madam Speaker, despite our challenges, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago continues to expend billions of dollars in the health sector to improve the level of services to all our citizens all over this country, be it in San Fernando, in Point Fortin, in Sangre Grande, in Roxborough, in Port of Spain, in Diego Martin, all over we are spending billions of dollars to make health care available to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So good is our health care system, Madam Speaker, that not too long ago, when we were grappling under the throes of the COVID pandemic, where our health care professionals managed this with distinction, it was the hon. Member for Siparia who, every single day, attacked our health care officials.

She called—the hon. Member for Siparia called for the resignation of Dr. Roshan Parasram. We all remembered that. The hon. Member for Siparia called for the resignation of Dr. Avery Hinds. The hon. Member for Siparia, the Leader of the Opposition, called for the resignation of Dr. Maryam Abdool-Richards, called for the resignation of Dr. Michelle Trotman, health care professionals who laboured night and day with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, with all health care providers, being attacked every single day by the Leader of the Opposition when we were grappling under the throes of a pandemic that was ravaging every single country, where we would have seen lives being strewn all over, bodies being strewn all over, in Italy, in the United States, the most developed countries. But our health care providers stood with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Al-Rawi: She took us to court umpteen time.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Our health care providers stood with the Government of

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Trinidad and Tobago, and our health system was able to manage under these difficult circumstances.

What happened as a result, Madam Speaker? Every single day, whilst they attacked our medical professionals, they sued this State left, right and centre—

Mr. Al-Rawi: And they lost.

Hon. M. Gonzales:—overspending \$40 million defending those claims. Whilst we defend the people of Trinidad and Tobago, we had to defend the people of Trinidad and Tobago from them in the courts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Al-Rawi: They attacked the regulations.

Hon. M. Gonzales: They attacked the regulations, the COVID regulations that were put in place. There was no template to manage COVID anywhere around the world—

Mr. Al-Rawi: The Privy Council ruled against them.

Hon. M. Gonzales: And the Privy Council ruled against them, Madam Speaker, as we sought to defend and to protect our citizens. Our health care professionals were attacked. So their behaviour today is no different from how they behave a couple of years ago.

I recall that the first COVID death in this country, before the Ministry of Health investigated the matter to communicate in a responsible way to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, it is the Leader of the Opposition that announced the first death in this country with a smile on her face. They love death, you know, Madam Speaker. Something about death they love. They love coffins. They like to drag coffins. All by the residence of the Minister of

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Health, dragging coffins. I think I saw a video where the Leader of the Opposition was walking behind a coffin. Something about death they are very fascinated by. I think I saw Johnny Walker walking behind the coffin too. Some gentleman they call “Johnny Walker”, Madam Speaker. Something about death. And it should trouble the conscience of every good citizen when your leaders and your Members of Parliament are somehow fascinated about death. It is very troubling, Madam Speaker. And that is the reason why today, they are riding this very unfortunate issue like a tiger.

But, Madam Speaker, as we have done before, as we are doing now and as we will continue to do as a responsible Government, as a strong nation, we will also rise above that. And when the report is delivered and we understand fully what has transpired, our health care will be in a better place. But this is no time for political pandering. This is no time for political gamesmanship. It is no time for nauseating political behaviour and political hypocrisy. It is no time, Madam Speaker, for political and cheap attacks against our health care professionals, against the Minister of Health.

Madam Speaker, this Motion is frivolous, it is vexatious, it is all geared towards undermining the good work of our health professionals and the Government's work in the health system in this country. And therefore, Madam Speaker, I reject it out of hand, and I pray and I look forward to the day when this report is delivered. The citizens of this country will be in a far better place and we will continue to work with our colleague from St. Joseph, as a responsible Government, to continue to provide good health care services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. M. Gonzales (cont'd)

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Augustine.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Khadijah Ameen (*St. Augustine*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I really wish that Members on the other side were a little more connected with reality because what I hear coming out, I hardly even hear the Members talking and sharing what good things they are doing in public health because it seems that they are very limited. And it is a sad reality that this type of gaslighting where they seem to believe that if they continue to repeat an untruth that it will magically become true, when the reality is that all over Trinidad and Tobago, people know that when you go to the hospital, you have a long wait in the emergency, you have lists of— waiting lists for surgeries, long waiting lists where people actually die before they can get a surgery. That is a reality.

You have people sleeping on the floor sometimes because they are in the casualty for more than 48 hours sometimes. I remember visiting a heart attack patient who was kept there for more than 48 hours and he had to sit on a chair, and he eventually put his bag on the ground and made a pillow for himself at the Mount Hope emergency. This is a reality of what we face. Sometimes simple diagnostic tests, people are waiting for a long period of time, and unless they can afford it outside, it is difficult for them to save their own lives.

The truth is that because of the Government's mismanagement, that people sometimes go in for health care and come out as corpses. We have babies who died and they want us to believe that the PNM is providing a solution when they are the problem.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, it is not the UNC that said that this country was 178 out of 200 for COVID treatment, it was John Hopkins University. Are they lying too? That is the reality of—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Ms. K. Ameen: “Oh” yes.

Madam Speaker:—withdraw the word and find another word.

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, when John Hopkins University put out the figures that Trinidad and Tobago was 178 out of 200, it was—

Madam Speaker: You withdrew?

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes.

Madam Speaker: You withdrew the word?

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes.

Madam Speaker: You did not say it.

Ms. K. Ameen: I withdraw that sentence completely—

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Ms. K. Ameens:—so I am rephrasing it now. Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, when John Hopkins University placed Trinidad and Tobago 178 out of 200 in the world for COVID treatment, they were not telling an untruth, these are facts, these are statistics that you cannot deny.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The Member who spoke before me, I think he mistakenly said that the San Fernando General Hospital was built by the People’s National Movement. That is not true and I just want to correct the record. The San Fernando General Hospital was actually the Colonial Hospital—the San Fernando Colonial Hospital in 1924. And before that, it was also existing there

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when King George and “dem fellas was around”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, in 1952, construction started and in 1955, you know who opened that hospital? Princess Margaret, not the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And, Madam Speaker, they continue to tell these stories and these tales hoping that it will become a reality, and it will not. That will not make it a reality. Madam Speaker, the Member before me mentioned former head of the South-West Regional Health Authority, an esteemed and well respected—a real doctor, Dr. Lackram Bodoie.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: A real doctor. And when Dr. Lackram Bodoie was appointed there—

Madam Speaker: Member, again, that person is a Member of this House and therefore, you refer to them.

Ms. K. Ameen: When the Member for Fyzabad at that time in his professional capacity was appointed to head that RHA, he immediately began by acknowledging that there was a problem because that is the mortality rate we inherited from the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: When Dr. Bodoie spoke about 14.4, almost—

Hon. Member: Member for Fyzabad.

Mr. Indarsingh: Member for Fyzabad.

Ms. K. Ameen: When the Member for Fyzabad spoke about 14.4 deaths, almost 15 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2010. That is the figure we inherited

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from the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And you know what is the first thing that was done? First of all, the good doctor, now Member for Fyzabad acknowledged that there was a problem and immediately began to work on it, and UNC did not sweep it under the carpet.

5.50 p.m.

In fact, Madam Speaker, it was a report generated by that time, and I just want to refer to it. A report on the Maternity Services Review Committee in Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry of Health, and this was done in May of 2013. It was this report that the Member for Fyzabad and his colleagues had an input in. And this led the People's Partnership Government to create a position for directorate for women's health including maternal and child health at the Ministry of Health, to provide leadership, policy formation and solution to continue to decrease the infant mortality rate and the maternal mortality rate, and they were successful and I congratulate them today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, you know this is not a Motion about the Opposition. This is not even a personal attack on the Member for St. Joseph. Billions of dollars have been spent. The Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West is quite right billions of dollars have been spent, but then why do you continue to see this systematic failure of the Government? That is what this Motion is about. This Motion is about the continued failure of the Minister of Health, the leadership of the Ministry of Health and the refusal to accept reality and deal with it, and what is happening is that people are going to the public health,

getting sicker and sicker, patients die, patients talk about maltreatment.

I want to first begin by acknowledging that there are so many of our health care workers who work under all these conditions and they do serve people genuinely, but we cannot discount that the mismanagement at the top and the incompetence at the top, in the hands of the current Minister of Health, is what has our health care falling apart. We cannot deny it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West spoke about a vein, a ruptured vein that caused a baby to lose a limb in a very unfortunate incident. Madam Speaker, are you comparing a ruptured vein to 21 babies dying? I hope that is not what the Member was trying to do. He did not seem to have much information to praise the Ministry of Health, so he resorted to, you know, kind of elongating the few things he had to make up the 45 minutes, but he spent some time there and I am very concerned that that is what he was trying to do. It is good that he sounded a little apologetic but an apology does not bring back the life of those babies. It does not.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, so many things have been said about the current situation where we understand the deaths of the babies are up to 21, and you know that is not the only failure. The members of Government have been trying to make it sound as though that is the one blemish in the public health sector. That is the one blemish on the poor Member for St. Joseph, when the truth is there are so many, many more instances of babies dying, people dying. People are taking the Government to court, winning cases against the Regional Health Authority and the Minister of Health. So the non-performance and the

incompetence is a norm. It is not something unusual.

Madam Speaker, in my contribution, I will speak about human resource shortages and how this Government has continued to systematically undermine our nurses, our doctors and our allied health workers. I will speak about how the shortage of equipment has been tremendously affecting performance, and causing pain and hardship, and worry, and death particularly in urology concerning dialysis and cancer treatment. I will also want to share, Madam Speaker, with regard to some things under the Ministry of Health that actually tie into local government that we may take for granted, when we look at the bigger picture of the public health. I quickly want to go into the Insect Vector Control Units.

Madam Speaker, insect vector control works alongside local government regional corporations. They are responsible for treating, most times, mosquitoes, but any sort of vector that comes up. They have been functioning for years now with vehicles that are not functional. Staff members are actually buying tyres, parts, changing oil in the vehicles—the Government vehicles—and in some cases vehicles break down completely. These vehicles transport personnel, they transport machinery, and they also transport chemicals, but you cannot put those types—it is not advisable to put those types of chemicals in a private vehicle that a person will use for their family. So while some of the public health workers have been generous enough to use their vehicles, it is not safe and you are putting workers at risk.

The chemicals that they are using, in most instances, they are not storing them properly because the storage areas are not suitable. You have workers on the same compound and they are, of course, exposed to fumes that might be

noxious, poisonous and dangerous. You also have the issue of shortage of chemicals because in many cases—as a Member of Parliament, you request some spraying from insect vector control. The councillors request spraying for mosquitoes and you know what they are told? The ULV machine is down, or we do not have enough chemicals. A lot of times, the ULV machines are not working and it affects the quality of work. Sometimes they do “ah lil ting” and they pass through the community very quickly and you just get a hint of the smell of the chemical because they are still trying to do their work but again, because of what they face.

The workers are also jeopardized because you are not providing proper PPE to them for them to handle the chemicals.

Madam Speaker: Member, you know I have allowed you a little leeway, but I am cautioning you on relevance. If you read the text of the actual Motion, I believe you are straining the text and I will ask you to whatever you are doing try and bring it in, because this is talking about patients, and health care workers, and so on. So I think you are straining it where you are going.

Ms. K. Ameen: Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, the Insect Vector Control Unit falls under the Ministry of Health, but I am also bringing it back to how the lack of insect vector control leads to more patients and more of my constituents having to go to the public health system to seek medical advice and medical treatment. But I will leave that there—

Madam Speaker: If that is the way you are going, you must do it very quickly because this is talking about health care services to citizens. Okay?

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes. That was actually the end of the point there, Madam Speaker. I raise that because I want to tie it in to situations where we have

insect-borne viruses and you have dengue, you have Zika. I actually want to refer to a case that has been completed now with a Zika patient, where the ruling actually pointed out that Trinidad and Tobago was violating the United Nations Charter on Human Rights where it is related to public health, where it relates to treatment of a child, and treatment of the disability. So I wanted to tie that in with the insect vector, as it relates to these things.

Madam Speaker—so that is the point there. That is it.

Madam Speaker: I am giving you some latitude to see where you are going, but please bear the caution in mind.

Ms. K. Ameen: Well that is where I was going and I have gotten there, and I am moving on now.

Madam Speaker: You have gone.

Ms. K. Ameen: So I hope that between the clarifications in terms of where I was that the point could be heard, that because the Government has been neglecting those areas of public health, you have a repercussion later down the road where Trinidad and Tobago now has registered against itself a legal judgment where the judge actually berates Trinidad and Tobago for breaching one in terms of the United Nations Charter.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 53, I beg to move that the debate on this matter, which is before us at this time, be adjourned.

Question put and agreed to.

**EXCHEQUER AND AUDIT ACT
(EXTENSION OF SECTIONS 24(1) AND 25(1))**

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 33(5) please. Standing Order 33(5).

Mr. Indarsingh: Time to go home.

Mr. Lee: If I can seek your indulgence, Madam Speaker, 33(5).

Madam Speaker: 33(5). I believe six o'clock has passed. It is 6.01.15.

Mr. Lee: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Well we cannot have this kind of conversation, but if it is 33(5) okay, this is the fourth Friday of the month. I am quite aware of that. But, what it says is:

“Government Business shall have precedence on every other day except Private Members’ Day.”

And I think—

Mr. Lee: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Yes. So Private Members’ Day ends at 6.00 p.m. It does not mean that the day ends at 6.00 p.m. I think we have had precedent. You were talking about precedent? I do recall we have precedence of this having happened. Minister of Finance

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Exchequer and Audit Act
(Extension of Sections 24(1) and 25(1))
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Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. Madam Speaker, I know they are excited, but I would like protection from the get-go. They are screaming at me.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance, I am not hearing any screams, but please proceed. It is 6.02 p.m., you have the Floor. Please proceed

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, I am hearing them. I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas it is provided by section 24 of the Exchequer and Audit Act, Chap. 69:01(“the Act”) that within a period of four months after 30th September in each year, the Treasury shall cause to be transmitted to the Auditor General accounts (hereinafter referred to as “financial accounts”) showing fully the financial position of Trinidad and Tobago on the said 31st December;

And whereas it is provided by section 25(1) of the Act, that on receipt of the financial accounts prescribed by section 24, the Auditor General shall cause them to be examined and audited and shall, within a period of seven months after 30th September in each year;

And whereas the said section 24(1) provides that the period provided for the transmission of the financial accounts by the Treasury to the Auditor General may be extended to such longer period thereafter as Parliament may by resolution appoint;

And whereas the said section 25(1) also provides that the period provided for the examination and auditing of the accounts may be extended to such longer period thereafter as Parliament may by resolution appoint;

And whereas it is necessary that in respect of the financial accounts for 2023 that the period of time specified under section 24(1) of the Act and the period of time specified in section 25(1) of the Act be extended for the purposes stated in the said section:

Be it resolved that for the purpose of the financial accounts for 2023 that the period of time under section 24(1) of the Exchequer and Audit Act be extended from the period of four months after the 30th September 2023 to a period of eight months after the 30th September, 2023:

And be it further resolved that for the purpose of the financial accounts for 2023 that the period of time under section 25(1) of the Exchequer and Audit Act be extended from the period of seven months after the 30th September 2023 to a period of eleven months after the 30th September, 2023.

Madam Speaker, I have explained the purpose of the Motion which is essentially to invoke sections 24 and 25 of the Exchequer and Audit Act to extend the time for doing the things described therein in those two sections.

6.05 p.m.

I want to make it clear at the outset that the required report from the Treasury was submitted to the Auditor General on January 31st, 2024, in accordance with section 24 (1) of the Exchequer and Audit Act. Therefore, this extension does not arise as a result of a breach of the Exchequer and Audit Act.

The root cause for this Motion before the House is the detection by senior public servants that the statement of revenue, which had already been submitted by the Treasury to the Auditor General by January 31st, 2024 as required,

contained a significant variance and understatement of revenue. This variance was later quantified by senior officials at the Ministry of Finance, comprising personnel from the Treasury, Budget, and Inland Revenue divisions to be \$2,599,278,188.73.

I want to repeat that the revenue for fiscal 2023 was understated on January 31st, 2024, by the amount of \$2.6 billion. In other words, the fiscal outturn for 2023 was in fact better than I reported in this place in the budget exercise of 2023. This discovery or detection by senior officials at the Ministry led to the resubmission by the Treasury of the accounts to the Auditor General on April the 16th, 2024.

I will now detail what has been told to me by the public officials involved as to the reasons for the understatement of revenue in fiscal 2023. For the information of Members, the Inland Revenue Division disburses refunds for five types of tax, namely individual income tax, corporation tax, valued added tax, business levy, and green fund levy. These refunds are ultimately debited from the various tax revenue accounts to arrive at a net figure for revenue collected under each type of tax.

The practice is that from time to time the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance will authorize the Inland Revenue Division to pay a particular quantum of tax refunds within a designated period. This is based on cash flow. Once this authorization is received, the Inland Revenue Division allocates the approved amount amongst the various types of tax and various types of taxpayers. Thereafter, refund cheques are printed, sorted and dispatched to taxpayers by the Inland Revenue Division. These cheques are valid for a period of six months during which time taxpayers can encash or

redeem the cheques at the various commercial banks. These cheques, once redeemed, are debited against the relevant tax revenue accounts and credited to the relevant tax refund account.

A reconciliation process is then performed within the Inland Revenue Division's GenTax system to account for all encashed refund cheques against the refund cheques printed by the Inland Revenue Division for all types of tax. And, as I can just digress slightly, this type of thing happens every year because Government cheques are valid for six months and cheques may be issued in August or September of a financial year and are not encashed until October/November/December of the following financial year. So even though the Treasury and the Budget Division would have an estimate of revenue and expenditure, the actual expenditure and revenue is only determined when a reconciliation is done of all of the cheques that had been cashed at the commercial banks and sent to the Central Bank for reconciliation.

Prior to February 2023, to facilitate the reconciliation process the Central Bank submitted to the Inland Revenue Division on a periodic basis the actual physical encashed cheques—so the actual paper cheques themselves—as well as a report on a compact disc for uploading into the Inland Revenue Division's GenTax system. They have an electronic system.

However, on February the 6th 2023, the Central Bank implemented a new electronic cheque clearing system which changed the manner in which cheques are cleared. This new system was introduced after the passage of the Bills of Exchange (Amdt.) Act, 2022, which we debated in this place. Under the new system physical copies or the actual physical cheque itself are no longer required to be transported from the commercial banks to the Central Bank and

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(Extension of Sections 24(1) and 25(1))
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then back to the Inland Revenue Division for the reconciliation process. Instead, cheques are now scanned and images are uploaded to the electronic cheque-clearing system and then transmitted to the Central Bank. So the commercial banks scan the physical cheques, upload them to the electronic cheque clearing system—the new system—and then transmit these images to the Central Bank.

This process has shortened the time for clearing cheques as there is no longer a need to transport physical cheques from the commercial banks to the Central Bank and then to the Board of Inland Revenue for reconciliation. Once the cheque images are uploaded to the system, the Central Bank captures the data on the cheque images for its clearing and reporting activities and physical cheques are now retained by participating banks.

I am told that from February the 6th 2023, when the new electronic cheque clearing system at the Central Bank went live, the Inland Revenue no longer received the physical cheques as expected. Instead, the division began receiving the electronic images. However, owing to the secrecy provisions that exist under the—gentlemen. Owing to the secrecy provisions that exist under the Income Tax Act, neither the Treasury Division nor the Ministry of Finance has any access to the GenTax system and this is all part of a well-established system. You do not want anybody in the Ministry of Finance other than the officials at the Board of Inland Revenue having access to people's tax records. It is well known. That is section 4 of the Income Tax Act. So owing to the secrecy provisions that exist under the Income Tax Act, neither the Treasury Division nor anyone else at the Ministry of Finance has access to the GenTax system and so it cannot participate in the reconciliation process. The burden

then shifts to the Inland Revenue Division.

Following the reconciliation process by the Inland Revenue Division, the Treasury is notified via interdepartmental adjustment vouchers to debit the relevant revenue accounts and credit the relevant refund accounts to the general ledger, which is the master record of all Government accounts. The effect of these interdepartmental adjustment vouchers reduces the value of revenue recorded in the exchequer bank account as the gross value of revenue collected in any financial year is reduced by the value of refund cheques cleared within that financial year arriving at a figure for a net revenue. So the Government's net revenue is the gross revenue minus the tax refunds that it gives out.

I am told by the public servants that difficulties arose with the implementation of the new electronic system for clearing cheques. I am told that the data on the Central Bank's digital platform could not be easily read by the GenTax system without errors. The errors I am told were related to the commercial banks experiencing difficulty with the magnetic ink character recognition line required to read cheque numbers. Now magnetic ink character recognition is a technology that is used to verify the legitimacy or originality of cheques and other paper documents.

Essentially, officers of the Inland Revenue Division have advised us that it was difficult to easily access the new electronic cheque clearing platform. Further, files on the platform contained multiple tax types instead of being batched into various tax types as obtained previously. Previously, I am told that different types of refund cheques—refund cheques for individual income tax, refund cheques for value added tax, refund cheques for corporation tax and so on—were batched into the individual tax types and a physical bundle was sent

by the Central Bank to the Inland Revenue Division for reconciliation.

6.15 p.m.

However, the new electronic system does not match the tax types and instead sends all of them in one file to the Inland Revenue Division. This created difficulties. There were also mistakes made in the data processing at the Central Bank. Despite these setbacks, I am advised that the Inland Revenue Division prepared and submitted their certified Statement of Receipts and Disbursements to the Treasury Division.

Hon. Member: *[Interruption]*

Madam Speaker: All right, so Member—

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, you hear it too.

Madam Speaker: I am really being disturbed now, so I will ask Members to abide by Standing Order 53. If Members have a little difficulty, I know maybe they did not cater for this time, they can go outside, you know, take a little exercise, relieve themselves and come back in and comply with the Standing Orders. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I know it is a little bit too technical for them, perhaps that is why they are mumbling.

Despite these setbacks, I am advised that the Inland Revenue Division prepared and submitted their certified Statements of Receipts and Disbursements to the Treasury Division which was subsequently incorporated into the Treasury Statements which form part of the public accounts and were submitted to the Auditor General on the statutory deadline of January 31, 2024.

However, following this, during the week of February 26, 2024, the Budget Division informed the Treasury Division of what they had seen as an

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apparent material understatement in the reported Statement of Revenue for the financial year 2023. I want to repeat. What the Budget Division discovered was that the revenue for 2023, that had been reported by the Treasury to the Auditor General was actually lower than it should have been. There was higher revenue in 2023 than previously reported.

Now, the Statement of Revenue issued by the Treasury on January 31st and submitted to the Auditor General is usually received by the Budget Division in February of every year. When the Budget Division gets the Statement that the Treasury sends to the Auditor General because it is the Treasury by law that must send that, the Budget Division—it is a check and balance in the system—compares the monthly cumulative return of revenue to their own records of the year under review.

When the Budget Division received the Statement of Revenue, they compared it to their records and they observed that there were variances under several items, in particular under individuals, business levy and value added tax. The revenue section of the Budget Division was notified and in keeping with that section's reporting guidelines, explanations were requested from the Inland Revenue Division for the various items of revenue.

Consequently, from the first week in March 2024, both the Treasury Division and the Inland Revenue Division met to try to collectively determine the source of the discrepancies. Subsequently, the Inland Revenue Division requested and received from the Central Bank on the 15th of March, 2024, additional details of the transactions on the bank accounts.

When examined, this showed posting errors including double-booking of transactions and decimal point transposition errors which arose as a result of the

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implementation in 2023 of the new electronic cheque clearing system. Of the \$2,599,278,188.73 of revenue that was understated, it is noteworthy to highlight that the bulk of the understatement approximately \$2.2 billion occurred with respect to one erroneous transaction posted by the Central Bank on February 09, 2023.

Now, I am further advised that the Inland Revenue Division received the credit advices from the Central Bank through the Treasury Division in March 2024, and this allowed adjustments and amendments to be made to the Statement of Receipts and Disbursements. This is when the process of correction began. This then facilitated adjustments to the Treasury Statement of Revenue.

After completing the reconciliation process, the Inland Revenue Division subsequently confirmed that the variance in the Statement of Revenue for the financial year was in fact \$2,598,130,761.72, a slightly different—sorry, and a variance in the Green Fund of \$1,147,427.01 giving a total variance of \$2,599,278,188.73 and of that, as I have already indicated, VAT was \$2.26 billion. VAT was underreported to the Auditor General in the amount of \$2.26 billion. What the Central Bank had done was to double-post refunds of VAT and this caused this material variance.

Following this, in March last month, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance and her team held several meetings with the Inland Revenue Division, Budget Division and the Treasury Division to resolve the issue. The Auditor General was also invited to a meeting with the Ministry of Finance to explain the understatement of revenue and discuss corrective action. The Auditor General's team met with the Ministry's team on the 27th of March,

2024.

Following this meeting, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Finance had several written communications with the Auditor General about the matter. Unfortunately, unfortunately, the Auditor General initially declined to accept the updated and corrected public accounts even though it was made clear that the submission made on January 31, 2024 contained a significant understatement of revenue. I want to repeat that. Unfortunately, despite these meetings and correspondence and so on, the Auditor General initially declined to accept the updated public accounts even though it was made clear that the submission made by the Treasury to her on January 31, 2024, contained a significant understatement of a material nature, \$2.6 billion difference. However, the Auditor General subsequently accepted the resubmission of the public accounts on April 16, 2024.

The facts are, Madam Speaker, that in 2023, we received revenue that was \$2.6 billion higher than what was originally reported to the Auditor General in January 2024. We on this side and the officials in the Ministry of Finance quite rightly, believed that the accounts of any organization must reflect what actually happened during the period under review.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Because of challenges consequent to the introduction of a new automated system across the financial sector which is operated by the Central Bank, actual revenue was initially underreported. Once this error was discovered by the officials of the Ministry of Finance, despite the accounts already being submitted, the staff at the Ministry quite correctly reached out to the Auditor General with a view to correcting the record in order to ensure that

there was a true and accurate record of the public accounts of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for financial year 2023.

I was first informed of this situation towards the end of last month, in fact on the 25th of March. The public servants were trying to resolve it themselves, and upon being informed, I immediately sought advice, legal advice from senior counsel and from the Attorney General on the best approach to this conundrum. It is based on this advice that we have found ourselves here today.

Initially after the Auditor General reversed her position that she was unwilling to accept the corrected accounts for the financial year 2023 and after the Auditor General agreed to receive the corrected documents on April 16, 2024, based on the legal advice, it was not considered necessary to seek an extension of time for the periods in sections 24 and 25 of the Exchequer and Audit Act.

However, soon after the corrected accounts were received by the Auditor General and I ensured that senior staff of the Treasury went to the office of the Auditor General with the documents and the CDs and ensured that they were received and signed for. So, soon after the corrected accounts were received by the Auditor General, we were informed that the Auditor General had submitted her report on the accounts for the financial year 2023 without auditing the corrected figures.

Accordingly, as a responsible Government, we are of the view that it is now necessary to invoke the provisions of sections 24 and 25 of the Exchequer and Audit Act to extend all of the reporting periods by four months which we believe is adequate time to ensure that the correct figures for the accounts for the financial year 2023 are placed before the Parliament and the public at large.

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(Extension of Sections 24(1) and 25(1))
Hon. C. Imbert

I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (*Siparia*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I listened very attentively to the hon. Minister because when we got this Supplementary Order Paper on Wednesday, we were—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No, it was Wednesday the 24th, yeah, it is dated the 24th. Wednesday 24th of April, we were really flabbergasted, if that is a proper word to use, because we are seeing that we are laying the reports, Papers 5 and 6 on the Supplementary Order Paper, and I see that we have them because they are on the table there. So hon. Madam Speaker did receive them as per the constitutional provisions and statutory provisions, and how is it that we are going to be laying these reports but then you are asking to extend time for the Auditor General to carry out certain—further work, further consideration of the accounts submitted after the deadline date of January.

Madam Speaker, we are being told today that part of the explanation has to be with an understatement of revenue of about \$2.6 billion for fiscal 2023. We have been told it had something to do with cheques and electronic cheques and all kinds of cheques. And then we are being told that the Auditor General declined to accept the updated public accounts and then subsequently took them on April 16, 2024. We are told about \$3 billion revenue had to be audited, which went in as I say after the deadline date but today, the Auditor General presented a report without auditing the so-called corrected figures. Madam Speaker, I do not buy a single word of the explanation.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I do not buy a single word of that explanation. In all the years I have been here, I have never seen this happen and indeed I have here a listing of the reports over the years of the dates of the reports themselves, data submission to this House and the Senate, and the laying of said reports. So I do not really understanding what is happening here.

Madam Speaker, I am being told that the Auditor General is being pressured to accept these accounts. I am also being told that the Auditor General was sent a pre-action protocol letter.

Hon. Member: What?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, that the Auditor General must accept these accounts.

Mr. Hosein: “They threaten she.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And I am further being told after the pre-action letter, the Auditor General did consider these supposedly corrected revenue numbers and so on, supposedly, and says she could not still find any evidence of this—what was it? About \$3 billion in revenue.

Mr. Hosein: Oh, my.

Hon. Members: “Oooohhh.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Could not find that anywhere.

6.30 p.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Before I go further into this, Madam Speaker, I want to make it very clear that this action by the Government this evening is totally ultra vires the Constitution, it is totally in violation of our Constitution, and even if you get your simple majority to pass this Motion today, it will not

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stand up in a court of law. It is illegal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The action being taken is illegal and I will show why as I continue in my contribution.

So first of all, we speak today, again, coming after prime hours as it were, after 6.00 p.m.—nobody expected us to be here after Private Members’ Day. And to me, it is another sign of the kind of galloping dictatorship being used by this Government in attacking independent institutions from time to time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They have a track record. There have been ongoing attacks on prominent private sector individuals, often ordinary citizens. They have attacked and attempted to destabilize state institutions. How can we ever forget the one attack and interference on the independence of the Office of the President? You went and you snatched away—

Dr. Moonilal: Yes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, snatched away the—

Mr. Hosein: Merit list.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—merit list, the Commissioner of—totally in violation of the Constitution. Then we have attacks again coming through on other institutions and to me, this is just another such example. The DPP was attacked, *Guardian* article 03 October, 2023, Akash Samaroo:

“DPP seeks counsel after PM’s ‘attack’

...UNC accuses Rowley of undermining Office”

The article says:

“...Gaspard...is seeking counsel as he prepares to respond to a lashing

from Prime Minister Dr...Rowley during a...(PNM) public meeting in Barataria on Thursday night.

During the meeting, Rowley accused the Office of the...(DPP) of wasting taxpayers' money with demands for security measures at a building..."

Then we had attacks on the Integrity Commission. *Trinidad Express*, January 05, 2024:

"Rowley under fire for..."—Integrity Committee—"...'attack' Prime Minister...Rowley has come under fire for his 'attack' on..."—the—"...(IC) chairman Dr Rajendra Ramlogan."

"...IC chairman Rajendra Ramlogan said last night...he will not respond to the Prime Minister."

Attacks on the Judiciary:

"Rowley: Judge went 'overboard' in criticisms of..."—Commissioner of Police.

This in the *Newsday* of March 27, 2024, Sean Douglas' article.

Attacks on the Law Association:

"Rowley slams Law Association's pursuit of Chief Justice as 'political'"

Dareece Polo's article, October 01, 2019, in Loop News.

"Prime Minister...Rowley says the Law Association's...decision to launch judicial proceedings against him for his failure to appoint a tribunal to probe allegations into the Chief Justice as political."

Headline:

Prime Minister's—"...unwarranted attack"

Express Editorial, October 02, 2019.

"Not for the first time, Dr Rowley is trying to whip up public sentiment

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against a valid legal challenge by citing the high legal cost of challenging the State.”

We move on. Attack on the Central Bank, 24 December, 2015, *Guardian*, Renuka Singh:

“Central Bank Governor Jwala Rambarran has been fired. The...*Guardian* confirmed...Rambarran was dismissed by...Minister of Finance...”

Word of this unprecedented...”

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker.

Mr. Hosein: What Standing Order?

Mr. Hinds: I rise on Standing Order 48(1), completely irrelevant.

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Siparia, I think I understand the point you are trying to make but we are not going to go into all of those things. So I think you have given your examples. I ask you to press on with the substance of the matter before us.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I thank you, Madam Speaker. Some more examples of a tax on independent institutions, I have given several of them but I think the point, as you said, is made. There have been several. And I think this what we are doing here today is another attack on independent institutions from the Office of the Attorney General and the Auditor General.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So why? The question is why. Look, we have an Attorney General in this country who told an untruth in a Miami court. I do not know—**Hon. Member:** Correct.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I do not know if this Attorney General drafted the Motion put before this House.

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker—

Mr. Hosein: What is your problem?

Mr. Hinds:—I rise on 48(6).

Mr. Hosein: What is your problem?

Mr. Hinds: There has been no settlement in this jurisdiction or otherwise I might dare say, that the Attorney General—

Mr. Hosein: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Hinds:—stated any untruth. I object on 48(6).

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Siparia, if you can restate to comply within the Standing Order and let us get on with the debate.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Certainly, Madam. So I do not know—very relevant to this debate—whether the Motion before this House was drafted by the hon. Attorney General.

Madam Speaker: So you—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am going to explain why.

Madam Speaker: Yeah. No, you have withdrawn the statement.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Which one?

Madam Speaker: Because I have asked you—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am sorry, which one?

Madam Speaker: The Minister of National—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: The Minister of National—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

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2024.04.26

Madam Speaker: The Minister of National Security made an objection under Standing Order 48(6) with respect to a particular statement concerning the Attorney General. I have ruled in his favour and therefore, I have asked you to find a way to restate what you wish. Therefore, if you withdraw and find a way, you can then proceed. Thank you.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This was the statement of a false statement in a foreign court by the Attorney General—

Mr. Hosein: And he was disqualified.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—who was disqualified by that court? If that is what I am withdrawing, I withdraw it, but it is a fact.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I withdraw it, Madam.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I withdraw it, Madam.

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Siparia, if you have withdrawn it, you have withdrawn it without any qualifications. Yes? So it is withdrawn without any qualification.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am saying here, Ma'am, the Motion before the House—you know when we were going to school, way back in the when, it was very clear that every sentence has a particular structure. And I am saying this Motion, in the second recital, does not have that structure, which is to say, every sentence must have a subject, every sentence must have a verb. I think any—this is—a Standard 1 or 2 child knows this. Every sentence must have a complement. And here we are in the second recital of this Motion, where we are

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being told—second recital:

“*And whereas* it is provided by section 25(1)...”—I am reading from the Motion—“...of the Act, that on receipt of the financial accounts prescribed by section 24, the Auditor General shall cause them to be examined and audited and shall, within a period of seven months after 30th September in each year;”

To what? There is no complement in the sentence after:

“...examined and audited and shall, within a period of seven months after 30th September in each year;”

Something happens. And if you look at the section, it is there in section 25(1). That is what should have been included here but in their haste, I guess, or this is sloppy drafting?—the complement has been totally left out. And that should have read, after the words, “within a period of seven months after 30th September in each year”:

or such longer period thereafter as Parliament may by resolution appoint, prepare and submit and transmit to the Minister a report upon his examination and audit of all accounts relating to public moneys.

So that—sloppy, last minute, rushing to cover up, I do not know what.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I do not know what it is that they are covering up. So we have that.

And then now, we come to the Motion, we come to the law. And then we had that little debacle earlier in the Sitting where the hon. Speaker called upon the Minister to lay these reports, which are laid on the Table there, and the Minister folded his arms and refused. So to do—even though these documents were

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listed in the name of the Minister of Finance—

Mr. Hosein: 5 and 6 on the—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—numbers—Papers 5 and 6 on the Supplemental Order Paper. The big question is: What is the Government trying to avoid when it comes to scrutiny?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What is the Government trying to avoid?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So we have section 24 of the Act of what is to be done, where:

“...the Treasury...”

—and in this case the Act defines “Treasury” to mean the Minister.

“...the Treasury shall cause to be transmitted to the Auditor General accounts...”—referred to as the financial accounts—“...showing fully the financial position of Trinidad and Tobago on the said 31st December...”—2023.

And in this case, 2023. It continues:

“*And whereas...*”

—that was section 24.

“...section 25(1) of the...”—Exchequer and Audit Act, Chap. 69:01, I believe it is.

“...it is provided at section 25(1) of the Act, that on receipt of the financial accounts prescribed by section 24, the Auditor General shall cause them to be examined and audited and shall, within a period of seven months after 30th September in each year;

And whereas the said section 24(1) provides that the period provided for the transmission of the...accounts by Treasury to the Auditor General may be extended...”

Yes, it can be extended. We will come back to that in a moment.

“...*whereas* section 25(1) also provides that the period...”—and that can also be extended. “*And whereas* it is necessary in respect of financial accounts for 2023 that the period of time specified under section 24(1)...”—is to—“...be extended...”

And specified in:

“...section 24(1) of the Exchequer and Audit Act be extended from...four months after 30th September...to a period of eight months...”—which will take us way down into this year.

“...*further resolved*...purpose of the financial accounts for 2023...period of time under section 25(1)...be extended from...seven months after...30 September 2023 to a period of eleven months after the 30th September...”

Look at where we are going, to a period of seven months, right, to 11 months. Section 24 of the Act tells us:

“Within...four months after September 30th in each year, or such longer period...as Parliament may by resolution, appoint—

- (a) the Treasury shall cause to be transmitted to the Auditor General accounts showing fully the financial position...”—as at—“...31st December...”

And what is to be included in this?

- “(i) the Exchequer Account;”—is included.
- “(ii) the statement of public debt;

- (iii) the statement of loans from revenue;
- (iv) the statement of revenue showing...sums estimated to be received into the Exchequer Account and the sums actually so received in the period of account;
- (v) the statement of expenditure, showing the sums to be issued out of the Exchequer Account and the sums actually so issued...
- (vi) the statement of the loans or credits...
- (vii) the statement of assets and liabilities;
- (viii) such other statements as Parliament may from time to time require;"

Very important financial information for Trinidad and Tobago for transparency and accountability.

Mr. Hosein: The financial outlook.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The financial outlook, certainly.

“(b) accounting officers...”—will—“...prepare and transmit to the Auditor General...”—the—“...accounts of the moneys expended under the votes for which they were responsible...Each such...account shall contain an explanatory statement for any variation between the expenditure and the sum voted, and shall contain such other information and shall be in such form as the Treasury may direct and such statement as well as the appropriation account shall be signed by the accounting officer;”

As well:

“(c) receivers of revenue shall prepare and transmit to the Auditor

General statements of...receipts and disbursements in such form as the Treasury may direct.”

And then you have the:

“...four months”—period—“after the close of such period of account as may be prescribed in any law relating thereto...”

And it continues, section 25 speaks to us, as I said, about the, after 30th September, what has to be done.

Then we move to—there is here now, two sets of laws governing what happens with these reports after the Auditor has done her work. One set of it is under the Exchequer and Audit Act, Chap. 69:01, sections 24 and 25. The other piece of law, which is the Constitution, which is the supreme law of our country and therefore it will trump anything contained within the Exchequer and Audit Act, the Constitution tells us at section 116 what happens.

So before that, what would happen is that, according to the Exchequer and Audit Act, the Auditor General sends it to the Minister, the Minister then has to lay it, the Minister then has—if he does not lay it for 30 days upon receipt, then it shall be sent to the Speaker to be laid. But section 116 of the Constitution changed that and it now says that the report shall be sent to three officials: One, the Speaker of the House, the President of the Senate and the Minister, all at the same time. This was to avoid where Ministers would get statements and hug it up, hold it, again, reducing transparency and accountability.

6.45 p.m.

So, we have the Constitution now trumping what is in the Exchequer Act and we saw that debacle today about what happened, and who was to lay and

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who was not to lay. I would not get into that. One thing I will say is the Auditor General has complied with her constitutional duty.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Here in the report within the time frames specified and in submitting same to the three officials named. I do respectfully believe that the Speaker has also complied with her duty.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And the failure with respect to constitutional and statutory duty is on the part of the Government sitting on that side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, what is the process, Madam, under the law? Step one, within a period of four months after September 30 each year, the Treasury will cause to be transmitted to the Auditor General, accounts showing the financial position on the said 31st December, and in this case, of 2023. Step two, on receipt of the accounts prescribed by section 24, the Auditor General shall cause them to be examined and audited and shall, within a period of seven months after September 30 each year, prepare and transmit to the Minister, a report on his examination or audit of all accounts relating to public money. They do so, together with certified copies of each of the said accounts, both above deadlines are subject to extension by a resolution of Parliament. Both, which the Motion is now reciting to us.

However, the extensions now contained are retroactive extensions. What does this mean? We are now going to extend the time backwards, because the auditors have already prepared this report, signed it, submitted it to the relevant officers, according to law and, therefore, you are going to extend time. So,

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what are we going to do with that report now? What will we do with that report sitting on that table today? Are we going to throw it away somewhere? Put it in the dustbin? What are we going to do with those reports that were prepared? So, one—I will come back to the hiding.

So, we are coming to the violation of the constitutional provisions in our law.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: If we do the calculations for the extensions, under section 24 you had to transmit the accounts as at December 31st, by January 31, 2024. Then, four months from September 30 will take us into January. Where is January now? Where are we now? We are in the month of March. How many months later?

Mr. Hosein: April.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am sorry, the month of April. How many months later you are now coming to say, hey, we have some problems, you know. “All this thing about check and who recheck and how you sign cheque and hard copy and soft copy and the ink” all that, all that nonsense, in my respectful view, all that is nonsense.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, four months. When you get the accounts now, the auditor will examine and audit these accounts and prepare and give the Minister a report. This now, we are moving seven months from September 30, which is April 30th, which we are within time, according to the law, we are in time. But now we are being asked to move this to 11 months. It is clear the Auditor General cannot comply with this mandate until the Treasury sends their

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business. It is not made clear in the Motion that by logical inference it may be that the Treasury is the one causing delay and who caused the delay. You know, even with COVID, in the COVID period, Madam, even then the reports were submitted in time. They were laid in the Parliament in that time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I have a document here, you can find for me, which, over the years I have, that we searched since 2008, I was able to find it. In every single year from that period up to last year, 2022, all the reports were completed. All were submitted—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—to the relevant officers and all were filed—no, it is not there—in time in the Parliament and laid in the Parliament to give that accountability and transparency. This is not your money. This is the money of the taxpayers and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It belongs to them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, the Auditor General is a constitutionally enshrined and politically insulated office. All laws must be read subject to the Constitution as supreme law. Under the Constitution, as I said, the report has to be submitted to the Speaker, President of the Senate and the Minister of Finance. Section 116(4) of the Constitution tells us that the Auditor General shall submit reports annually to the Speaker, and so on. The receipt of the report, President of the Senate, Speaker must cause the report to be laid before the Senate and the House. This must be done at the next Sitting.

I have been informed, one of my Members has been informed by the Clerk of the House, Mr. Brian Caesar, that the report was received here on the

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24th , the same Wednesday 24th . And that is why I said the Parliament did their duty. On the 24th, the law in 116 says that it must be laid at the next Sitting. So, from Wednesday's receipt, when is the next Sitting, today, today Friday so, it was to be laid.

“Section 116(5) says the President of the Senate”—or anybody else—
“shall cause the report to be laid before the Senate and the House...at the next sitting of the Senate and the House...respectively.”

If the report has not been completed and submitted in accordance with 116, then 116(5) will obviously not be applicable. If the Auditor General has completed the report and submitted it under 116(4), then failure to lay the report at the next Sitting is in breach, I repeat again, of the Constitution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, if the report has been completed and submitted, what is the need for the Motion extending the time for same? It is done. It is done. The report is done. The Auditor General is now—what is the word—“functus”. She has complied with her duty. She has completed her duty under the law of our land. How can you now extend time, when that is done? I come back again, what are we going to do with these big fat books? A lot of work went into those reports, a lot, a lot of work. What would become of those? Will we forever hide them? But you know there is a saying, whatever is done in darkness, what, always comes to light.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, since the report is completed, submitted, there is no need to extend the time, because there has been compliance with the deadlines set in both the Exchequer Act and in the Constitution. Unless there

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was a breach of section 24 of the Exchequer Act and the January deadline was missed, then I could see there could only be the need to retroactively extend the time for that period if the report was not completed by the January date, and so on, and then you would have had, you could have retroactively do what you are doing now.

The Minister must clarify exactly what has occurred, what he is seeking to do by this Motion. Is it that the report has not been completed by both the Treasury and the Auditor General and they want more time, hence this extension? But that is not true. The Auditor General is sitting right in front of my eyes, in front of this entire Parliament, as a completed reported, dated the same Wednesday 24th, 2024 and submitted on the same Wednesday 24, 2024 and laid on the Supplementary Order Paper for today's sitting. So, it has been completed. The report has been completed, submitted in accordance with the Constitution.

Hon. Member: *[Interruption]*

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Pardon? Well, look it is there, that is it. Both reports are there, the report and the financial accounts as well. So, what is the problem? Is the Government trying to avoid scrutiny in the upcoming mid-year review in Parliament?

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We have always, in the past, gotten the report laid here in time for scrutiny and the mid-term review, which will be anytime soon.

Remember section 24(1) shows fully financial position as at 31st December to include—I said it before—exchequer account. This issue the

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Member raised, is it related to the exchequer account? Is it related to public debt, statement of loans, statement of revenue, of course, revenue and expenditure, statement of loans, all of these things? So, if you are doing that, why you want to hide this financial information from the public? Why is it you do not want to do what is constitutionally required to be done? This is a detailed fiscal account. Again, what does the Government want to hide? I do not understand it. I can only speculate, which I will do in a moment. The Auditor General's report states that the Government is trying to hide from the population, what? Why is the Government so determined not—

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia, you have two more minutes of ordinary speaking time, you are entitled to an additional 15 minutes to complete your contribution if you so wish.

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

Madam Speaker: Are you going to use that?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, Madam, I would be very grateful.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, Madam Speaker, I caused some searches to be done. The fact is that in the last 15 years, that is all I could have found up to this time, the Auditor General has never submitted a report late, nor have they ever asked for an extension of time, not even during COVID in 2020. Here are the figures that we can find, easily accessible on the Auditor General's website. Year 2007, date of report, April 29, 2008, Charmaine Ottley; 2008, April 27, 2009, Charmaine Ottley; 2009, April 29, 2010, Charmaine Ottley; 2010, April 28, 2011, Charmaine Ottley; 2011, April 25, 2012, Charmaine Ottley; 2012, April 29, 2013, Charmaine Ottley; 2013, April 29, 2014, Charmaine Ottley;

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2014, April 29, 2015, Majid Ali; 2015 report, April 29, 2016, Majid Ali; 2016, April 27, 2017, Majid Ali; 2017, April 30, 2018, Majid Ali; 2018 report, April 29, 2019, Lorelly Pujadas; report 2019, April 29, 2020, Lorelly Pujadas; report 2020, April 29, 2021, Lorelly Pujadas; 2021 report, April 28, 2022, Lorelly Pujadas; 2022, April 27, 2023; and now we have the 2023 report dated Wednesday 24th, to have been laid here in the Parliament.

So, all these years, every Auditor General complied with their duty. We now have a new Auditor General who has complied as well. This is, I think, her first report. The Auditor General has complied, Jaiwantie Ramdass. And then we have the dates laid. So, in addition to the date of report, every single one was laid in this House on time, in compliance with the law. So, what is the problem now? That report has been sent to Parliament this week, what is the problem? If you have a problem, Minister this is not the way to fix it. You probably need some new lawyers. This is not the way to fix the problem, Minister. You need new lawyers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, I come back again, what it is that you are trying to hide, what is it? Why is the Government so determined not to make this report a public document for the entire nation to see? What does that report contain that they do not want the public to see? What are you hiding? I wonder, is there a \$1 billion in Government expenditure in that report that remains unverified and unaccounted for—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—because there are no supporting documents?

Hon. Member: No way!

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Mr. Hosein: \$1 billion?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: \$1 billion. Is that what you are trying to hide from the public? Is it that you also do not want the public to find out that a particular MP, I think it is from Toco or maybe Grande somewhere, was paid the amount of about \$750,000 in fiscal 2023? Did the Auditor General confirm that there is a \$7 billion deficit for fiscal 2023?

Mr. Hosein: \$7 billion?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: \$7 billion deficit.

Mr. Hosein: “You sure is \$7 billion?”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am asking. It is a question. Are the audited accounts showing that the revenue for fiscal 2023 is 61.8 billion? Are the audited accounts showing that the revenue for fiscal 2023 is 69.3 billion?

7:00 p.m.

If you have a problem, Minister, this is not the way to fix it. You probably need some new lawyers. This is not the way to fix the problem.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: You need new lawyers. Yes. So, I come back again: What it is you are trying to hide? What is it? Why is the Government so determined not to make this report a public document for the entire nation to see? What does that report contain that they did not want the public to see? What are you hiding?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: What?

Hon. Member: What are you hiding?

Mr. Hosein: We must know.

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Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: I wonder? Is there a \$1 billion government expenditure in that report that remains unverified and unaccounted for?

Mr. Hosein: No. No way.

Hon. Member: No way.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Because there are no supporting documents.

Mr. Hosein: \$1 billion?

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: \$1 billion.

Mr. Hosein: \$1 billion.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Is that what you are trying to hide from the public? Do you also—is it that you do not want the public to find out that a particular MP, I think he is from Toco or maybe Grande or somewhere, was paid the amount of about \$750,000—

Mr. Hosein: What?

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC:—in fiscal 2023.

Mr. Hosein: Oh my!

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Did the Auditor General confirm that there is a \$7 billion deficit for fiscal 2023?

Mr. Hosein: Ohhh! \$7 billion?

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: \$7 billion.

Mr. Hosein: You sure is \$7 billion? \$7 billion.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: I am asking. Is a question. Is the audited account showing that the revenue fiscal '23 is \$61.8 billion?

Mr. Hosein: Hmm.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Is the audit account showing that the revenue for fiscal

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2023 is—this one?—\$69.3 billion?

Mr. Hosein: Yes, \$69.3 billion.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: This means revenue and expenditure—

Mr. Hosein: This is expenditure.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Yes. Revenue of \$68.1 billion, is it what that report tells us, and then expenditure is \$69.3 billion? You know what that means? That means that there is a deficit of over \$7 billion—

Mr. Hosein: Oh my! Wow!

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: —in fiscal 2023. Is that what you are hiding? What are you hiding? Is the Government providing accounts to the Auditor General of an additional about \$3 billion in revenue and the Auditor General cannot find it, just cannot find it? This reminds me of the \$17 billion that the Prime Minister told the country that he had brought back. \$17 billion—

Mr. Hosein: From travelling.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: —from travelling. Because of his travels. And up to now, no one can find any evidence—

Mr. Hosein: “Not ah pound ah yam.”

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: —anywhere in any account. Is this imaginary billion revenue an attempt to close that \$7 billion deficit that we recorded in 2023?

Mr. Hosein: Wow!

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: I have to wonder, is it that the Government is trying to hide the fact that maybe they have super-maxed the overdraft? Remember they used to talk about us maxing out the overdraft—

Mr. Hosein: Overdraft.

Hon. Member: “Yeh, yeh, yeh.”

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Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: —and we are living on fumes and driving on fumes. All those things that were totally not true. Are they trying to hide the fact that they have super-maxed the overdraft facility? Is it that the exchequer account is now overdrawn by about \$50 billion?

Hon. Members: Wow!

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: In 2022—I have that report here, the 2022 report. 2022, yes. This is the Auditor General report, Madam Speaker, for 2022.

Mr. Hosein: She can keep it.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Yes. I will keep it. Thank you. Fiscal—the Auditor General’s report for 2023—2022, Madam Speaker. I am asking—2022, the overdraft of the exchequer, which was the same overdraft driving on fumes and so on, was only \$245 million. Million “eh”.

Mr. Hosein: Overdrawn.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Overdrawn by \$245 million. I am now asking whether \$7 billion was withdrawn from the overdraft in 2023.

Mr. Hosein: Wow!

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: \$7 billion when previously it was only, what? \$245 million?

Mr. Hosein: That is true.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: And if this true, then this would be—that would be the highest the exchequer has overdrawn in the history of this country.

Mr. Hosein: That is what they hiding?

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Is that the big secret that this Government is hiding? I am asking further, is the Government afraid of the public finding out that in 2023, maybe, they took four local loans amounting to \$3.8 billion? And then

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we come to the public debt. Is the Government hiding a big secret that the public debt has now crossed \$100 billion? Is it that our debt now stands at probably a figure like about \$102 billion or over \$100 billion? This is due to large and wanton waste and squandermania of taxpayers' dollars that happened in the last several years.

So, we ask these questions. We ask these questions, are these some of the reasons, there is much more in this report as defined from the reports we have in 2022. There is a whole list of things. Is this what the Government does not want people to know, does not want the public to know? I have been saying that the Government is broke.

Mr. Hosein: "Hmm."

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: I have said it for a few months now that the Government is broke, and I say it because of what is happening with the revenues coming from the various streams of revenue. We see where the budgeted figure for natural gas is less than 50 percent of what was budgeted. So that revenue stream will be less than 50 percent expected. We look at other funds, we see what programmes, whatever has been happening. So, let me come to the crux of the matter of what the Government is doing here, I come back again, is a total violation of the Constitution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: If you have problems, and I am saying all these years people never had these problems, but if you have a problem, you have a remedy. If you want a good lawyer, talk to us, we have many good lawyers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: And we are not disqualified from Miami.

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Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: And we are not disqualified from any court. Not disqualified. The Exchequer and Audit Act, 69:01.

“25 (4) The Auditor General may at any time if it appears to him desirable...” —shall submit— “...a special report to the Minister for presentation in like manner to Parliament. Such special report may be made on any matter incidental to his powers and duties under the Act.”

Any matter.

So, if he has now found out, look, we have a problem with the cheque, and the ink and all these things. You cannot come now and tear up this report and make a whole new report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: You cannot do it. You are violating the Constitution. What you can do is utilise 25(4).

Mr. Hosein: Correct.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: And then you can do 26:

“If at any time it appears to the Auditor General that any irregularities have occurred in the receipt, custody or expenditure of public moneys or in the receipt, custody, issue, sale, transfer or delivery of any stamps, securities, stores or other State property, or in the accounting for the same, he shall immediately bring the matter to the notice of”—whom?—“the Treasury.”

Did the Auditor General bring any such irregularities to the attention of the Minister? I am informed the answer is no. The Minister could tell us if these were ever brought, and today the Minister speaks to us about senior public servants. Who are these unnamed senior public servants whose tell you to do

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this? Who are they? You said some committee was set up and— Was the Auditor General part of that committee? Who is the main functionary, or only statutory functionary for this purpose? Who are these unnamed persons—tell us—giving you such bad advice? I say with the greatest of respect to them, they probably mean well. But you see you could run, and we would always tell you Mr. Ken Valley, I remember him sitting right there, former Member of Parliament, the late Mr. Ken Valley, he says; “You could run, but you cannot hide!”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: This entire exercise today, if I may say so. I say this entire exercise today would take you to the courthouse.

Mr. Hosein: Yes.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: It would take you to the courthouse.

Mr. Hosein: And you will lose again.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: And you will lose again. And you will have to pay the costs. So, when it is you are extending like this, I say, retroactively where it is the report is already completed, you cannot come and change the report by extending the time. You cannot. But you could do a special report.

Mr. Hosein: Correct.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: You have now discovered these discrepancies. You can ask the Auditor General, on this section I just read, to proceed and go forward. Do a special report. Do a special report. Madam Speaker, in conclusion, I end by calling on the Government to stop abusing its power and authority.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Stop using this scant parliamentary majority to undermine the spirit of the Constitution and rescind and withdraw this Motion immediately.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Imagine the secrecy, blatant sinister lack of transparency and accountability that has now led to this historic move to not lay the Auditor General's report on time and force the Auditor General, which should never happen, independent office, not at the behest of any other authority, to force the Auditor General, thinking that you would get a parliamentary scant majority today to bypass the constitutional provisions. As I say, that will never happen because that will land up in the courthouse hon. Minister. They are undermining our democracy in this unprecedented sinister move. The country needs to know how they have spent our billions of dollars in the past year. That is our right. We condemn this Motion in every possible way.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: We say it is wrong, it is undemocratic and speaks to a galloping dictatorship by that Government. I serve them warning, again what is in the dark will come to light sooner rather than later. Your dictatorship days are definitely numbered.

Mr. Hosein: Take that Motion and play tic-tac-toe with it.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: Take that Motion, go back to the drawing board, and do the right thing.

Mr. Hosein: Pelt it away.

Mrs. K. Bissessar SC: You cannot take the Parliament's vote, because if the

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Parliament is acting illegally in this House, on this Motion, to say I now have a majority Madam Speaker, Auditor General you have to go back, scrap away all of this, and go back and audit and do—retroact everything backward. That majority will not suffice under the provisions of our Constitution. I thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: Playing tic-tac-toe with that Motion.

7.10 p.m.

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I rise to support the hon. Minister of Finance on the Motion before this House, and to make a few remarks in support of him, not with reference to the details which he is the master of, but really to look at the record of how we have got here, with reference to the applicable law.

The resolution before you, Madam Speaker, is clear, it references sections 24 and 25 of the Exchequer and Audit Act, and it bears emphasis that sections 24 and 25 of the Exchequer and Audit Act require the Auditor General, as one might expect, to examine and audit papers and documents that are sent to her under this Act.

Madam Speaker, section 24 of the Act requires:

“...the Treasury...”—to—“...cause...”—the account—“...showing fully the financial position of Trinidad and Tobago...”

To be transmitted to the Auditor General:

“Within a period of four months after 30th September in each year, or such longer period thereafter as Parliament may by resolution, appoint—

”

So as a general proposition, if the Treasury proposed to submit the accounts for whatever reason after the 31st of January, that is to say, after the expiry of four months from the 30th of September, then the time would necessarily have to be extended by the Parliament.

In this case, we know on the information put before this House by the hon. Minister of Finance that the Treasury submitted the accounts on time, 31st of January, 2024, but later discovered errors and brought those errors to the attention of the high constitutional office of the Auditor General of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Treasury was obviously bound to do so because its obligation was to provide the Auditor General with accounts showing fully the financial position of Trinidad and Tobago, and that it had discovered that the accounts which were submitted were indeed not full, and did not represent the financial position of Trinidad and Tobago. The understatement arose as we know from what the Minister of Finance has told us, as a result of an error which emanated from the new electronic chequing system of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago and other aspects of that system.

It is the Auditor General's duty under section 9 of the Act to audit those accounts, and to that end, she has the power under section 10(1) of the Act to call upon any officer for any explanation and information, which the Auditor General may require in order to permit her to discharge her duties. And that is a continuing obligation that subsists until the deadline date for the submission of her report to the Parliament. It is a duty equally under section 10(1)(b):

“to authorise any officer...to conduct any inquiry, examination or

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audit...”

And under section 10(1)(c):

“to send for and have the custody of any books, accounts, vouchers or papers...”—and—“...in any wise concerning the public accounts...”

I repeat that, under 10(1)(c) in the currency of the period when the documentation has been provided for her, continuing up to the point at which she submits her report to Parliament, she may:

“...send for and have...custody of any books...”—or—“...accounts, vouchers, or papers...”—and—“...in any wise concerning the public accounts...”

Implicit, therefore, in the performance of the Auditor General’s power is the possibility that during the course of her audit, errors may be discovered, and noted, and corrections accordingly made where deemed necessary. Madam Speaker, the plain ordinary oxford dictionary meaning of audit is:

An official examination and verification of financial accounts especially by an independent body.

That is the purpose of an audit. An “examination and verification of financial accounts”.

You do not receive accounts from the Treasury, the statement of revenue, put it into a book and present that to a Parliament as your audited account. It is your duty to examine those accounts and if of your own volition you discover there are errors, you are mandated by the relevant sections of the Exchequer and Audit Act to go after the source of the errors to verify and thereafter to submit a true account. And equally, if it is brought to your attention by someone else that that which was submitted on time has erroneous material in

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it, it is your duty to receive the information to demonstrate the error so as to correct your audit and present a proper audit report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: It really is A, B, C. It is no more complex than that. And just as much as the Treasury is obligated to present the full financial position of Trinidad and Tobago, the Auditor General is required through her audit to determine whether the full financial position has been represented. So that if it were to be discovered during the audit that the account submitted understated or overstated revenue or expenditure, the Auditor General is duty bound to carry out the necessary corrections. That is a statutory responsibility.

There was, let me emphasize, Madam Speaker, there was and is nothing untoward about the Treasury—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Members, I am really having difficulty, okay. So that the long commentary that is happening, Members can go out, continue their conversation and come back in. Attorney General.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. There was and is nothing untoward, as I was saying, about the Treasury notifying the Auditor General of errors in the accounts and providing her with information, which would have allowed corrections to be made. No extension of time by a resolution of Parliament is required in those circumstances because the accounts had already been submitted on time. But we will not spend more time on that, Madam Speaker, because we are here today with the prudence of the Minister of Finance to ask this House for its imprimatur to give that extension, so that that which necessary has to be done will be done correctly.

You have heard from the hon. Minister of Finance, Madam Speaker, (A) the cause of the error. Through the diligence of the Treasury Division of the Ministry of Finance, those errors were brought to the attention of the Auditor General well before the deadline of the 31st of April, 2024. (B), you have heard from the Auditor General the concerted efforts made by the officers of the Treasury Division to deliver the corrected material including by in-person visits to the Office of the Auditor General and being denied entry. Being denied. Officers of the Ministry of Finance, Treasury Division, seeking to go to the Auditor General with the corrective information were denied entry to the office of the Auditor General to provide the corrective information.

So alarming was the conduct of the office holder of this high constitutional office, that the Minister of Finance came to the Attorney General for advice, which I gave, including by the provision of two eminent counsels, one senior, and one very experienced senior junior counsel, which advice led to a pre-action protocol letter being written and delivered to the Auditor General on the 15th of April, 2024, and without going into it in detail, Madam Speaker, I want to place on record it is a six-page letter. And I want to place on record that the pre-action protocol letter written on behalf of the Minister of Finance, and settled by senior counsel went into the chronology that was being put before the Auditor General, to demonstrate the time when the financial statement was submitted firstly, 31st of January, and then the efforts which were made thereafter to ask the Auditor General to perform her statutory constitutional duties.

So the letter proceeds to recount with attachments to it, that in the week of the 26th of February, the error was discovered. The material understatement

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that during the period from late February 2024 to early 2024, personnel from the Treasury Division and the Budget Division and the Inland Revenue Division carried out investigations. Thereafter, on the 25th of March, an attempt was made to communicate with the Auditor General by the Ministry of Finance.

On the 26th of March, a further attempt was made. On the 27th of March, a further attempt was made. Thereafter, on the 28th of March, another attempt was made because the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance was not receiving any response from the Auditor General in response to letters being written to the Auditor General. On the 28th of March, the Permanent Secretary sent a Memorandum by email to the Auditor General explaining the error, the provenance of the error, and the significance of the grave implications if the error was not corrected. On the 5th of April, the Permanent Secretary submitted a further memorandum to the Auditor General pointing out the error that emanated from the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago.

On the 8th of April—all of this narrated in the pre-action protocol letter. On the 8th of April, the Permanent Secretary sent a further memorandum to the Auditor General. On the 8th of April, again, the Comptroller of Accounts sent an email with a compact disk containing the corrected information to the Auditor General.

On the morning of the 9th of April, further attempts are made by the Ministry of Finance to approach the Auditor General. Up to this point, the information is not being received. All of this being narrated in the pre-action protocol letter. Attempts were made to call the Auditor General. Calls went—on the 9th of April, calls went unanswered. On the 11th of April, the officers—on the 9th of April the officers went to the Office of the Auditor General, on

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arrival they were told there was no one there to receive the items, that is to say, the compact disk with the corrected information and they should return on the 11th of April. They returned on the 11th of April, and the Assistant Auditor General told the officers of the Ministry of Finance that he was instructed by the Auditor General to accept only the compact disk containing the original public accounts but not to accept the compact disk containing the amended public accounts. It is nothing short of bizarre.

At the request of the Auditor General, the three officers then met with the senior legal officer in the Auditor General's Department. The senior legal officer excused herself, said she was going to consult with the Auditor General, came back and said to the Ministry of Finance persons that she was instructed to accept only the compact disk containing the electronic copy of the public accounts based on the original revenue statement, but not to accept the compact disk containing the amended public accounts.

That was the basis on which an eight-page pre-action protocol letter was written to the Auditor General asking her to please receive the corrected information, and cautioning her of the grave implications that would befall the economy of Trinidad and Tobago if she proceeded to publish a report based on information which to her knowledge was erroneous.

Madam Speaker, the Auditor General replied to the pre-action protocol letter on the 17th of April, and among the things that she emphasized in her reply was that she quoted section 116 subsection (6) of the Constitution, and that subsection states:

“In the exercise of his functions under this Constitution the Auditor General shall not be subject to the direction or control of any other person

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or authority.”

And at the end of her statement her letter, she continues to decline.

7.25 p.m.

Madam Speaker, it is remarkable that we could find ourselves in the year 2024, in Trinidad and Tobago, an evolved democracy, to have this kind of conduct from a senior, high, constitutional office-holder.

On the 17th of April, 2024, Madam Speaker, I received from the Auditor General, at my office, Office of Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs, a letter dated the 17th of April, 2024, by which the Auditor General requested a legal opinion from me, as Attorney General, on sections 24 and 25 of the Exchequer and Audit Act. Madam Speaker, through you, I can assure the public of this country and this House, that I referred that letter to another eminent senior counsel for advice. As a result of the advice received by letter of the 19th of April, 2024, addressed to the Auditor General and signed by me, I wrote to the Auditor General in these terms:

Dear Auditor General,

Re: Request for Advice

I acknowledge receipt of your letter dated the 17th of April, 2024, with attachments, requesting my advice on whether the Auditor General is required to consider the amended statements referred to in your said letter.

In light of the provisions of sections 24 and 25 of the Exchequer and Audit Act, consistent with my duty under the Constitution, and as you are aware, I am already advising the hon. Minister of Finance on this very

matter. I refer to the pre-action protocol letter dated the 16th of April, which is one of the attachments to your said letter to me.

In the circumstances, it would be inappropriate for me to render any advice to you on this matter.

I recommend that, with all appropriate urgency, you should retain independent counsel to give you such advice. I give the undertaking that as Attorney General, I am prepared to pay reasonable fees incurred by you, as Auditor General, for the retention and obtaining of that independent advice.

Sincerely yours.

It is not for me to say, Madam Speaker, nor to speculate, whether the Auditor General obtained such independent advice. Suffice it to say, that in less than a week of receipt of my response to her and six days before the 31st of April deadline—

Mr. Imbert: 30th.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC:—30th of April deadline, books arrived in this House and in the other place purporting to be the Report of the Auditor General.

Madam Speaker, in her response of the 15th of April to the pre-action protocol letter—because the Auditor General responded—in the final paragraph, the Auditor General stated:

The Ministry of Finance is free to submit an original and signed dated letter to the Auditor General by 12.00 noon on April 16, 2024, recalling the public accounts previously submitted and dated January 31st, confirming the statement of declaration and certification previously provided as inaccurate, and providing the revised public accounts.

And this letter says, the Auditor General will be published in the Auditor General's Report. This is the response of the Auditor General to the pre-action protocol letter.

The challenge, therefore, which is presented in this very bizarre situation that we find ourselves in, Madam Speaker, arises from the fact that: a) The Auditor General has refused, in flagrant contravention of her statutory and constitutional responsibilities under the Constitution and the Exchequer and Audit Act, to accept the corrected materials from the Treasury Division of the Ministry of Finance as part of her audit.

Secondly, she has refused—because she appears to have wrongly relied on section 116(6) of the Constitution, which states, and I quote it again—the Auditor General has already quoted it twice in correspondence to the Minister of Finance and to me.

“In the exercise of his functions under this Constitution, the Auditor General shall not be subject to the direction or control of any other person or authority.”

Her senior legal officer actually referred to this subsection and put the words “emphasis mine”, after those words were placed in bold font.

And (c) the Auditor General has required the Treasury to recall the accounts, which had been submitted in time, and to resubmit amended accounts, certifying them to be correct. The doing of that, which the Auditor General has requested the Ministry of Finance to do, would give the appearance, Madam Speaker, that the accounts were submitted late. When in fact what happened was that, they were submitted on time but then later corrected. That is the remarkable, bizarre situation we find ourselves in.

Let me be clear, whether we were before this House on this resolution, this Motion today—I accept we are here through the prudence of the Minister of Finance— or not, it would not be unlawful for the Auditor General to perform her audit, according to the Oxford English Dictionary meaning of that word “audit”, on the basis of the corrected, resubmitted accounts, which she refused to accept. The accounts were submitted on time and later corrected. They were not submitted outside of the time limit. And that brings me to a point that I had intended to make, Madam Speaker, in the other place, on a debate that is still taking place there, and the Leader of the Opposition advised herself today, as the Opposition seems to continue to advise itself wrongly on the so-called separation of powers.

We are in an unfortunate situation in this country in which office-holders do not understand what the separation of powers means. Separation of powers does not mean that one branch of government or one high constitutional office is not allowed to speak to another branch. And I can do no better than to quote from a quotation out of a Court of Appeal judgment of this country, which has been approved in the Privy Council for many years since, and that is in the Court of Appeal decision, Appeal No. 10 of 2004, *Director of Personnel Administration and Police Service Commission v Cooper, Balbosa*, and others, and I quote from Chief Justice Sharma at the time in January 2005, at paragraph 28 to 29 of his dictum:

“In all Constitutions, based on the Westminster system of government, there is in operation the doctrine of the separation of powers. By this doctrine, the autonomy of each branch of government is presumed to be immune from undue encroachment from any others. Thus, the

Legislature, Executive and Judiciary operate in an environment which is presumed free from influence...”

While...”

—and this is the critical part of Chief Justice Sharma:

“While in the popular sense it may be convenient to divide the powers of government into...specific spheres, in practical reality such rigid classification is neither desirable nor possible. On the basis of the doctrine as initially formulated by French jurist Montesquieu, what is desired is not that the different organs...should have no influence or control over the acts of each other but rather...”

—and I emphasize this from the judgment of Chief Justice Sharma:

“...but rather that neither should exercise the whole power of the other.”

You are permitted to speak to each other.

The Auditor General is required, by her enabling legislation, the Exchequer and Audit Act, to conduct an audit during the period until she hands in her audit report. And until she does that, the Ministry of Finance is lawfully entitled to bring to her attention errors that were made with respect to a finance statement that was delivered to her on time. And to show her, so that she does her statutory duty and her constitutional duty correctly, where the errors are, so that she may correct those errors and present a full, true report to this House, not a purported report.

7.35 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: I therefore stand here today, Madam Speaker, to support the prudence of the hon. Minister of Finance to bring this resolution,

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notwithstanding the fact that the statement of revenue was correctly submitted in time in January 2024. I regret that this newly appointed Auditor General, in her first year of putting an audit report before this House, should start off with a purported report and appears to be misadvising herself. If she has sought legal advice, I recommend she change attorneys and obtain competent legal advice. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

PROCEDURAL MOTION

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 15(5), I beg to move that the House continues to sit until the completion of the business before it.

Question put and agreed to.

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Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Saddam Hosein (Barataria/San Juan): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, after we heard that lesson on constitutional law, I think the hon. Attorney General missed the class where our Constitution speaks to the Attorney General being the guardian of our democracy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Today, Madam Speaker, he is in dereliction of duty.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. S. Hosein: We are hearing one of the most powerful officeholders in this country, that being the person of the Attorney General, giving advice for the harassment, threatening and the encouraging of the Auditor General to breach the provisions in the Constitution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: If I was the Prime Minister of this country, Madam Speaker, I would fire the Minister of Finance and the Attorney General together.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They, Madam Speaker, came to this Parliament to give us all of this information about cheques and about books and balance, and digital images and—Madam Speaker, just give us the report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: It is as simple as that.

Dr. Moonilal: I want my copy.

Mr. S. Hosein: Just provide a copy of the report. That report that was signed, sealed, delivered, submitted to the Speaker, the President of the Senate and the Minister of Finance, we are entitled to a copy of that report and we want the report, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: We want the report.

Mr. S. Hosein: We want the report. But I stood here, Madam Speaker, to correct the record because this Attorney General has a penchant for not speaking the truth. He is a complete stranger to the truth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Complete—complete stranger to the truth.

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Dr. Moonilal: He cannot recognize the truth.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, the law is clear, the law says that:

After the financial year, 30th September, you have four months in which the Treasury is to submit the accounts to the Auditor General.

Why do we have an Auditor General? To verify the figures that were collected in terms of revenue, verify the figures in terms of expenditure for all of the accounts of Trinidad and Tobago. Very simple. The law says:

Provide this information to the Auditor General by the end of January.

So, January 2024, the Minister admitted that the accounts were in fact provided by the date; no problem. No problem, the accounts were delivered on that date.

Dr. Moonilal: “Ah thought he say he make ah mistake.”

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, then apparently, two months later, in around March 28, 2024, a memo was sent—sorry, let me just backtrack—on the 25th of March, 2024, apparently the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance verbally communicated with the Auditor General, saying, “Aye, we have some problems with them accounts we give you all.”

Dr. Moonilal: What?

Mr. S. Hosein: Verbal, you know. You are talking about the public accounts of Trinidad and Tobago—

Dr. Moonilal: Billions?

Mr. S. Hosein:—and there is a verbal communication between the PS from the Ministry of Finance to the Auditor General. And then thereafter, on the 28th of March, 2024—we are at about three days now—a memorandum goes to the Office of the Auditor General, called The Report on Variance in the Statement of Revenue for the year ended September 2023. What the PS of Finance is

advising the Auditor General of is a variance in the statement of revenue that was submitted in January. It says that:

A request was made to allow an amendment to this statement as the variance represented a material amount to the value of \$3.3 billion. At this date, the Ministry of Finance indicated that an amount of the value of \$2.5 billion was reconciled and an unexplained difference of \$781 million.

So that is what the memo is saying. Let us break it down: 31st January, the accounts submitted; around the 25th of March, PS has a verbal communication with the Auditor General; 28th of March, they want to now change the figures on the accounts that were submitted in January. They want to change the figures, and therefore, on the 9th of April, after that, the Ministry of Finance did some reconciliation exercise and they still found a variance of about \$780 million were not reconciled.

Now, that is not the job of the PS, you know. If you are sending accounts to the Auditor General, it is for the Auditor General to verify what figures that were provided by the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: That is not the job of the Ministry of Finance, the Constitution is clear. Your job is to administer, the job of the Auditor General is to audit, it is clear. Thereafter, Madam Speaker, on the 16th of April, 2024, the Ministry of Finance recalled the previous submission and now placed a new account called, the Amended Public Accounts for the year ended September 2023.

Now, Madam Speaker, it gets a bit more strange now, because at the 16th of April, 2024, the Auditor General had in her possession two accounts, both

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accounts are reflecting different figures. One account is reflecting figures of about \$61.8 billion; that is one statement she has, and then she has an amended public accounts stating a figure of \$6.4 billion or so, so there is a \$3 billion difference in the revenue figure that was submitted to the Auditor General. But this is the strange thing, Madam Speaker, the new accounts with the \$6.4 billion that was submitted to the Auditor General came after the January deadline without the Parliament's approval. So how can they ask the Auditor General to accept these accounts without Parliament's approval to extend the time? That is illegal. That is unlawful.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: That is unlawful. Thereafter, you look at the accounts where the both accounts, one reflecting \$61 billion, the other one reflecting—

Madam Speaker: So, you know, Member, remember the accounts are not before us. Okay? So while you could talk to the chronology and so on, you know, in terms of that level of detail, that is not before us at all, neither of them, so I would ask you to desist from that level of detail, wherever you have got it from.

Mr. S. Hosein: Sure, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the bottom line is that they have backdated the amended accounts that were submitted.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: So a new amended account was submitted in April, but it was dated 31st of January, 2024.

Dr. Moonilal: What?

Mr. S. Hosein: That is what the Auditor General had to deal with.

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Madam Speaker: Again, Member, it is the same thing. That is not here before us, so you have to be very careful. Remember you started your contribution with a particular demand—okay?—so while something is on the Table there, it is not yet been laid in the formal sense for that to be information in the debate. So you have got to be really very careful.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I am willing to stand by what I said here today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Had the Government provided the reports—

Madam Speaker: Now, it is not a question of standing by what you have said. This is not a question about challenging the veracity, what I am saying is, this is not the subject of the debate, the actual contents of the report, because the report or reports, or whatever you want to refer to them as, are not yet laid. Okay? So that that sort of granular detail is not permissible.

Mr. S. Hosein: So, Madam Speaker, at the end of the day, there is a report before us, the Minister failed to lay the report. We cannot see the report. We have certain information in our possession why the report was not laid.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: And he wants an extension. He wants an extension.

Mr. S. Hosein: I have information that there is a \$7 billion deficit, they are trying to now make up \$3 billion to prove that the—

Madam Speaker: And again, you know, I cannot tell you how to do things, but while you may have certain information, and the report is not laid—it is on the Order Paper but it is not laid—again, I am not going to allow you in the way you are doing it, as if it is a fact before all of us.

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Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, the Motion says very clearly that we are seeking an extension of time for:

“...the 30th September 2023 to a period of eight months after the 30th of September, 2023:”

—for the submission of the accounts. We are clear on that. So therefore, we are looking at the end—so we are looking at September, October, November, December, January, February, March, April, May, and why?

Dr. Moonilal: Why?

Mr. S. Hosein: Why are you seeking an extension? Is it because the accounts are clearly not matching the figures that were submitted? Is it that because you could not find certain revenue that was submitted? I am asking. Is it that you are asking now for this extension because the accounts that were audited by the Auditor General are not the true and correct accounts of Trinidad and Tobago? Is that why?

Is it because certain moneys could not be verified because of supporting documents not being provided? I am hearing something very, very wrong in this country where the Attorney General is confirming to this Parliament that staff from the Ministry of Finance was going into the Office of the Auditor General and then legal threats went thereafter through a pre-action protocol letter.

Dr. Moonilal: He said that.

Mr. S. Hosein: Is this still a democracy, Madam Speaker?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: He said dat?

Hon. Member: Yes.

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Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]—should be fired.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thereafter, the report will now be laid 11 months from the 30th of September, 2023, because that is what the Motion is resolving.

When that time reaches, Madam Speaker, maybe this Parliament might be on recess. We may not have sight of that report until the next parliamentary term; may be a next government, and, Madam Speaker, that leaves Trinidad and Tobago in a very unfortunate circumstance because we have the mid-year review coming up and we would not be seeing that particular report to confirm what the overdraft would have been, to confirm what Trinidad and Tobago's public debt would have been—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: That is it.

Mr. S. Hosein:—to confirm whether or not any Member of Parliament received \$725,000 in the last fiscal year. I do not know. That money probably gone Toco, or something, I do not know. Because the Auditor General's report, by law, indicates that these are matters that must be provided and compiled within the particular report, Madam Speaker. So I am asking these questions because these are pertinent questions.

You cannot tell an Auditor General, “Listen, we will provide the wrong accounts at a later date, you accept these accounts, you audit these accounts but you could do it without parliamentary approval”, and then you come afterwards to seek parliamentary approval for the accounts you submitted in April. Madam Speaker, that is absolutely wrong, totally wrong. It is dangerous.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. S. Hosein: This is not a precedent that we ought to be setting in this country because it is totally wrong.

It is in violation of the Constitution, and the Attorney General of all persons ought to know better, to give better advice than this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: It is absolutely wrong, Madam Speaker. Why is it that the Government is hiding this report? Give us the report now, and if a special report or a supplemental report or an addendum has to come thereafter, we can read the both reports together, but make this report transparent, make it public. This is why you lay Papers in this Parliament, to make documents public. It is as simple as that.

7.50 p.m.

So all these figures that I have called and I have quoted, maybe we would know whether or not they are verified or not if the reports are made public but, Madam Speaker, I stand by what I said earlier on because we have very good information that this is what happened. That is why we have a particular privilege in this House so that we could stand by what we say and we have our repercussions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: So the Government cannot come at this late stage, Madam Speaker, and tell this Parliament to engage in an act of illegality because we will be no part of it. We will play no part.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Madam Speaker: All right. So, Member for Baratavia/San Juan, I will ask

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you to withdraw it. Find another way to say what you want to say.

Mr. S. Hosein: My interpretation of what is taking place is an illegal act because it does not comply with the Exchequer and Audit Act.

Madam Speaker: So again, you may have an impression, but I think the particular offence that I have pointed out, you have not cured it. Please withdraw it. Find a way to say it.

Mr. S. Hosein: I withdraw that particular statement, Madam Speaker, and I continue with this particular Motion in terms of my debate. At the end of the day, Madam Speaker, we are here to grant an extension to the Government. We do not believe what the Minister of Finance is telling us why the extension is sought. We do not believe it is because of the new amendments to the Central Bank Act and so on with respect to the imaging of cheques. We do not believe that for one second, Madam Speaker. Our particular view on this matter is that the books are trying to adjusted in order for the Government to have a smaller deficit because they want to come and boast to the country, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—that there is some sort of prudent fiscal management. You have some many industries closed down, people losing jobs in this country and they want to tell people, things good eh. That is what they want to do, Madam Speaker. That is, in fact, gaslighting and we will play no part of this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, they ought to stop harassing independent constitutional officeholders in this country.

Dr. Moonilal: They are stalking them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Dr. Moonilal: They should get a protection order.

Mr. S. Hosein: The Government must start complying with the law, Madam Speaker, because at the end of the day, this involves the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Section 116 is, in fact, an entrenched provision of the 1976 Constitution. The Auditor General did her work. We believe that the Parliament did their work, but we are on this side condemning the actions of the Government, and in particular—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—the Minister of Finance and the Attorney General for their actions against hounding the Auditor General in this country. I thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance. Oh, Member for Oropouche West. You give way? Yes. Oropouche West.

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I rise to spend a few minutes on this Motion. It will not be very long. I want to endorse the contributions of the two speakers on this side—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—the hon. Leader of the Opposition and my colleague the Member for Barataria/San Juan. Madam Speaker, today began with a series of very unfortunate events. Very, very, very unfortunate events. I find it very disturbing to sit here as an elected Member of Parliament and to listen to the hon. Attorney General use the opportunity here today to attack the character of somebody who is not here. I think that is very, very unfortunate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. D. Tancoo: It the second time, Madam Speaker, it is the second time that an attack has been made on an individual who is not here to defend themselves by this Government. I think it is unacceptable. I think it is unethical. I think it is disgusting. I can come up with many, many, many, many more adjectives, Madam Speaker. But it is disturbing, Madam Speaker, that the hon. Attorney General would stand trying to create the perception that he was speaking on the basis of law. My colleague earlier indicated, in fact, both my colleagues earlier indicated why this process that is being followed here is contrary to the law. I would not traverse that direction again because, I frankly, I think this is clear. The Government has its intention. It will twist the events as they are, it will interpret the law as they see fit, whether it is true or not, because when they get taken to court and lose, it is not coming out of their pockets so they do not care.

Madam Speaker, what we saw today is a travesty, it is an abuse of process, Madam Speaker, and it started not just today. Madam Speaker, if nothing else the lesson we should take from this—there are two lessons. One, is the Government will go after—well, let me deal with the first one. The first lesson we should take from these actions here today, Madam Speaker, is that you cannot trust anything that this Government says.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: You cannot trust them. By their own admission, by the admission of the Minister of Finance, and by the hon. Attorney General, information was provided in clear conscience apparently, information was provided up to the deadline date, the due deadline date information was provided, but subsequently sometime in March, more than a month and a half thereafter new information was supplied. So, Madam Speaker, if you cannot

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judge, if you cannot trust the information provided by the Ministry of Finance to the Auditor General, what else can we trust? What else is there? We can have no confidence in any information provided by this Minister of Finance to anybody. If he could mislead—well, let me rephrase that, Madam Speaker. If he could misinform the Auditor General, then he could easily misinform the rest of the country, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Point of order, 48(6). I have had no communication on this matter with the Auditor General. I have neither informed nor misinformed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: So that is imputing improper motives. Not me.

Madam Speaker: So, Member, please withdraw. Find a way to say what you want to say.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, I withdraw and allow me to say this, Madam Speaker. If we are in a situation where the agents of the Minister of Finance, persons who I find great difficulty in believing that information as critical as this is would have left the Ministry of Finance and reached the Auditor General's department without the concurrence and agreement and signature of the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Madam Speaker, the same 48(6). I do not get involved in these matters. The public servants deal with this. I am not involved and he is imputing improper motives.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance, I think you are going to have an opportunity to deal with that. Member for Oropouche West.

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Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, there is a maxim in law that says those that come seeking equity should come with clean hands. This Government here came today, Madam Speaker, with one motive in mind, and it was to malign the character of the Auditor General.

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

Madam Speaker: Member, I think you need to withdraw that, please. I uphold the objection.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Withdrawn, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Withdrawn. Madam Speaker, I want to refer to another issue, Madam Speaker. You see, I think the Auditor General crossed lines recently, and that is why we are here treating with the kind of contempt that the Minister, the hon. Attorney General—

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

Madam Speaker: Member, again I have to uphold the objection. Please withdraw that particular word.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Withdrawn.

Madam Speaker: Find a way, I mean, you may have some passion, but find a way to contain it.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Withdrawn, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I move on. I said earlier that this was not the start of the unfortunate events, Madam Speaker. By his admission, the Minister of Finance indicated that he became aware of these inaccuracies that were submitted somewhere in mid-March.

Mr. Imbert: End of March.

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Mr. D. Tancoo: Sorry. End of March. Thank you. End of March. We are now almost at the end—we are at the end of April. So you became aware of—

Madam Speaker: Member, the conversation is this way please.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Sorry.

Madam Speaker: Right? So please, not you.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Apologies, Ma'am.

Madam Speaker: Yes. Sure.

Mr. D. Tancoo: So, the Minister of Finance became aware of a discrepancy that—apparently that discrepancy was made known to others in his Ministry without his knowledge.

Hon. Member: What?

Mr. D. Tancoo: If nothing else, Madam Speaker, what this tells me, is that the Minister has no clue about what is going on in his own Ministry.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: But end of March he knows. Impressive. He finds out after two months that, mysteriously, misinformation was submitted and he seeks the advice of the hon. Attorney General. Well, that was obviously a mistake. Clearly that was a mistake because the hon. Attorney General advised the Minister that he should come to the Parliament and bring legislation which, as my political leader and the Leader of the Opposition has indicated, is unconstitutional, as has been explained by my colleague from Barataria/San Juan, it is illegal, so he should not have done that but—

Madam Speaker: I ruled on that already so—when the Member for Barataria/San Juan— So find a way, another way, to say that please.

Mr. D. Tancoo: So the hon. Minister had one month.

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Madam Speaker: So you withdraw that.

Mr. D. Tancoo: I withdraw that, Ma'am, fully withdrawn. That will play out somewhere else. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister had one month. It took the hon. Minister one month after having been told that something was wrong with the information supplied. It took him one month to bring a badly-drafted Motion to this House to try to correct a wrong, Madam Speaker, one month. That is the other thing. That represents slothfulness, laziness, and more importantly, Madam Speaker, "ah doh care damn attitude" by this Government when it relates to the accounts, the expenditure and the need to account for the expenditure, Madam Speaker, to the taxpayers of this country. Madam Speaker, one month it took the Minister to do this.

Last week when we were here, the Leader of Government Business when she moved the Motion to adjourn last week indicated that it was Private Members' Day and asked the Chief Whip here what we will be doing. The Chief Whip advised, I was present right here, the Chief Whip advised that he would advise her. So that was last week on Friday. I am advised, Madam Speaker, by the way, there was no mention of this Motion although the Minister knew—

Hon. Member: It was not on the Order Paper.

Mr. D. Tancoo:—although the Minister knew that there was need to come to debate something or the other.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: [*Interruption*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: May I please? May I please?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: No.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Are you joining the debate, Ma'am?

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Mrs. Robinson-Regis: No.

Madam Speaker: No. No. No. All right. Please, Member, we cannot afford these running commentaries. Member for Oropouche West, please do not be tempted to be distracted. You continue your conversation this way.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Ma'am. In fact, Madam Speaker, I am advised that earlier this week when the Chief Whip and the Leader of Government Business communicated with regard to which Motion we were going to do today, again there was no mention of this Motion before the House.

In fact, Madam Speaker, up to Wednesday night in the dead of night when this Motion was shared to Members of Parliament there was not even at that point indication. What we got was a notice saying that two papers were going to be laid and that there is a Motion that would be debated. Today, we came here and the two papers were not, in fact, so laid, but the Motion we have been asked to debate. We are being asked to debate a Motion, Madam Speaker, without knowing the specifics. The Minister has indicated one figure. In his presentation he had indicated one figure that does not match.

I am curious, Madam Speaker, even if that is the only issue, if that is the only issue as pointed out by the Minister himself, why would the Minister come here to extend the space for the Auditor General to file her report by four months? I understand why he would have extended or why he wants to extend from January to now because that is the four-month period to cover the actions that they would have committed without legal cover. But I cannot understand if this is the only issue, why the Minister of Finance believes that it will take four months to correct?—especially when the Minister claims that they were having all these conversations between the Ministry of Finance and the Auditor

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General.

8.05 p.m.

I think that there is substantial—we think on this side that there is substantially more, and I think the Leader of the Opposition has made it very clear that there is provision in the law as it is now, without having to go through this process of retroactive legislation. I think it is very, very, clear that there is a provision, and I recommend that provision be followed instead of trying to do what the Minister of Finance is trying to do now, which seriously undermines the integrity of an independent office holder, who by her accounts—and I hold no brief for anybody. By her accounts, stood by the law, which says that documents must be submitted by end of January, and if they are not submitted they cannot be considered. You know it is frightening, Madam Speaker, that these individuals on the opposite side preside over—

Madam Speaker: The hon. Members on the opposite side.

Mr. D. Tancoo: The hon. Members on the opposite side preside over the creation of policy that deals with the award of contracts, et cetera. And here we have a situation where, just to draw the parallel, we may have what is in effect a deadline. A firm deadline set in the law. We have a fixed strict deadline; a date. And the Minister of Finance and the hon. Attorney General who has advised him is now coming to say well, we could flex that.

If you have supplied a bid for a project and the deadline time has passed and the cut off time has passed, you can now vary the figures, you could vary the input, you could vary—that is a frightening thought, Madam Speaker. And that happens because the Government on that side has no value, well, they have not demonstrated that they have value for the principles of law, even for the

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establishment of deadlines that they have themselves set, that they accept are here.

Madam Speaker, the methodology of how this entire process has taken place today, brings the integrity of the claims by the Minister that it is the use of the technology. I mean, Madam Speaker, this must be the only Government in the world who has spent the last three years increasing the use of technology, digitization of this, and digitization of that. They have continued. This must be the only Government, Madam Speaker, who has increased the use of technology, and created more problems for themselves. That makes no logical sense, Madam Speaker.

In fact, a lot of the presentation of the Minister in the statement before, earlier today, and in his opening statement today, sought to “confuffle” the entire issue with dates, dates, dates, dates, dates, dates, dates. Instead of treating with the true fact, and the true fact, Madam Speaker, is that the Auditor General, this would be a second public issue with the Minister of Finance, and I think the Minister of Finance does not seem to have taken her initial commentary that he was late in the submission of documentation with regard to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, and I believe that that sets her on a downward trajectory.

Clearly, however, Madam Speaker, I think it is unacceptable in winding up, Madam Speaker, I think it is unacceptable that the Government would once again use these premises to wage a war, especially given, Madam Speaker, that they have already initiated in legal action—

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

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Oropouche West, again, just withdraw

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those words. Find a way to say what you want to say another way. Please.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker I withdraw and I say this in my closing. I find it unacceptable that this Government will come to the Parliament and use the parliamentary privilege, especially after they have gone to legal counsel to initiate legal action. Having already initiated the legal part of it, they still come to use these facilities, which are broadcast live, the country is watching, and using that privilege, parliamentary privilege here, to assail the character of somebody else. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, I can answer some of the questions asked by the last speaker. However, many of these statements made, made absolutely no sense. I was very clear in my opening statement that when the Auditor General sent a response to the letter, with respect to the Auditor General's unwillingness to accept the amended statement of revenue for the financial year 2023, that at the end of that letter was the following statement:

The Ministry of Finance is free to submit an original signed and dated letter to the Auditor General by 12.00 noon, on April the 16th, 2024, recalling the public accounts previously submitted and dated January 31, 2024, confirming the statement of declaration and certification previously provided as inaccurate and providing the revised public accounts.

So that this letter was sent by a senior legal officer in the Auditor General's department, to the Director of Legal in the office of the Attorney General. So

this letter dated April 15th, was sent from the Auditor General's office to the Attorney General's office, indicating that Ministry of Finance was free to recall and resubmit. The recounts indicate that the previous information submitted was inaccurate and provide the revised public accounts to the Auditor General. I do not think any of us expected that after that letter was sent, and the following day, the—so, this is the April 15th letter, the following day April 16th by the deadline, the 12.00 noon deadline, the Comptroller of Accounts herself, and her senior staff went to the office of the Auditor General and submitted the revised accounts. Nobody anticipated that the report would then be published without the audited revised accounts. Nobody expected that. It is only on the 24th of April, two days ago, that we learnt that the audited accounts had been prepared without the corrected information.

So, there is not a question as the Member for Oropouche West has tried to pretend, of a month; it is a question of two days. It is two days ago that the Government learnt that the Auditor General had decided to publish the report without the corrected accounts that had been given to her by the senior officials of the Treasury on the 16th of April. Only two days ago. There was no communication between the 16th of April and the 24th of April, that the Auditor General was not going to treat with the corrected accounts. We have acted with speed, we have acted within 48 hours of learning that the Auditor General's report does not contain an audit of the corrected figures. We are here within 48 hours, and we have acted with speed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: But I expected the Opposition to make all sorts of “nancy stories”. I expect a “nancy story” from all hon. Members opposite. I expect

that because I expect them to make as much heavy weather as they can of this situation. It is a very unfortunate situation. None of the public servants in the Ministry of Finance, the Permanent Secretary, the Comptroller of Accounts, the Head of the Budget Division, all of the senior officials in the Ministry of Finance are astonished at the reluctance of the Auditor General to even communicate with them.

Hon. Member: *[Interruption]*

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, come on, this Member is ridiculous. I seek your protection.

Madam Speaker: Okay, I believe the opportunity for anybody else to join in the debate has gone, and they would have forfeited that voluntarily. So, if you need to make an interjection there is a particular Standing Order by which you do so. If not, I will ask Members to please, allow the Minister to do his winding-up in some silence. It is 8.40 p.m.

8.15 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I know there are some Members of this House who believe that they should be political court jesters, but this is a serious matter. There is not a single senior member of staff in the Ministry of Finance—and these people are career public servants. Some of them have been in the Ministry of Finance for 30 years, have served numerous governments, have served UNC governments, NAR governments, PNM governments. These are career public servants. Not one of them can understand the reluctance of the Auditor General to refuse to communicate—well, the reluctance to communicate, the refusal to communicate, the refusal to receive corrected information. Not one of them can understand it.

And let me tell you something, it would be entirely irresponsible of me, as Minister of Finance, with senior public servants: the Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue, the Chief Account in the Board of Inland Revenue, the Comptroller of Accounts, and all the senior staff in the Treasury, the people in the Central Bank, the people in the Budget Division, it would be highly irresponsible of me, as a politician, to throw them under the bus by allowing inaccurate accounts to be submitted to this Parliament and to the country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Because as soon as those inaccurate figures had been circulated and published, questions would be asked, “Who is responsible for this?” And let me just correct misinformation put into this Parliament by hon. Members opposite. The Minister of Finance, and no Minister of Finance has any role to play in the submission of accounts to the Auditor General. That would be ultra vires, both the Constitution and the Exchequer and Audit Act. The Minister of Finance has no role to play in producing the records, producing the revenue figures, producing the cheques, producing the expenditure details. That is not a matter for the Minister of Finance. The Exchequer and Audit Act is clear, it is the Treasury, and the Treasury is headed by the Comptroller of Accounts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And the Treasury receives information from the Board of Inland Revenue, from the Inland Revenue Division, who in turn receives information from the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. And it would be irresponsible of me, as Minister, to allow inaccurate information to go on the public record because everyone of those public servants would have questions

to answer.

The first thing Members opposite would do, is call for disciplinary action to be taken against all of these senior officials in Inland Revenue, in the Treasury Division, in the Central Bank and so on. That is the first thing they would do. I will not allow it. I will not allow it, Madam Speaker. I will not allow it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mistakes are made. The public servants came to me and they were embarrassed. I mean, if you are a senior public servant, you think you want to tell your Minister that you have made errors of this magnitude? No, they do not want to do that. But they came to me in their embarrassment and they told me what happened, that because of a new electronic cheque clearing system, which was not implemented properly, by all concern, did not implement it properly, errors were made and they felt it would be completely improper for the revenue of Trinidad and Tobago to be understated by \$2.6 billion in any financial year.

I heard the Member for Siparia go back 15 years. That is irrelevant. We are talking about the financial year 2023. I respect the public servants bringing this matter to my attention. They did not have to. They did not have to tell me anything. They could have simply left it as is because as Minister of Finance, I do not see these figures. I do not get involved in them. I do not vet them. I do not sign off on them. That is ultra vires if I were to do that. If I were to try to cook the books, as the Member for Barataria/San Juan has falsely alleged, then I would be breaching my duty as a Minister and an oath that I took here.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: I cannot get involved in that, and the public servants could have very well left it just so. And when the Auditor General audited the thing, and the thing came to the Parliament, and the Members opposite in the various committees start to say, “Buh wha going on here, these figures are different,” then they could leave me—well, to try and find my way out of that, but they did not do that. They came to me, they said, “Minister, we have made a mistake, this is the mistake,” and they spent day and night trying to reconcile the error; day and night. They should be complimented for all the hard work they did trying to reconcile the error.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So I have sought legal advice, and the legal advice I have—because implicit in the response from the Auditor General is that the time, the date has expired. Implicit in all of that, the messaging coming from the Auditor General, is as far as the Auditor General is concerned, the time has passed and therefore, what is the legal remedy? If the time has expired, you have to look for a legal remedy. The legal advice from senior counsel is that the time has passed for the submission of the accounts, but the time has not passed for the submission of errata. That is the legal advice that I have received. Senior counsel has put in a written opinion to me that the accounts were submitted on the 31st of January—and this has nothing to do with the Constitution. I hear Members over there just babbling. You do not know what you are talking about, and I will read the relevant laws into the record shortly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: It has nothing to do with the Constitution. Nothing. So the legal advice from the senior counsel is—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, please get them to stop?

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, he is hearing things, you know.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: The unfortunate thing is that I am hearing them too.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. Moonilal: Oh, you are too?

Madam Speaker: Yes. So maybe those who are not hearing them are wearing hearing aids, but let us get on with the business of the evening. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I said before, I know that some Members opposite think it is their job to be a political court jester, but this is serious business.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So these snide, snotty remarks that they keep throwing across the floor, sotto voce, it really is inappropriate.

So let us get back to the business. The advice I have received from senior counsel is that the accounts were submitted on time by the Treasury to the Auditor General, and there is nothing wrong with the Treasury submitting errata, indicating to the Auditor General that there are errors in the figures. The Auditor General may have a different view, I am not getting into the legal fray. I am not getting into that. But the legal advice that I have, that since that messaging is coming from the Auditor General that the information has been provided out of time, then we are using the provisions of the Exchequer and Audit Act, which is in the English language, in black and white, that Parliament

can extend the timelines in section 24 and section 25 of the Exchequer and Audit Act.

And let me read into the record what is in there, and even to deal with the non-point made by the Member for Siparia, the non-point that the Auditor General could submit a special report. How on earth is the Auditor General going to do that without receiving the information? We are in a situation now where the Auditor General has said, or has implied, or has indicated, or has signalled that the Auditor General does not wish to receive the amended documents. How then can the Auditor General do a special report?

Mr. Hosein: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, children.

Madam Speaker: No, Member. Minister of Finance. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I just want you to withdraw “children”. I think that is an insult to children. Please—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: So just stand and—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: Member, just stand and withdraw that, please.

Hon. C. Imbert: Certainly.

Madam Speaker: Yes. Please.

Hon. C. Imbert: Sure.

Madam Speaker: Please. Member for Barataria/San Juan, I know it is Friday—the fourth Friday. A brilliant submission was made by your Whip. Let us try to keep as close as possible to 6.00 p.m., so I hope I do not have to rise

again; as close as possible. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Let me just read the Exchequer and Audit Act, which the Members opposite either do not know or do not wish to know. Section 25(1) of the Exchequer and Audit Act says at subsection (3)—25(3) not 25(1):

“The Minister shall lay the report of the Auditor General on the table of Parliament within thirty days of its receipt by him or, if Parliament is not sitting, within thirty days after the commencement of the next sitting.”

That is in the Exchequer and Audit Act, that the Minister of Finance has 30 days to lay the report of the Auditor General.

And since the report was received on the 24th of April, by my reckoning, the Minister of Finance has until the 23rd of May to lay the report. But be that as it may, out of an abundance of caution, we have come here today to utilize another part of this section 25, which states that:

“The Auditor General shall set out in his annual report all payments made out of public moneys...”—and so on and so on.

And:

“...transmit to the Minister a report...”

“...within a period of seven months after 30th September in each year or such longer period thereafter as Parliament may by resolution appoint...”

We are here to deal with a resolution to extend both of the times. And the Member for Oropouche West asked a question. He might be able to see, the hon. Member, why we would want to extend the time to submit the information from the Treasury to the Auditor General by four months. He might be able to see that, the hon. Member. But the hon. Member cannot see why we want to

give the Auditor General a further four months to deal with it.

In the first place, that additional four months for the Auditor General to present the report is the outer limit. So the Auditor General does not have to submit that in August, which is actually when the four months will run to—actually, May, June, July, August, if you do the maths. I did a lot of problems in mathematics on that side, you know; a lot of problems in mathematics. But four months from April 30th is August 31st, but the Auditor General could submit in July, could submit in June, could submit in May, but I do not want the Auditor General to make a complaint that the period specified in the Exchequer and Audit Act for auditing the financial accounts is four months, and we extended the period for the Treasury to send the accounts to the Auditor General by four months, but we did give the Auditor General also a maximum period of four months to do her report. That is why we did four and four. We are trying to avoid any arguments. And you heard the argument on the other side, “We are harassing—the Government is harassing the Auditor General.” Well, if we had said, “All right, we are giving the Treasury four months extra to submit the corrected accounts but the Auditor General is only getting one month to audit that,” you would hear the howl from Members opposite. They speak out of both sides of their mouth, Madam Speaker.

The fact of the matter is, we have explained everything here. There is no Minister of Finance involved in the transmission of these documents, of these records, of these books, of these accounts between the Treasury and the Auditor General. No Minister of Finance gets involved in that. No Minister of Finance gets involved in reconciling cheque payments and tax refunds, because that would be a breach of the Income Tax Act, section 4. This is entirely something

that is done by senior public servants.

It is my duty as Minister of Finance, when I am told about an error, when I am told about a difficult situation, when I am told about a very strange situation—the Attorney General spoke about—used a word “bizarre”, the Member for Siparia used the word “sinister”. All of those words could be used to describe the unwillingness of someone to receive corrected documents. I will not ascribe any of those words to the Auditor General’s office, but the public looking on might want to describe the actions of the Office of the Attorney General in this way. The fact of the matter is, the public servants—

Hon. Member: Auditor General.

Hon. C. Imbert: Auditor General, sorry. Auditor General, my apologies. The public looking on might want to describe the actions of the Auditor General in those words, “bizarre”, “sinister”, whatever. The fact of the matter is the public servants discovered a big error, they tried to inform the Auditor General, the Auditor General decided not to be informed, and action had to be taken. As Minister, the only power I have is to seek advice from the Attorney General and seek the approval of the Cabinet to come to the Parliament today to use the legal instrument available to me, as Minister, to extend the times in the Exchequer and Audit Act.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: There is nothing else I can do. I cannot do what is being shouted across the floor at me by hon. Members opposite. “Ah cyah harass nobody”. I am empowered to come and utilize the law, the Exchequer and Audit Act. This has nothing to do with the Constitution. The Constitution does not speak to any duty on the part of the Minister of Finance to do anything with

these accounts. The Exchequer and Audit Act speaks to a duty on the part of the Minister of Finance to lay the report within 30 days. And I can assure you, Madam Speaker, I will do exactly that. I will do exactly that. I will do what is required of me under the Exchequer and Audit Act.

8.30 p.m.

This is necessary. It is just wrong. All of the figures being bandied about, around by Members opposite, just demonstrate to me they have problems with accounting and mathematics. It happens every year when you have a budget debate every single year. Because if you look at the revenue figures in the Auditor General's Report, the revenue figure is always substantially higher than the figure reported by the Minister of Finance, always. And the expenditure figure is also always much higher in the report of the Auditor General than the expenditure figure reported by the Minister of Finance, and it is a simple accounting transaction.

In accounting, there are figures that are above the line, and there are figures that are below the line. And when you are dealing with government accounts, principal repayments and contributions to a sinking fund are below the line and are not reported in the fiscal outturn. So even though hon. Members opposite, the hon. Member for Siparia misled as usual by some mathematical infant on that side, quoted numbers that do not make any sense. The revenue for fiscal 2023 was not \$61 million—\$61 billion. It certainly was not.

In the *Review of the Economy*, I have made it clear that the estimate for revenue in 2023 was \$53.8 billion. Why would I be annoyed if the Auditor General say it is really 61? Why? I would not get vex for that. And I have

reported in the *Review of the Economy*, I have reported that total expenditure for fiscal 2023 was \$57.2 billion. Those are the figures because they exclude financing and borrowing. You do not record a loan as revenue, a loan is not revenue. Revenue is taxation. When the Auditor General is doing her accounts, she counts all cash flow.

So you borrow money and you put it into the Government's account, the Auditor General counts that as revenue, we do not. You refinance a loan, you pay back a loan principal payment, the Auditor General counts that as expenditure, we do not, no accountant for the Government does that. So that the numbers in the fiscal accounts will always be different to the numbers in the Auditor General's accounts. And I have been trying to explain this to hon. Members opposite for 30 years—for 30 years. They had one of them from one of those central seats—

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, could you ask the Minister to stop screaming and shouting and jumping in this space.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Hon. C. Imbert: What Standing Order was that? What Standing Order? Because “yuh cyah handle de truth”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: You would not know the truth if it hits you in the face. You cannot handle the truth. That is your problem. The data on the public debt, the data on the public debt is in the *Review of the Economy*. I heard the Member for Siparia carrying on at a rate about how the public debt has now reached to \$101 billion. Nonsense. If one goes into the *Review of the Economy*, the figure

is 131. I will be happy if it was published and the public debt was only 101, but it is not. The Auditor General uses a different method in examining and reporting on the accounts of Trinidad and Tobago, and really, Members opposite have got to do better.

I end by saying that I am glad that the public servants in the Inland Revenue Division, in the Treasury Division, in the Budget Division, the Central Bank, et cetera, had the courage to report to me that they made a significant and material error in recording the revenue for fiscal 2023. I am glad they did that, I am happy to report that we are here to give them the opportunity to correct their error so that they will not be victimized or pilloried by unscrupulous people such as the supporters of the Members opposite, I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put.

Mr. Lee: Division.

The House divided: Ayes 19 Noes 14

AYES

Robinson-Regis, Hon. C.

Imbert, Hon. C.

Hinds, Hon. F.

Deyalsingh, Hon. T.

Al-Rawi, Hon. F

Beckles, Hon. P.

Webster-Roy, Hon. A.

Gadsby-Dolly, Hon. Dr. N.

Gonzales, Hon. M.

Exchequer and Audit Act
(Extension of Sections 24(1) and 25(1))

Mc Clashie, Hon. S.

Cummings, Hon. F.

Forde, E.

de Nobriga, Hon. S.

Leonce, Hon. A.

Manning, Hon. B.

Morris-Julian, Hon. L.

Scotland, K.

Richards, K.

Monroe, R.

NOES

Lee, D.

Ameen, Ms. K.

Persad-Bissessar SC, Mrs. K.

Indarsingh, R.

Padarath, B.

Moonilal, Dr. R.

Hosein, S.

Ratiram, R.

Bodoe, Dr. L.

Ram, A.

Tancoo, D.

Benjamin, Ms. M.

Mohit, Ms. V.

Seecheran, Dr. R.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, on a division with 19 Members voting in favour, 14 Members voting against and no abstentions the Motion is passed.

Question agreed to.

Resolved:

That for the purpose of the financial accounts for 2023 that the period of time under section 24(1) of the Exchequer and Audit Act be extended from the period of four months after the 30th September 2023 to a period of eight months after the 30th September, 2023:

That for the purpose of the financial accounts for 2023 that the period of time under section 25(1) of the Exchequer and Audit Act be extended from the period of seven months after the 30th September 2023 to a period of eleven months after the 30th September, 2023.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you Madam. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the House do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, there is one matter that qualifies to be raised on the Motion for the adjournment of the House, I have been advised that by agreement this item will be deferred to a subsequent Sitting. Whip—yes. Okay.

Question put and agreed to.

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2024.04.26

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.39 p.m.