

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, October 04, 2024*

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2024**

[Second Day]

*Question proposed.***Madam Speaker:** Leader of the Opposition.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]**Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia):** Thank you very much. Thank you, Madam Speaker and Members of this honourable House for this opportunity to contribute to Budget 2024/2025. I also want to thank our UNC team of MPs here, Senators, Councillors, Aldermen, activists and the hardworking staff of the Opposition Leader's Office and the staff of our constituency offices.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I express my continued gratitude to the great constituents of Siparia for electing me as their MP since 1995; it is my honour to represent you.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Today I dedicate this response to Budget Statement 2025 to the 99 per cent of persons who have been abandoned by this PNM Government. I dedicate this response to them and hereby give them a voice in this Parliament.**Hon. Members:** [*Desk thumping*]**Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Minister Imbert spoke for five hours and 13**UNREVISED**

minutes to announce a \$2 per hour minimum wage increase to some workers and a 5 per cent new offer to public servants. The Minister joked about doubling his time to 10 hours. I would have preferred, had the Minister doubled the minimum wage increase to \$4—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and the offer to public servants to 10 per cent instead. I take note, hon. Minister, it takes a resolute disposition and steadfast dedication to be that tedious for five hours. So, hon. Minister spent over five hours reading the PNM's eulogy, fighting to convince the population, but failing to convince them of anything worthwhile the PNM did or is going to do. Imagine five hours of talk and nothing about lowering food prices.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Five hours of talk and nothing about senior citizens. Five hours of talk and nothing about generating more revenue. Five hours of talk and nothing credible about fighting crime.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Five hours of talk and nothing about job creation for the thousands of unemployed citizens. Five hours of talk and nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing about the missing billions in the Auditor General's report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Instead, the Minister appeared to be scraping the bottom of the barrel for that over five hours to find some achievement that the PNM could claim as its own. But, the best Minister could find was that they changed 1,000 light bulbs. Once again, the “maths is not mathsing” in this budget statement. This is the 10th consecutive budget delivered by Finance Minister

Imbert, under the direction of the same Prime Minister and with the approval of the same Cabinet. The fact is that in every budget since taking office, every year Minister Imbert's projections have been historically wrong on revenue, on expenditure, on deficit and on debt and many other metrics. In this year's budget statement, for example, at page 150, the Minister estimated revenue of \$54.224 billion. Let me repeat that, \$54.224 billion in revenue for fiscal '25. The Minister broke it down into oil revenue of \$14.174 billion, non-oil revenue of \$35.039 billion and capital revenue of \$4.011 billion. Madam Speaker, these figures add up to \$53.224 billion in revenue, not \$54.224 billion. These figures, given in his own words, as they say from his own mouth, do not add up to the \$54.224 billion that the Minister told us; instead add up to \$53.224. This is \$1 billion in revenue less than the budget statement to date.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Minister cannot account for the billions of dollars to the Auditor General, and now the Minister cannot account for another billion dollars in his stated revenue. According to these revenue numbers, if we are to believe them, the deficit for 2025 would be \$6.5 billion and not \$5.5 billion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So the Minister does not appear to have got basic arithmetic correctly. And then it gets more muddled, Madam Speaker. When we go to the *Draft Estimates of Revenue* for fiscal 2025, page (v), we see a different number being given for estimated revenue. We see that estimated revenue, according to the *Draft Estimates*, the Minister's own books laid here in this House, we see estimated revenue for 2025, of \$52.61 billion. That is \$1.6 billion less than the \$54.224 billion from the budget statement. This would mean then a deficit of

what?—\$7.122 billion for fiscal 2025. We ask, Madam Speaker, what is the correct revenue figure? What is the projected deficit, those in your budget statement? Is that the correct revenue estimate, or is it the Estimates given in the *Draft Revenue Estimates*?

The Minister also failed to mention that the same table in the *Draft Estimates of Revenue* shows that the Minister plans to borrow \$12.8 billion in fiscal 2025. Therefore, the revenue in 2025 would be \$65.506 billion and that is before you add capital receipts and extraordinary receipts for revenue.

The Minister also failed to tell the country that in fiscal '23/'24 they accessed financing of \$18.5 billion to supplement revenue. Of this, \$2.4 billion was from extraordinary receipts and \$16 billion was from borrowing, borrowing; \$16 billion borrowing in the last fiscal year. Of this \$16 billion in borrowings in fiscal '24, about \$8 billion were domestic borrowings and \$8 billion were foreign borrowings. Why did the Minister, or any of the commentators since Monday, not speak of these facts? Why? Why are we not told of the level of borrowing, of the mistake and double figures in revenue? Why? Why? Why are we not being told this?

10.10 a.m.

The Minister also failed to tell us, that the Government has borrowed \$107 billion in nine years from 2015, to the end of fiscal '23/'24, \$107 billion in borrowings. When we add a further \$12.8 billion, the Minister intends to borrow in '25, this Government would have borrowed \$119.8 billion in 10 years, from 2015 to the end of fiscal '25. If we were to add the approximately \$17 billion drawn down from the HSF, we would see that this Government has accessed financing of about \$136.8 billion to finance spending. Remember that the

additional financing also comes from capital and extraordinary receipts, are still to be added for financing.

The Minister also failed to tell the country that in fiscal 2025, in addition to the expenditures, that the Government will have to spend \$9.9 billion on debt servicing. We can find this in the *Draft Estimates of Expenditure*, page XXXIX. Nowhere in commentary since Monday, from Government representatives, business chambers, pseudo-intellectuals and “eat-ah-food” elites, has any of these figures been discussed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Instead, it was the same old story of glibness, intellectual laziness, shallow commentary, and in some cases, shameless pandering from some sections of the business community.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The same time they continue waiting with begging bowls for contracts. They say greed has no shame.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You see, some enjoy the fat of the land, and will do everything in their power to ensure the average citizen never enjoys it as they do. We live in times when the bravest amongst us are now standing up for one another, speaking up against fake elites, greed and oppression of the average citizen. Lobbying for the rights of the differently abled, for the abused, for the people suffering in silence, and those wanting a better life for themselves and their children, right here in T&T.

This Government, likes to talk about patriotism, and who is patriotic, and who is not, when it suits their agenda. But patriotism does not mean pandering to

the Government for favours.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Patriotism does not mean sinking with the PNM ship even when you see it going down. Patriotism does not mean allowing others to suffer while you do better and better. Patriotism does mean staying silent to “eat a food”, while others are being abused or taken advantage of. We must continue to press on to the mark of the higher calling which sees everyone being treated fairly. The average citizen was not told of these numbers by the Minister and his surrogates, because the children and grandchildren of the average citizen would have to work and pay all these debts that are being created. This Government and the Minister have pushed us all, including our future generations into a death trap. They keep spending excessively more while creating nothing to generate additional income.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I will say nine years and nothing. Where is the Prime Minister’s promised plywood factory? Where is the Prime Minister’s Sandals? Where is the Prime Minister’s promised Toco highway? Where is the not-so-insignificant sum of money from Bill Gates that the Prime Minister said he was getting?

Hon. Members: “Hmm.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Why are we not hearing about Dragon gas, the Toco port, the La Brea dry-docks, things promised by the hon. Prime Minister. Somebody said maybe the Prime Minister got pip so we are not hearing these things anymore.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Where is NiQuan, which the Prime Minister boasted about? The Prime Minister cut the opening ribbon with great fan-fair, and by the next week the plant blew up in a ball of fire.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: But that is common with this tragic history as a Minister. Remember when that Minister built a housing development on the hills, Las Alturas, which fell and slid down the hill?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, that Minister built a housing development in the flat lands named Greenvale, and that was flooded out. So, now the Minister builds one half way between the hill and the flat land, Trestrail Development, and they now must break down those buildings because the units failed. You cannot make this up.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You cannot make this up. Where are the VAT refunds and workers back pay? The business people and workers of this country want their money now. They say they do not like their money to “sleep out.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They want their money now. Where is the Roadmap to Recovery? Where they outsmarted the “eat a food” fake elites and pseudo-intellectuals? Where is this Roadmap to Recovery? Maybe it is in the same place that all these other Cabinet-appointed bodies—reports from them.

In fiscal '23/'24, last fiscal year, \$32.5 million was spent on Cabinet-appointed bodies. Question: What is there to show for this money? For fiscal '24/'25, \$35.7 million has been allocated under the Office of the Prime Minister

for Cabinet-appointed bodies. What will there be to show for this money? Trinidad's number one salesman who has not made a single sale in nine years to the benefit the citizens—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—maybe he is the greatest salesman after all, as seen in successive budget documents. The Minister has sold out this country's future to financiers and special interests resulting in a whopping \$134.8 billion in debt.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Never forgot such a salesman he is, who together with the chosen one, Minister Young, negotiated gas prices with multinational executives in Houston, where they were outsmarted, tied up like hairy legged crabs, and sent back home.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Today, the Point Lisas Estate is half shut. Our citizens are being forced to pay high electricity rates because of their disastrous gas price negotiations. Madam Speaker, the facts are, since this Government came into power in 2015, the energy sector measured in real GDP has contracted by 32.5 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: After nine years, besides golfing, we have a Prime Minister with no achievement to his name, both on the golf course, and on the job. It is only bogey, double bogey, triple bogey, quadrupole bogey, on his score card.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I will spell it for you. B-O-G-E-Y, a term in golf

on the score card.

Madam Speaker: Order. Order.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Please proceed.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Children of wrath. Children of wrath are warned of the bogeyman, but we in Trinidad have the perennial “bogeyman”. Since 2015, the Prime Minister has been complaining about difficult times like a persistent cry, but what is he doing to improve the situation? In the last nine years, the Prime Minister spent about 391 days out of the country that is more than one year, Madam Speaker, more than 391 days, and then nine years and, nothing. Now I raise this because in this 391 days, the hon. Minister of Finance acted for the majority of these days. Well, it was 391, so, minus 16, and two more. And then suddenly the chosen one, Minister Young, has replaced him.

Only last weekend there was an article in the *Saturday Express*, 28 September, '24, in which the Prime Minister told our country to hold strain and prepare for difficult times ahead until 2027. I certainly will not dub the Prime Minister “the national town crier”, although the Prime Minister has been known to have said things that were later proven to be untrue. However, Minister Imbert appeared to insinuate this on Monday, when he claimed the economy was doing well. There are different messages from both men who sit in the same Cabinet. One who used to act as Prime Minister, and the current Prime Minister. Who is the country to believe?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Minister Imbert had us believe on Monday, everything was hunky dory, everything was booming and glowing, and great, but

yet the Prime Minister, days before, told the country hold strain until when?—2027, difficult times are ahead. Which one of these persons are we to believe? While the Prime Minister tells the country to hold strain for difficult times, we see in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* under Head 13: Office of the Prime Minister, page 58, Sub-Head 02, Item 19; Official Entertainment under Office of the Prime Minister was allocated \$30 million, which is an increase of \$29.7 million from 2023/2024.

10.20 a.m.

So in fiscal '23/'24, that Vote, Official Entertainment, under the OPM, was allocated \$240,000. In this election year, it is now allocated \$30 million. We also see Item 66 on the same page, Hosting of Conferences, Seminars and other Functions, an allocation of \$20 million, an increase of \$19.35 million over last year's allocation. The last fiscal year, that allocation for—what was it?—Hosting of Conferences, Seminars and other Functions, last fiscal was \$650,000. In this election year, it is now \$20 million.

These two Items were allocated \$890,000 combined in fiscal '24 last year but in fiscal '25, an election year, a whopping \$50 million allocated, an increase of \$49.11 million for entertainment and functions there. It is all there in the budget documents: \$50 million for feting, added to the previous \$70 million for a mansion in Tobago, \$3 million for paintings, \$10.6 million in foreign trips since 2020. Clearly, the economy is good for the Prime Minister.

In contrast, in the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, again, Head 13: OPM, page 20, project No. 119, Strengthening of the Childcare and Child Protection Systems in Trinidad and Tobago, do you know how much was allocated in this fiscal year? A measly \$1 million for childcare and child protection in our

country. But we know that this Government does not care about child protection systems because high PNM officials have been repeatedly accused of being involved in a paedophile ring.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yet to date, the authorities refuse to investigate this accusation of rampant paedophilia in high ranks of the PNM. Shame and scandal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, \$50 million for parties at OPM, but \$1 million for strengthening child protection systems in the country to combat pedophiles. Somebody told me, for this Government, “dey eh no party like ah Diddy party”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: But let us look at this in the large. In this fiscal year, '24/'25, an election year, the Prime Minister's Office has been allocated a total allocation of \$823.7 million. This is *Recurrent and Development Programme* together. When we look at last year, it was \$598 million. So there is now an increase of \$224 million, almost \$225 million—

Hon. Member: A quarter billion.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—a quarter billion allocated to the Office of the Prime Minister. So we are asking—\$823 million and therefore, we will ask the question, so what is this money to be spent on?

I move along. The UNC has consistently brought legislation to protect children. We brought the Children's Authority Bill, 1999. We brought the Children (Amdt.) Bill, 1999. We brought the Adoption of Children Bill, 1999. We

brought the Miscellaneous Provisions (Children) Bill, 1999. We brought the Children's Community Residences, Foster Homes and Nurseries Bill, 1999. We brought the Children Act, 2012, and, of course, we brought the very, very great Children's Life Fund Act.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: While the country is told by the Prime Minister to hold strain until 2027, the Office of the Prime Minister has been allocated \$50 million for dancing and feting in 2025. And this is the other boogie—you call this one boogie-woogie; boogie-woogie for fetes. And who are the persons invited to the fetes? It is the same representatives, Government, pseudo-intellectuals, the “eat ah food”, fake elites. They never mentioned these figures, as I said, since Monday. But you know I care for everyone, even for our Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And I urge the Prime Minister to be cautious and take it easy, because the last time he feted too much, it was in a panyard and he passed out flat on the ground.

Dr. Moonilal: “He capsized”.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank God, to the great men and women of the TTPS Special Branch who were there to rescue him and stretch him out.

When we go to the 2025 *Development Programme*, Estimates for Head 701: IDF, Sub-Head 13, again, the Office of the Prime Minister once more, on page 187, Item 039, there is a vague description of Construction of Buildings, and there is an allocation of \$400 million under this rubric of Construction of Buildings. It does not say what buildings are being constructed by the Office of the Prime Minister. We ask, what buildings will the Office of the Prime Minister construct

for \$400 million in fiscal 2025? In 2024, \$48 million was allocated in the IDF to the OPM. In 2025, election year, now it is \$452 million. So which buildings, what buildings where?

I had a look at the PSIP book—as they say, sometimes the devil is in the details, but in the Estimates themselves, it just says “Construction of Buildings”. And when you go to those books there, the PSIP, we looked, and for Public Buildings under the Office of the Prime Minister, not one is mentioned. So I will be happy if the Government will enlighten us which buildings for this \$400 million going to be spent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And when we hear that in comparison, if we go to page 121 of the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme* for '25, this fiscal year, under Head 48: Ministry of Trade and Industry, what do you see? Zero dollars allocated for the development of the music industry. Zero dollars allocated for the development of the film industry. Zero dollars allocated for the development of the fashion industry. These are industries that our young people are interested in. There are over \$400 million allocated for the Prime Minister to build unknown buildings, but nothing, zero, zilch for young people and the creative industries. No achievement in nine years after spending \$530 billion. That is about half a trillion dollars. As I said, zero, nada, zilch.

Today, maybe the late former Prime Minister, Manning, must be looking down on the second seat of the Government Parliament Benches, grinning. You know what? Even the late former Prime Minister, George Chambers, must be looking down at this Prime Minister and laughing. I am sure the Government speakers will want to ask them, what about my Government's achievements? I

will answer that question but in a very small sampling. My colleagues will deal with the various portfolio areas because if I were to take the time to list all these achievements, I would have to speak here for much longer than five hours or 10 hours.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In that period, 2010 to 2015—these are some of the achievements, as I said, just a sample. We had foreign direct investment totalling \$10.38 billion or TT \$67.5 billion. We had the highest GDP in our modern history, \$187.5 billion. We had the highest foreign reserves of US \$11.5 billion. And I pause here, Madam, to say, this Government runs with a false narrative that when they came into Government in 2015, the Treasury was empty. In fact, they perpetuated that false narrative, going to the extent of doing like a little comic strip—like a comic book strip, with some yellow van or truck parked out some building and filling it, saying that we emptied the Treasury. We left you with US \$11.5 billion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We left you with US \$11.5 billion. We increased public servants' wages by 5 per cent in 2011—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and 14 per cent in 2015, ending a lengthy negotiation period. We settled over 130 collective agreements, much of which had been left in limbo by that previous Government—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—previous PNM Government. The unemployment rate in T&T reached a record low of 3.1 per cent in the first quarter of 2014, under

my watch.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We had a historical high of 643,000 persons employed in 2014, our last full year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

10.30 a.m.

We created 56,000 new jobs without a single new tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We had the largest economy in our modern history. We had a 67 per cent tertiary education participation rate. Non-energy revenue increased by over TT \$13 billion between 2010 and 2014. GDP per capita increased from US \$16,000 in 2010 to US \$20,900 in 2014. This is GDP per capita. Over 11,000 businesses were established in the last two years of my Administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: About half of the foreign direct investment inflows to the Caribbean reached Trinidad and Tobago. FDI inflows to T&T increased by 21.5 per cent under my watch. In my Government's five years, 21 production-sharing contract licenses worth approximately US 2 billion were signed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We distributed more than 100,000 laptops to students and teachers under my watch.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: My Government was amongst the first in the

world to achieve universal preschool education.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Indeed, we were recognized by the United Nations' then Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, for this achievement. We had amended the SEA to include a continuous assessment component. We expanded the GATE Programme to include technical and vocational education and training. As I said before, we established the Children's Life Fund.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We established a nursing academy to fill vacancies in the public health sector, which by the way, they have shut down. With that Government, they shut it down. We increased old age pensions, disability grants, and Public Assistance Grants.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We distributed about 5,000 lots in three years under the Land for the Landless programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: As I said, we can go on with these, but my colleagues will pick up where I left off. So, those are some of the achievements under the Government I led. What is the legacy of this PNM Government after more than nine years and more than half a trillion dollars spent? Not billion, not million, but half a trillion dollars spent.

It is blood-stained sheets and bloody-red sheets; it is bloated bodies in bulging body bags; it is bullet-busted heads and blown-out brains; beautiful babies blown to bits in their beds; buried bodies being ripped out of graves and burnt; bawling mothers and families; bursting Balisier book accounts; big money; big

Balisier House painted blood red; broken promises because of bad budgets; betrayal and backstabbing in Cabinet because of bacchanal and backwardness; bullying; battering and brutalizing citizens to add burdens; billions of blue bills “banditted” by broken men.

What does it all mean, Madam Speaker? What does it mean? It means that bloodshed, bankruptcy, banditry, betrayal, butchery, brutality and bawling, are the wallpaper of our whereabouts under this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, I am still asking for your protection. I think this is happening too often now.

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*] because of the thumping of the desks, I could not hear what you were saying. Yeah—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: No, I could not hear what you were saying, what you were raising to my attention, so if you could raise it to my attention again, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, the constant “Pswshhhh” on the other side.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Constant—I mean, when the Minister was speaking, he got up 20 times, because Khadijah, MP here—what? Please, you will have your turn. Everybody will have their turn. Minister had five plus hours—

Madam Speaker: Alright. One, I want to remind all Members—excuse me. I want to remind all Members of Standing Order 53, with respect to no excessive talking. And where there is talking, if the volume could be minimal, but the

talking cannot be an excessive conversation. So let us try to hear the Leader of the Opposition in silence. And I just want to remind the Leader of the Opposition that I know it is difficult for all of us that we have our relationships, but remember we refer to each other by their portfolio or their constituency. Please proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am guided by you, Madam Speaker. I am asking what does all this mean? I talked about the legacy of this Government. What does it mean? And I started by saying, which I will repeat; it means that bloodshed, bankruptcy, banditry, betrayal, butchery, brutality, and bawling are the wallpaper of our whereabouts under this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It is the landscape of our lives. It is a collage of carnage bonded with blood. Blood is a bond for this landscape of butchery and burdens. That is the legacy of this PNM Government after nine years. Our country is lawless. It is a land where chaos, destruction, brutality, and sick, violent torture reign. Citizens are terrified and living in their self-imposed states of emergency.

One person is murdered every 16 hours, about. One person is murdered. So when we sit here today, that is another one. I pray God not, but at least gone, yes, while 45 murders are the monthly average. There have been about 4,500 murders under this Government in the nine years. Today, the number of murders for this year is reported as 480. Today, that is the report for today. Since 2015, this Government has allocated \$60.83 billion in national security. It was not a shortage of money—\$60.83 billion to national security in the past nine years. How will this 6.1 billion allocated in this fiscal year fix the violent crime crisis in

this one year, when for nine years, over 60 billion could not fix it? How will this budget allocation in this fiscal '25 fix that crime crisis? The Prime Minister still arrogantly persists, with his sleeping “Minister of national insecurity”, perpetuating citizens’ misery using his own words. Minister Hinds, a “wrongeous” choice.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Imagine the Member for St Joseph was robbed outside a rum shop at 5 pm on a Monday. Following his complaints of crime, members of the public who are fed up with nine years of violent crime are saying the Minister should drink his rum and get out of their faces.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I would not say that. I would say the Minister only now knows, in his words, “This is where crime reach”. He now knows that. After over \$530 billion of taxpayers’ money was spent, the violent, unprecedented crime crisis continues to grow. That is the legacy of this Government, PNM, perpetuating national misery.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When machine gun fire exploded the body of the beautiful little angel, Anika Guerra in Moruga, it was like taking a chainsaw to jello. An innocent, tiny angel and a daddy blasted to pieces. Last year, the Peterkin children were blown to bits in their beds. These children who should be in school today were murdered in their own homes, whilst the Government and the Education Minister are forever bobbing and weaving through scandals and trying to beat out fires with Facebook posts. Our schools have become gang-recruitment zones and academic failure is the norm.

On page 117 of the '25 Budget Statement, we are told that an e-book platform will be integrated into the education system and operational by June 2025, but if you are still there, that is. You would not be there. But what device are students going to use to access these e-books? What device? Where are they going to get data? Who is going to pay for the data? So it sounds good on paper, grand on paper. E-book platform—this Government took away the laptops of the children. Now the Minister of Education can enlighten us about how this e-book platform will work. The Minister of Education complains to the population about a lack of money but never mentions that \$69.5 billion is allocated for education since 2015. Gone through \$69.5 billion and complaining about money.

10.40 a.m.

Despite all that money, the Minister has fostered out of control school violence and an ever-increasing academic failure rate, according to the Education Minister, after this Government spent \$530 billion taxpayers' money. PNM:- — pressure, no money PNM means, “pressure, no money”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That is the legacy of this PNM Government. Over the past nine years, citizens have experienced numerous problems and horror stories when they seek health care. The Health Minister continues to govern through public relations stunts, gimmickry, buffoonery and deflections from the issues. The 5000 deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic, the recent spate of the 21 neonatal deaths at the NICU, and the poor response to the current dengue outbreak, have all exposed the gross incompetence of this Government in healthcare.

The Health Minister has been allocated \$56.89 billion since 2015; \$56.8 billion since 2015. And yet, the health sector, nine years now, continues to be

plagued by long waiting times for clinic appointments; days spent waiting on chairs in the casualty department; long waiting times for cataracts; joint replacement and other surgeries; frequent shortages of drugs at the hospitals and health centres; scheduled surgeries are often postponed due to lack of supplies; long waiting times for MRI, CT ultrasound scans. No plan to address the substantial number of unemployed doctors. No plan to stem the bleeding of our nurses from our country. The Health Minister is either weeping, shedding tears, or liming outside rum shops, while the Health Ministry has become a ministry of death.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Minister should hide his face in shame for the poor state of healthcare.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You know what the hon. Minister could do? The Minister could take his own advice. The Minister could get a piece of old cloth and make a mask, or the Minister could take an old jersey and make a mask to cover his face. That is the only man I know who was robbed and left with his wallet and cell phone to call the police. After \$530 billion spent, legacy—taxpayers' dollars—that is a legacy of the PNM. PNM: priorities never met.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: PNM: priorities never met. The Finance Minister paints a rosy picture of the energy sector on pages 58 to 65 of the budget statement. As I told you before, the Prime Minister said there are difficult times ahead. This is a manifestation of the cognitive dissonance of this outgoing PNM Administration. From 2016 to 2023, the energy sector's real GDP contracted in

seven of these eight years; 2024 is no different. The decline is predicated on a 34.9 per cent decline in natural gas production and a 37 per cent decline in oil production from 2015 to 2024. So it has been a decline in both natural gas production and in oil production.

These negative trends ripple through our economy and manifest as economic contraction, lower revenues, falling foreign reserves and decreased supply of US dollars. After nine going on 10 years the decline in the energy sector must be laid squarely at the feet of the Prime Minister and his chosen Minister Young—

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Hon. Minister Young? Minister of Energy or?

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*] to say, yeah, or the MP for the constituency, yes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Okay, hon. Minister for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. Thank you very much. So, I say we lay this decline in the energy sector at the feet of both the Minister and the Prime Minister.

The hon. Member for Port of Spain North of St. Ann's West exhibits remarkably similar qualities as his leader, and will therefore be most appropriate to succeed him. After nine years in office both have no achievements to their name, both are very successful at failing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries was Minister of communications, failed. He was then Minister of National Security, failed. Now Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, fail.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I want to remind the hon. Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East and his budget statement, the Minister talked about the PNM had built and delivered the Penal Fire Station.

Hon. Member: What.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: If it is one person who remembers that it was the People's Partnership that built the Penal Police Station, it will be the hon. Member of Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, because when he came down there to open that fire station, he had a mishap. I felt so sorry. He fell off the stage. So, he will not forget that, and I will not forget. I felt so sorry for him. But they did not build that fire station. And, there are several other things the Minister his Budget Statement is telling us that they built, they did not build, and my colleagues will pick up on the items according to the Ministry.

So, both of these Ministers seem to have a plan to make the Government penniless—no pun intended for the Member from Arima—after more than \$530 billion taxpayers' dollars. I say again, that is a legacy of this PNM Government, PNM, "PNM" means poor national management. Every sector spirals uncontrollably downward into deepening failure, crisis and collapse. The national security, health, education, energy sectors are in a mess. I am inclined to repeat the Government's own words from one of its hon. Members. You are in charge, deal with it. Everything is collapsing under your watch.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Nowhere in this budget's education section, between pages 114 and 123, does this Minister address school violence frontally. Social media videos of school violence are widespread. Disgusted people are sharing disgusting images of violence. Disgusted people are explaining their

disgust through a medium they feel comfortable with. After, as I say, \$530 billion dollars spent, that is a legacy of this PNM Government. “PNM” means people’s needs marginalized; people’s needs marginalized.

Our children’s bodies are being tattooed with pain, literally and figuratively. Look into the children’s eyes, listen to their trembling voices and hear their rage building, see their mask of rebellion. I say again, after half a trillion taxpayer dollars spent, that is the legacy of this PNM Government. PNM: pain, neglect and misery. Pain, neglect, misery.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And you know, some of these images can be changed if the Government listens to people. Has this Government listened to the people? Have they listened to the people in their constituencies? Have they listened to how their policies affect our citizens? Have they listened to people’s dreams, their hopes, their aspirations and their ideas? I can say with confidence that this Government has not. That is why the country has gone backwards in every area except for the crime rate. That is the only industry that is growing.

Unlike the PNM, the UNC has always maintained that we will not leave any citizen behind. Through us, they will always have a voice.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So every year we undertake nationwide pre-budget consultations, following our great party’s founding principles and tenets to be the people’s voice and faithfully represent their interests and needs. They are the ones indeed who put us here. Thanks to all who attended our consultations and shared their concerns and suggestions with us, including representatives from NGOs, labour unions, business organizations and other groups. Thanks also to

those who sent us emails, texts and WhatsApp messages and those who sent written submissions. The people know the truth about what is happening in our country. They live it and they feel it. Unfortunately, the PNM Ministers live in a bubble, and they do not know what life is like for most Trinbagonians.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

10.50 a.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This Government has presented propaganda budgets for the past nine years, which have consistently failed our country. This fiscal 2025, budget is no different. What is the legacy of this Government's '24 budget? But just look at the budget titles, over these nine budgets, and now the tenth one.

For 2015/2016, their first budget, the title was, or the theme, Restoring Confidence and Rebuilding Trust: Let us do this together. Really? Restoring Confidence, Rebuilding Trust. The people were betrayed—together—the only ones together, were the ones reaping the benefits.

For, 2016/2017, Shaping a Brighter Future: A Blueprint for Transformation and Growth. Again, this grouping was drawn up without the people in mind. The people are still stuck in the dark, while the promises shine for a chosen few.

For 2017/2018, Changing the Paradigm: Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path. Mr. Minister, the people do not feel the sustainable path, they are still stuck in the same economic rut.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Budget 2018/2019 theme: Turnaround. The people have not seen a turnaround, just more empty promises and the same struggles, while a few profit.

For 2019/2020: Stability, Strength and Growth. That was the theme. The people are still asking, stability for whom? Strength for whom? They said certainly is it not for them.

Fiscal 2020/2021, theme: Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. Now, the economy might have been reset for a few, but it is the same story for the majority. Struggle with no innovation, or pressure, no money.

For 2021/2022: Resilience in the face of a Global Pandemic. Again, resilience for the few, but the many are left asking, if this is resilience, why do we feel abandoned?

For 2022/2023: Tenacity and Stability. We ask the question, where is the tenacity or stability? The people have seen none of it. They are still struggling. All the promises never materialized.

For 2023/2024, last fiscal: Building Capacity for Diversification and Growth. There has been no diversification of the economy—and this is born out of the hon. Prime Minister's words, that we are still putting our eggs in the energy basket. No other revenue streams have been developed, none have been growing. We are still dependent—and that is why we have been told to hold strain until when, 2027, when we hope some gas and oil will come in. So we have not yet diversified the economy. We have only increased capacity and growth for the few. People are still waiting to feel any of it. There is no growth where they stand.

For 2024/2025, this present budget, Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity. The economic indicators have been in steadfast decline, since 2015. That is the only thing that has been steadfast, decline; steadfast decline, because of the Minister's resolute incompetence. The Minister mentioned

no pathways to long-term prosperity, besides waiting for gas production and prices to rebound.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, with the budget theme of Forging Pathways to Prosperity, nothing was mentioned of those pathways, to take us into prosperity. Instead, hold strain, until when? 2027. Real GDP contracted from 2015—2024 by approximately 20 per cent. Our current economy is one-fifth smaller, since 2015, when we left office. The Finance Minister has historically based his budgets on overestimated prices of energy products. The Minister has consistently been wrong on oil and gas prices, revenue and expenditures, leading to deficits and increasing national debt. Nine years of borrowing, and HSF withdrawals, call in question the competence of this Minister and his Government. Because of his consistent history of poor judgment, the erroneous projections and broken budget promises, we cannot trust any figure—growth projections or new promises that the Minister has spoken.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That coupled with the scandalous missing billions from the Auditor General's report, makes the Minister's numbers all the more questionable. Only the PNM could engineer a Finance Minister so incompetent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Indeed, the Minister, Madam Speaker, is on record as saying that he thought his own leader was mad for making him the Finance Minister.

Hon. Member: Correct.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Look I am not in their Cabinet room. The Prime Minister should have chosen his man for finance wisely.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Clearly, he did not.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam. So, borrowings on HSF withdrawals are being masked, disguised as revenue to make deficits appear smaller and artificially present the illusion of growth, fooling no one except those who purposely chose to be blinded and the PNM's true believers. What was the result after these nine propaganda budgets? This is the reality. GDP has contracted to 2006 levels. GPD has contracted going back to 2006 levels, with record deficits, billions owed to suppliers and contractors, billions owed in VAT refunds, \$119.8 billion borrowed, over 50,000 jobs lost. They are spending millions to lose jobs, rather than to create jobs.

This Government has no idea how to grow the economy and create jobs and wealth for the people of our country. You see, my colleague from Diego Martin North/East should know better. The Member should know what a beautiful economy should look like. A beautiful economy is like a golf course. You have to groom it every day, otherwise the country turns into wasteland.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So after half a trillion of tax payer's dollars spent, that is the legacy of this Government. Propaganda, not management. PNM means propaganda, not management.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I turn now to the cost of living, which is an area of concern for many. Instead of growing the economy and making citizens lives easier, what have they done? They have sought to place burdens on ordinary citizens. The cost of living has sky-rocketed. On page 28 of the budget statement, the Minister boasted of having extracted \$91 million in taxes from home owners. I always remember I once likened the Minister and his smile and glowing face to Gollum—

Hon. Members: [*Laughing*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—from *The Lord of the Rings*, because any time money was coming in, whether it was from taxes or otherwise, Minister—what was it? Fines. So, he tells us—boasts \$91 million in taxes from home owners. Year after year, they come with taxes, fuel price hikes, traffic ticket fines, electricity and water rate increases. While removing grants for single mothers. Baby-milk grants, laptops for our children, GATE for university students, house and land prices are out of reach for the average person. Rents will increase because of property taxes and increase in utilities.

Everybody in this country is lying on a bed of needles. For most, the needles are already inches into their flesh, and every day the needles are forced deeper into their flesh because the cost of living burden gets heavier. Every day citizen are being burdened. This Government and these Ministers are effecting death by a thousand cuts. They add an ounce of burden, then an ounce of pain, then another ounce of horror and repeat. They do this over-and-over again, to the population, until people have learnt to be helpless and hopeless, until they are timid and terrorized, until they are crippled and paralyzed, because of the cost of living.

Never once did the PNM Government ask the people how they felt about the cost of living. They never asked you how their wage freezes, lock-downs, forex restrictions and other oppressive measures, have affected workers, fathers, mothers, children, heads of households, young people, the elderly, the retired and the disabled. After half a trillion dollars of tax payers money spent, that is the legacy of this PNM Government. PNM: people, never matter. People never matter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.00 a.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC has a legacy of caring. We always do our best to have a positive, direct and tangible effect on the lives of everyday citizens. We work to make lives better. When citizens are experiencing hardship, we want to know and try to help. Citizens are now asking for cost of living reform. The cost of living, as I said, has skyrocketed in the last nine years. Central Bank data on the Consumer Price Index shows some percentage price increases from 2015 to 2024 in major categories.

Madam, I was surprised at some of these numbers coming from Central Bank data. Inflation from when we demitted office to 2024: Housing, 14.5 per cent increase; rent, 10.1 per cent increase; transport, 26.8 per cent increase; health, 46.7 per cent increase—46.7 increase in health; communication, 11.4 per cent increase; furnishes and household equipment, 16 per cent increase; recreation and culture, 21.2 per cent increase; hotels, cafés, restaurants, 35.1 per cent increase; bread and cereals, 39.8 per cent increase—bread and cereals; meats, 45.7 per cent increase; fish, 35 per cent increase; milk, cheese and eggs, 31.7 increase; butter, margarine and edible oils, 66 per cent increase; fruits, 46.2 per cent increase;

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vegetables, 58 per cent increase.

These are not my numbers, Madam. These are coming from the Central Bank, their databank that they have on their website. Premium gas increased by 35 per cent, super gas increased by 158 per cent, diesel increased by 227 per cent, kerosene increased by 193 per cent. And for the benefit of the hon. Member, Port of Spain South—I do not see him in the Chamber, Port of Spain South. For his benefit, even the price of coals went up.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The rise in fuel prices in turn contributed to a 26.8 per cent increase in transport. Again, except for Trinidad's most legendary cyclist from Port of Spain South, who pedals to Parliament in his SUV, this in turn raised expenses for most businesses and thus, consumer prices.

Hundreds of thousands of citizens have been battered by higher living costs due to Government's higher fuel prices. When my Government left office, Madam Speaker, super fuel was \$2.70 per litre. Today, it is \$6.97 cents per litre. Diesel was \$1.50 per litre; \$1.50. Today, it is \$4.91 per litre. So cost of living increases have led to declining living standards for many citizens, significantly impacting the middle and working classes. One can only imagine what is happening to those least able to bear this increased burden, such as individuals on fixed incomes, like pensioners or public assistance. Due to deliberate government policy and the combined increases in transport, taxes soon to be high, utility rates, land and house prices, rent, security and health care costs will further erode the purchasing power of citizens.

While the cost of living has skyrocketed because of failed government policy decision, the Government's limiting of all negotiations for wage increases to

4 per cent previously and now 5 per cent means that Government is deliberately facilitating the diminishing of employees' purchasing power.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And that announcement made by the hon. Minister of Finance about the cap of 5 per cent, the Government is interfering in the collective bargaining process—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—by directing the CPO to offer the 5 per cent for those who already took it. The Government is interfering in the collective bargaining process, and as MP Indarsingh will tell us, it is a serious breach of best industrial relation practices.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So the Government's decision to cap wage increases at 5 per cent means that employees in essential services, such as the fire, police and prison services, as well as teachers, medical personnel and other public servants are facing a substantial drop in the value of their purchasing power.

What does this hike in the cost of living mean to households in the context of the new low wage increase? Unions were forced into accepting. It means that households will have to reprioritize and limit their spending. While PNM Ministers enjoy almond milk and Ozempic, I think they call it—"Ozempec" or Ozempic—

Hon. Member: [*Laughter*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—they tell you there is no macaroni pie, no ham and no going to the movies with your children.

Hon. Member: Shame.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Due to the continuous price hikes, households already must spend a greater percentage of their salary on food, transport and medical care. This means that the real value of household incomes has shrunk over the last nine years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When one factors in the additional burden of property tax, which will take priority over many other bills because it fetches a very high penalty, including loss of property, it is evident that the increased cost of living and drastically reduced standard of living will substantially impact most households.

What are citizens of our country to do? The country needs cost of living reform. Low and middle-income households will have to dig into whatever savings they may still have to keep their heads above water. Again, after this half-a-trillion-taxpayer-dollar spend, that is the legacy of the PNM. PNM means priorities never met.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I move along. This latest budget follows the same tragic pattern the Minister sets, devoid of new ideas, devoid of imagination, devoid of substance, devoid of accountability. This budget repeats broken promises made before, repeated promises. Promises have been made and it has been repeated and broken, and repeated, and repeated, and broken. There are numerous of them and my colleagues, again, will go sector by sector to itemize them.

This budget, therefore, projects yet another unrealistic revenue projection—projects unrealistic revenue estimates. Indeed, you know, there is a new buzzword

in the political arena, not in our nation but in the US where they are going into their elections, presidential elections, and you talk about speaking, and it is a “word salad”. And here in Trinidad and Tobago, I will say, this budget by the hon. Minister is a buffet. I remembered Kevon who works in my office told me he was going to a buffet, if I wanted anything. I said, “Well, what kind of food dey have?” He said, “They have everything spread around the table. That is a buffet and you just pick.” So this budget is like a buffet of word salads. It is not one. It is several of them compiled together. The most unhealthy salad you could ever find.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This budget is another chapter in their book of failed budget gimmicks.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Nowhere in this budget can we find proof of people getting value for the \$67.3 billion spent by this Government in fiscal, last year, '24.

Since the Government took office, I can say without fear of contradiction that every sector in our nation—roads, infrastructure, health care, education, national security, agricultural, tourism, energy, public utilities, social services—every sector is worse off than when we, the Partnership, was in government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And more and more, our citizens are standing up and asking, “Where the money went?” Half a trillion dollars. “Where the money went?” They say, PNM means “public needs mismanaged”. “Where the money gone?”—this is an often repeated question.

11.10 a.m.

I can share some of where that money went, Madam Speaker, and certainly when we get back into Government, we will find out where the rest of the money is.

Hon. Member: Exactly.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Exactly where it is.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Exactly where it is. Here is a brief list of how your taxpayers were lost under this Government. First up, in the first year of office—very early into that first year—paintings purchased for \$3 million.

Hon. Members: Shame.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: A Benz purchased for \$2 million. I think it was purchased for the Prime Minister. We were told about a Trump phone call, \$16 million. We were told that Tarouba stadium, \$210 million. Well I get into the trouble with the Minister of Finance, Buccoo estate.

Hon. Member: Correct.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Buccoo estate; \$174 million.

Hon. Members: “Buck-oo”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Toilet paper factory loan, \$30 million.

Ms. Ameen: Wow.

Hon. Member: They ever paid that back?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: TSTT’s bailout—good question, was that toilet paper factory loan ever repaid? That is a good question. I did not know Government is in the business of lending a toilet paper factory money. What interest was there and who was involved for them to give this loan to this toilet

paper factory? TSTT's bailout of Massy Communications, \$255 million; Ernst and Young audits, \$20 million; PriceWaterhouseCoopers audits, \$10.5 million; San Fernando Waterfront destruction, \$500 million; *Cabo Star* mobilization fee, \$13 million; *Ocean Flower II* mobilization fee, \$20 million; President's House restoration, \$89 million; \$1.2 billion for four boats—Austral, Incat. This Government seems to have an obsession with boats. We have 30 boats parked up somewhere up in Staubles Bay, not working; they will not repair them. Now they tell us in this budget they want to buy, what, four more? Interceptors, more boats, what is it with boats? The hon. Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East will remember the famous *Su*—*MV Su*—which never floated for one day; purchased by a previous PNM Government of which he was a Member. What is it with boats? The boat never floated. When we come into office, I think we have to find ways to—

Hon. Member: Drag it somewhere.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—drag it and dispose of it.

Prime Minister's residence: Refurbishment in Tobago, \$70 million; the family of a Government Minister, about \$250 million in rent; the family of another Government Minister, about \$4 billion, in—what was it? State contracts and loans, and stuff; CARIFESTA 2019, \$28 million. I understand—we were told on Monday we will be hosting CARIFESTA again next year. I do not know if it is another \$28 million, we shall wait to see. A \$120 million loss at Trestrail HDC development. What a shame and a scandal. What a shame.

Hon. Member: Demolishing.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Demolishing—\$120 million loss, when you have people starving and cannot buy food. When people who cannot access health care

given the 46 per cent increase in health care. Then there is the \$8.9 million ramp in Tobago to accommodate the *Jean de La Vallette*. Then there is the \$45 million to harass MP Moonilal, the Member for Oropouche East. Then there is a Mosquito Creek collapsing, \$50 million. I think MP for Oropouche East dubbed it the “mosquito crack”.

Fifty-five million on the DPP’s Office, rentals for the DPP’s Office and still not occupied, never used; \$3 billion missing Auditor General’s Report; \$400 million was wasted by NGC on Train, \$4 million was wasted by NGC on Train 1; \$ 120 million owed by NiQuan for gas; \$140 million in *Galleons Passage*, another boat; \$100 million the *Jean de La Vallette* ferry; \$120 million on Balisier House; \$5 billion in improperly awarded contracts as flagged by the Procurement Regulator, \$5 billion and this is in one year? Five billion dollars flat. This amounts to over \$1 billion, Madam Speaker; \$1 billion for “eat ah food” lawyers.

Now why do I say that, Madam Speaker? These are repeat lawyers. These are lawyers who earn above a million dollars and get repeat, repeat, repeat briefs. So I am not attacking our lawyers. These are in a special category. I think one of them at the top of the list got \$45 million in briefs, and the list goes on. Then we have \$17 billion wasted. This is where all of these things, there are many more, this is where some of your taxpayer dollars went. It did not go towards anything to benefit the average man or woman on the street. What is the legacy of this Government after spending, as I say, half a trillion dollars? Again, PNM means “Plundering National Money”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Because of the Government’s legacy of failure to create a single revenue-generating project and shutting down revenue-generating

projects like Petrotrin, the steel mill, half of Point Lisas, they have repeatedly drained this country's savings.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This is the first Government ever, ever "eh"? The first Government ever, through their Minister, to withdraw moneys from the HSF, not once, not twice, not three times, but on 10 occasions.

Hon. Members: Wow.

Dr. Moonilal: Shame, shame.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Ten times withdrew from our savings in the HSF.

Dr. Moonilal: Never, never.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Never before, not a previous government. And if you remember the history of this, how this came about, it started with late former Prime Minister, the hon. Basdeo Panday. It was given a different name at that time, Heritage and Stabilisation Fund is now. This was then put into law by a previous PNM Government by statute, so previous to that there was an arrangement for moneys to be saved for a rainy day and then the HSF came into being. And not a single government, whether it was the Panday Government or it was the Manning Government or whether it was the Government I led, never took out one cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Ten withdrawals by this Government, under this hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East. One, September 2016, US \$375 million; September 2017, US \$252.5 million; March 2020, US \$79.8 million; in June 2020, US \$600 million. These are not little bits of money, you know. These are millions upon millions of dollars. US dollars.

Dr. Moonilal: Imbert is that you?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: US dollars.

Ms. Ameen: US dollars boy?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: US dollars. September 2020, US \$300 million; December—wait twice in one year you know? September 2020, December 2020, US \$198.9 million.

Ms. Ameen: Four times in 2020; four times.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So in that year, 2020, four times. Alright. Minister will come to cry and tell us it was COVID, it was COVID, but the Minister must be honest and tell us how much other money was sourced from various international organizations to deal with COVID. And I am sure—we have two brilliant doctors here, I am sure they will be able to tell us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Which one is it now? Which one is it? March 2021, US \$293.7 million taken out.

Hon. Member: Again?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: June 2021, US \$300 million withdrawn; September 2021, so another—wow, three in 2021, three times—

Dr. Moonilal: “He get COVID again”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—US \$100 million. And December 2023, US \$160.3 million and the Government—this was in 2023.

Dr. Moonilal: Dengue.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Government did not publicly announce that. Did not publicly announce that.

Dr. Moonilal: That was for dengue.

Ms. Ameen: Hiding information.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Hiding information

11.20 a.m.

I think there was, in fact, some harsh words between the Auditor General that issued a special report, if I am not mistaken about this. So that is the legacy of this Government, over US \$ 2.7 billion which works out to about TT \$ 17 billion withdrawn on 10 different occasions. On the other hand, my Government deposited over US \$ 1.18 billion—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—TT \$7.9 billion into HSF from 2010 to 2015 and I repeat, we did not make a single withdrawal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Under my watch, our country accumulated the highest foreign reserves in our country's history.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We put in \$7.6 billion into our HSF and I said this Government withdrew—This Government withdrew \$17 billion; drained from the nation's savings, \$17 billion wasted. Added to \$17 billion raided from the nation's savings or drawn from the nation's savings, \$34 billion taxpayer vanished. Madam Speaker, \$34 billion taxpayers' money vanished with nothing worthwhile to show in return. Again, that is the legacy of this PNM. "PNM" means "Pathetic Negligent Misappropriation."

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Now the Minister always has a very sunny theme for presentations.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Lee: Sunny.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Very sunny, and for his mid-term reviews. Maybe the Minister secretly likes the warmth of the rising sun.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This PNM Government has broken over 90 per cent of their budget promises in the past nine years. A promise by a Government in a democracy to the citizens is a sacred covenant that holds a meaningful place in a nation's political and social psyche. This is because a budget is more than itemized estimates of government expenditures and revenue for a fiscal year. At its core, a budget is a contract between the Government and the citizens who elected them to office and it is at whose pleasure the Government serves in accordance with the Constitution of the land and the sacred tenets that the Constitution espouses, that is, equality, justice and fairness.

Every year the Government of Prime Minister Rowley consistently makes numerous promises under the various Heads of Expenditure. Data analysis shows this adds up to about 490 budget promises made in the past nine years—

Hon. Members: Wow.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—about 490 promises made. The total number of broken promises over the same period is about 373.

Dr. Moonilal: What?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And the total number of repeated promises is about 100.

Hon. Members: Wow.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So we have the broken and the repeated.

Dr. Moonilal: Another record.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Of these broken promises the most scandalous I think is the Ministry of National Security given the state of crime, given the crisis we are in in national security. Of these broken promises, national security registers the highest number of broken promises, 51. This is when the crime and violence wave is at an unprecedented historic high level.

The Ministry of National Security is followed by Works and Transport, Public Utilities—

Dr. Moonilal: Critical areas.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—Education, Tobago Affairs, Health, Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and Finance the other sectors comprise the remainder of the 373 broken promises of this Government. My colleagues will provide the details, I am just giving the numbers. Some matters go beyond the cut and thrust of politics and the PNM Government's chronic failure to keep its budget promises is one of them. This Government and its Ministers must honestly account for these 373 broken promises to the citizens. This is the history of the Ministers, gimmickry, non-performance and half a trillion dollars spent and the country got zero, nada, zilch.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, I would say here now, “PNM” now also means PNM, “Projects Not moving.” “Projects Not moving.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam, thank you. “Projects Not Moving.” However, we have some plans, the UNC, that we will implement. They will not be broken promises like what we are getting from this Government.

I want us now, to look at a few sectors, critical sectors where the Government has hoodwinked the population. One is digital transformation.

Hon. Members: “Orrr”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This is the latest buzzword, you know. This is mentioned all this time, digitization, digital, and I am just doing a very short piece on this, Madam. It is alarming and disappointing that in the heart of the digital age, the Finance Minister could only muster nine mentions of digital transformation in his five-hour plus presentation on Monday. This again shows the PNM Government’s continued failure in this very critical sector. The future of our country’s economy, productivity, and global competitiveness depends on the nation’s digital transformation. However, digital transformation cannot be misconstrued as we equate it with a cashless society. We have been hearing this for quite a while now, cashless. You do not equate digitization with being a cashless society.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC is on record as supporting a hybrid digital and cash transaction system at this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: A hybrid, digital, and cash transaction system. While the world has fast-tracked its digital future, T&T is left behind by the PNM’s failure to deliver on its digital transformation promises. In past budget statements, we were given grand assurances about the future of digital transformation in this country. However, in the fiscal 2025 *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, which is the driver behind this whole digitization trust, this Ministry of Digital Transformation,

Madam, would you believe it was allocated a measly \$1 million for digitization of this Ministry.

Ms. Ameen: Normal.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This is a digitization Ministry allocated, what, \$1 million.

Dr. Moonilal: One million.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Now, I will tell you something. I remember one year we were here and this same Ministry of digitization was talking about it and we were shocked that they did not even have a website. They did not even have a website, that was way back in the day. They did not have any computers, they did not have any staff, so now they probably got some staff, Madam, so now they have to get some computers. \$1 million. It gets worse. This is the Ministry responsible for digitization, imagine it is not digitized. It gets worse. In our draft estimates there for 2025 \$1 million was allocated to computerize this Ministry, I told you that, and the Government promised widespread digital infrastructure improvements, enhanced e-governance services, and digital tools.

Hon. Member: E.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: E-governance services, thank you, and digital tools. Yet, what have we seen, what do we see? So we have \$1 million for that Ministry and \$1 million for computerization of that Ministry. What have we seen? We saw two Ministers standing by the Arima Dial trying to connect—[*Member laughs*] You know, if you “doh” laugh, they say, you will cry. We are into this great digital—

Hon. Members: Trying to get Wi-Fi.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Two Ministers standing by the Arima Dial trying

to connect to Wi-Fi because to the PNM that is what a smart city is. Look at the failure of the Connected Arima project. When it was announced in 2021 it was one big mamaguy. The tconnect platform, another one, which was meant to be a cornerstone of key e-government services collapsed last year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.30 a.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Since then we have had nothing, leaving citizens in the dark when trying to access essential services. This is a pattern with this Government, creating initiatives without providing the necessary infrastructure to support it. In 2015, this PNM deliberately dismantled the digital infrastructure that was carefully being built under our leadership.

Madam Speaker: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, allow me to remind us that while the Finance Minister spoke glowingly of the creation of the Ministry of Digital Transformation in 2020, the Minister conveniently forgot to mention that his Government eliminated the Ministry of Science and Technology in 2015, which was fulfilling the same role under that Government.

Madam Speaker: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Ministry's rebranding in 2020 does not absolve the PNM of the five lost years during which no meaningful action was taken to advance digital initiatives.

After the pandemic underscored the importance of digital infrastructure, they hastily revived the Ministry. Instead of delivering on the promised future, this Government's digital transformation agenda remains mired in stagnation, underperformance and a lack of vision. Trinidad and Tobago deserves more than

half-baked projects and unfulfilled promises, yet no one is surprised that this is where we are under this PNM Government.

Digital leaders within the private sector have spoken about the challenges of digital transformation. They emphasize that transformation is about implementing technology, preparing teams, up-skilling staff, creating organization structure—creating an organizational culture that embraces change. Yet there is no indication that this Government has a plan to support businesses or public sector employees in adapting to new digital realities. I always talk about this Government is like NATO, no action, talk only. No action, talk only. The result, low adoption rates, underutilized systems and public sector inefficiencies cost the country time and money. Despite promises of more robust cybersecurity frameworks and legislation, Trinidad and Tobago remains woefully unprepared from modern cybercrime threats.

The Cyber Security Incident Response Team is under-resourced and we have yet to see any substantive movement on the comprehensive cybersecurity legislation promised years ago. Again, another broken promise. This Government clearly has no coherent digital transformation strategy. They have failed to deliver on their promises, and their approach lacks both ambition and follow-through. Digital transformation should be a key pillar of our national development strategies, yet this administration treats it as an afterthought, which I say, also applies to how they see their own Minister of Digital Transformation. Ask any citizen to tell you who is the Minister of Digital Transformation.

Mr. Indarsingh: They cannot. Nobody knows.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They cannot. They cannot. They cannot.

Dr. Moonilal: Not even on a computer.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am sorry to say, I myself will be hard-pressed to say who it may be.

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker as well.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Maybe Madam Speaker is brighter than we are, but I am hard-pressed to say who is this Minister. Ask citizens what this Ministry has done, they cannot tell you. No one knows. Trinidad and Tobago deserves a government which understands the power of digital transformation, ready to harness it for the good of all citizens. That will be—oh, sorry.

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 53(1)(b), the Members opposite, particularly the Member for Laventille West, who is not in Laventille West, is continuously engaged in what appears to be a planning meeting with the Member for Arouca/Maloney.

Ms. Ameen: They are, continuously and very loud.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So, I will invite Members, if there needs to be long discussions, to leave the Chamber, have the discussion and come back. Okay? Let us set the standard that we want for the debate. Alright. Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. So, I was talking about use of digital transformation, it is very vital for our development in our country, and so all the talk about digitization and the digital Ministry and so on, in my view, it is just another mamaguy, a digital mamaguy.

Madam Speaker, I turn now to the energy sector. I make a few points here and I know my colleague is the expert, MP for Pointe-a-Pierre, has much more to say on energy matters. The consensus among the energy industry community is that this sector which is most import to our country, is in worrying decline. Workers in some plants in Point Lisas, their natural gas supply contracts expire

within the next two years, are already making plans to migrate.

Hon. Member: “Hmph.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: A few weeks ago Methanex shut down the Atlas Methanol Plant which has a production capacity of over 1.7 million tonnes per year and they restarted the smaller Titan Methanol Plant which has a production capacity of 875 tonnes per year. So they shut down the 1.7 million tonnes per year plant which was Atlas and went to the smaller Titan Plant. There is a view that that the Atlas Methanol Plant will never restart given the amount of natural gas it needs, and the fact that it is due for maintenance which will require a significant investment. It will unfortunately become an addition to an ever-growing industrial graveyard which includes the ArcelorMittal steel complex, the TTMC 1 Methanol Plant, the Yara Ammonia Plant, the Atlantic Train 1 and the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In addition, Nutrien is now operational with three of its four ammonia plants. All these closures happened under the watch of this PNM Government. The dislocation is reflected in the labour stats for the energy sector. Central Bank data tells us the number of persons with jobs in the energy sector fell—fell, energy-sector jobs from 20,500 in 2015, my last year in office, to 10,400, a decline of 49.3 per cent in the energy sector.

Hon. Member: “Wooo.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Where have all these professionals gone? Where have they gone?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Both the Prime Minister and the Minister of

Finance have confirmed this decline. In his famous or infamous affidavit supporting the State's case in *Dhoray v the AG* under the compulsion of oath—
Madam Speaker—

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, 53(1)(e).

Madam Speaker: Okay. So let this be the last time I have to stand up on Standing Order 53(1). Alright? You know, the conversations are continuing. Members are always invited to go outside, have their conversations. I am sure they are important conversations, and come back in, but we need to hear the contribution, and I want to hear the contribution from the Leader of the Opposition. So let this be the last time I am standing on this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I had just read some Central Bank statistics which are telling us that there has been a decline in the labour force in the energy sector by 49.3 per cent, and I am asking where have all these professionals gone? We had some of the best professionals in the energy sector, having had our energy sector what—it is over 100 years old, one of the oldest, most mature energy sectors in the world. So where have they gone?

Both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance have confirmed this decline, and we are saying in the famous or infamous affidavit in the case *Dhoray v the AG* under oath, the Minister of Finance admitted that the law as an expected oil and gas production had had a profound impact on revenue. So the Minister is confirming that decline in the energy sector production and revenue. Nowhere in this budget speech however, does the Minister mention this TT \$9 billion deficit which the Central Bank reports as TT \$9.5 billion. The Minister said the deficit for fiscal 2024 was expected to be \$9 billion in this affidavit, but nowhere in his

speech does the Minister mention it. This decline amid the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister's wailing and gnashing of teeth leads to a rust belt akin to what they have in the United States.

11.40 a.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The legacy of the last nine years under this Government, now going into 10, is that Trinidad and Tobago is a Trinidad and Tobago rust belt. The Government has ignored, has sidestepped this decline, but denial is not a strategy and speaking the to Energy Chamber soon is not a plan. The centrepiece of the PNM's rust belt is the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery, a major national asset that once provided energy security for our country and for the entire CARICOM region. We must always remember who blew the lights off at Pointe-a-Pierre, who blew that light off and shut down, who blew it and why. That too we will find out when we get back into office.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That refinery is now left to rot and become perhaps the world's most expensive scrap iron heap.

In the Minister's speech on Monday, we heard about three bidders. None of these companies are known to have any track record in the refining industry. I think we are going on another mamaguy run. Before every election, we are hearing how they are going to find someone to lease or buy the Petrotrin refinery, but elections come and elections go and nothing happens, so this perhaps just another mamaguy. But none of these three companies are known to have any track record in the refining industry. If it is different, then let us know.

On top of that, there are serious questions and allegations about improper practices by at least two of these preferred bidders. It reminds me all over of the

Jindal fiasco, when the Government did not even take the time to do just a simple Google search, which took Michael from my office 20 minutes to do the Google search to find out. So did the closure—coming November will mark six years of the closure of this refinery. That is the six years of depreciation of refinery assets. Did the Cabinet's decision to close the refinery consider the impact of six years of depreciation in its economic analysis? Three attempts to find the buyer for the refinery have failed. From 2006 to 2014, some US \$1.6 billion was spent on the upgrade known as the GOP, I think it is gas optimization project. That money is now lost. Maybe the approach to restarting has to change. On this side, we commit to restarting the refinery. Trinidad and Tobago should be in the—
[Inaudible]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Upon on returning to office, we will appoint a task force of industry experts to report to the Cabinet within 90 days on the way forward to restart the refinery.

I turn now to Heritage Petroleum. Heritage Petroleum has made no difference to oil production. Heritage has produced less oil after six years than Petrotrin was producing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So they are boasting that Heritage produced so much oil in the production estimates but let us face it, Heritage has made no difference to oil production. Heritage has produced less oil after six years than Petrotrin ever did—Petrotrin did. In its last year of operation 2018, Petrotrin averaged 37,558 barrels of oil per day, whereas Heritage has averaged 34,000 barrels per day for 2024. So it is lower, it is not more. It has not been better than

Petrotrin. National oil production, Madam Speaker, is now at 1938 levels.

Hon. Member: Wow!

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The production has fallen so much. It is now at 1938 levels. We are going backwards. Backward ever, forward never under this Government. Large pieces of what was once the proud oil industry in places like Santa Flora, Palo Seco, Los Bajos, Point Fortin, Guapo, Parry Lands, Guayaguayare, Barrackpore, Penal, and, of course, Pointe-a-Pierre are now in decay and being reclaimed by nature. Places like the Pointe-a-Pierre camp and beach camp are now lying in ruins. The boasts about Heritage's profitability are hallow and vacuous. Petrotrin's exploration and production unit, now called Heritage, was always profitable; always profitable.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We believe that saving oil production requires an infusion of private capital, new technology, efficient acreage management and a "debottling" of the maze of approvals.

I turn now to natural gas. As mentioned earlier, the Prime Minister lamented the level of natural gas production and said it will worsen before there was some relief in 2027. When the Prime Minister returned from Switzerland in September 2022, the Prime Minister warned similarly. The Prime Minister said then that he had seen a:

"...diagram shows that by 2026, 2027, 2028 the levels of gas that would be available to Trinidad and Tobago...will have far-reaching consequences for government revenues and... the quality of life for all people in Trinidad and Tobago."

So, Madam Speaker, what is the population to do? What are the people of

Trinidad and Tobago to do for 2025 coming up, 2026, 2027? Do we just hold strain and wait until 2028?

Ms. Ameen: Vote them out.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Cannot happen. Yes, you are right. You are right. That election, you will have to choose and vote them out.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: While this Government tries to hide its concerns about Atlantic's restructuring, our LNG production declined by 39.4 per cent from 2015 on our watch—declined from then—and 2023, a decline of 39.4 per cent, and we declined further from 2024, right down to 2027. "Hold strain, hold strain." The Prime Minister tells you, "Hold strain." The consequence of this is the now permanent shutdown of Train 1, while Trains 2, 3 and 4 operate at under 65 per cent of their capacity. They boasted that they restructuring allowed third-party gas to be sold to Atlantic. Another mamaguy? Please tell us, where would this third-party gas come from, and when will it come? Another mamaguy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When will it come?

In addition, Train 4 is not yet part of restructured Atlantic as its commercial arrangements continue into 2026. So we can restructure as much as we want but the reality is that with significantly less gas being produced, there is less LNG to sell. It will be helpful if the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries could say when he expects natural gas to arrive from Dragon and from—

Mr. Lee: Manakin

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—from Manakin—from the Manakin field.

In his budget speech the Minister of Finance repeated the same old story he

had repeated for the last nine years. They said the leadership of a major upstream company told them that when they, the PNM, came into office, that they would not pay taxes until the 2024. False narrative again. Feeding that false narrative to the people of our country. So they were telling us, telling the country, the leadership of a major upstream company told them that when the PNM comes into office, that the companies would not have to pay taxes until the 2024.

That company is no secret, it is bpTT. They posit—this Government—that this was because of accelerated capital allowances introduced in mid-2014. That narrative shows a gross lack of understanding of the fiscal regime which underpins the energy sector. When they say, “Pay no taxes,” which tax were they referring to, and which tax was the Government referring to? Is it SPT? Is it PPT? Is it unemployment levy or royalties? The fiscal regime changed in 2014, with the introduction Accelerated Capital Allowance, which only affected petroleum profits tax and not the levy.

It had no bearing on bpTT’s payments of supplemental petroleum tax or royalties. However, the PNM did not immediately change these Accelerated Capital Allowances. They were so vex with it but they did not change it. They did not move to change it at all. Their accelerated exploration allowance expired. It was allowed to expire in 2017, because of the sunset clause that we had introduced in the Finance Act of 2014, and the accelerated development allowance was only changed in 2020. So crying and weeping and wailing and whatever, if this was destructive, why did you not move it?

Data will show you from EITI that from 2016 to 2022, what happened?—bpTT paid the Government \$14.7 billion in taxes and royalties. Not zero; not zero, \$14.7 billion in taxes and royalties.

UNREVISED

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.50 a.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, but I cannot use that. Untruths, we can say untruths or false narratives. Either the PNM did not understand what the leadership of bpTT was telling them or they misrepresented what they were told by bpTT. You know what is the irony, Madam Speaker? The irony of all of this false narrative is that the investments under that new regime that we are placed in, that lead to the Juniper, the Angelin, the Matapal, the Cypre projects—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—are all directly related to these assorted capital allowances made by my Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And those are the projects that are coming in— what is the word? Bringing in, producing for us now. Bringing in the gas and oil. The way forward in the energy sector, Madam. When we return to office we will revitalize the energy sector to save our economy from its current economic death.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will revise the fiscal incentives system to conduct drilling. Madam Speaker, do you know that drilling declined by 56.9 percent from 2015 to 2023, at the heart of our production decline. So there is a decline. There is a decline in the drilling as well, and we would assess the efficacy of state enterprises structures to determine the appropriate model for tackling decline in production and the energy transition. STOW certification will no longer be a requirement for working in our energy sector. It is too onerous, expensive and discriminatory to small businesses and SMEs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It can cost hundreds of thousands to become STOW certified. Certification is given for one or two years, after which the business must be recertified. STOW, through the Energy Chamber is holding companies to ransom by having a monopoly on who can conduct business in the energy sector, using health, safety and the environment as a strangling tool. We will revert to the PLEA certification, combined with an expanded role of the OSH agency by adding an advisory capacity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The OSH agency will then have a department, which can advise and assist companies in complying with the provisions of the OSH Act. The Energy Chamber of Trinidad and Tobago has existed for almost 68 years, and has previously—they have provided good service to our country. However, that Chamber is now dominated by large multinationals and local special interest groups and locally-owned MSMEs in the energy sector without an adequate voice. So what is happening? Large multinationals, local special interest groups, and the locally-owned MSMEs are really without an adequate voice. Many local business people in the sector have stated they are afraid to voice their true opinions for fear of retaliation from the larger companies and local special interests. We are all too familiar with that under this present Government. We will create and fully finance the formation and operation of a new body to represent local energy service companies and contractors. The new body will also represent businesses that provide goods and services throughout the energy value chain.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: All locally-owned MSMEs in the energy sector will be able to join and use this body to make representations directly to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and Prime Minister without having going through this existing chamber. We will remove all state-owned energy companies from the Energy Chamber of Trinidad and Tobago and create a new separate body to represent these state companies' interests.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Respectfully, respectfully, I do not believe that the current Energy Chamber represents and advocates for the best interest of our state-owned companies. State-owned energy companies must make decisions and policies in the best interest of our citizens and not for a private body mainly controlled by [*Inaudible*].

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Through these new representative bodies we will prioritize the interest of our local energy companies and local content. We will further incentivize the roll out of electric hybrid and CNG vehicles. Our new UNC Government will lead in this regard and mandate that practical new government vehicles be electric, hybrid or CNG.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Hello, hello, you all getting tired. Wake up. We will implement a system to determine the fuel price at the pump that protects the population and keeps the subsidy manageable.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: As I mentioned earlier, based on a committee of experts we will consider to restart the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: There is much more we can say on the energy sector but I will leave it to my colleague, MP for Pointe-a-Pierre.

I move along to the health sector, Madam. The Minister of Finance continues to boast and make great promises after spending nearly 60 billion taxpayer dollars on the health sector. So you have already spent \$60 billion thus far, now the Minister is saying that the Government is trying to enhance the capacity and efficiency of our health-care system, where the quality and accessibility of both primary and secondary care are being almost absent. To date, patients in our public health institutions are unable to get the attention deserve at both the primary care and secondary care levels. This is unacceptable and a total shame on Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: After nine years, the Minister of Finance is still trying to tell the population about his Government's so-called multidisciplinary approach to managing and preventing non-communicable diseases, when the reality is that in Trinidad and Tobago we do not have an idea of the actual incidence of diabetes, hypertension and cancer. We do not know. We do not have an idea of these NCDs, the extent of it.

There has been no national survey or study done under this Government to determine the true incidence of these NCDs, and to ensure that adequate planning would be appropriate for the management. When you have the empirical evidence you will be able to plan. That has never been done over the last nine years. So, when the Minister tells us about this multidisciplinary approach to managing and preventing NCDs, it is another mamaguy. The Finance Minister presented to the

nation his Government's so-called health sector achievements, but had to group them for four years to blatantly hoodwink and fool the population into believing they were doing a lot of work.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Minister told us 3,400 beneficiaries for dialysis over four years. You know what that works up to, Madam? That is 800 per year. And the fact is that the incidence of renal failure is over 4,000 citizens.

Hon. Member: Wow.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So you are boasting about chicken feed and letting, you know, so many people suffer. No wonder health care is one of the— alongside crime health care is neck and neck in areas of concern in the population. Those 4,000 patients require dialysis at least twice or three times weekly, but the Minister says that only 800 per year are being done. The Minister speaks about radiation treatment. The Minister said that over four years 2,000 patients would get radiation, but that is 500. That is over four years, eh. You see the Minister lumps the four years so it sounds like plenty, thousands. But when you disaggregate that it turns out to be 500 persons per year. What about the other patients per year who need radiation treatment and who are not getting it?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Finance Minister should be very unhappy with himself and his Government for stating that only 1,000 persons received cardiac services per year, and 750 retinal surgeries were performed, when there are thousands more patients who need cardiac services and retinal surgeries in our country.

12.00 p.m.

So what has happened to these patients who have been waiting for years to have these surgeries done, what has happened? Some die while they are waiting. They give them appointments two and three years down the road, they pass away before that appointment date even comes. Well, the sad reality is many patients waiting for cardiac services, bypass surgeries, have died waiting for that surgery.

Similarly, many patients waiting for retinal surgeries become blind whilst they are waiting. When the Minister opens the statistics to show that 265,000 people have to go the CDAP programme, it tells you how dire the national situation is. And hon. Minister let me tell you this, this is not something to boast about. This is not something to boast about. This shows the need for more adequate, cost-effective, efficient, effective pharmaceutical medication. So 265,000 people will be eligible for the CDAP programme at \$190 million over a four-year period, which is about \$47 million per year. Do you know what this means? It shows that when we on this side have always complained that CDAP pharmaceuticals are ineffective you have just proven us correct.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The statistical analysis exemplifies the need for improving the types of pharmaceuticals provided in the CDAP programme to ensure greater effectiveness in managing diabetes and hypertension.

Now it is also time that we improve the level of ambulance care, to upgrade the level of training for ambulance service attendants, to provide the relevant equipment and pharmaceutical in the ambulances and ensure an effective communication strategy from ambulance to hospital as is being done internationally to save lives, particularly concerning heart patients and patients

requiring urgent treatment on the way to hospitals. It is time enough they upgrade the training to bring a higher level of emergency medical technicians. Why has the Government not been able to provide sufficient medical for breast cancer screening, mammography, prostate screening? We have fellas high up in the dance, big up in the game, they are flying off to United States to check these things, but the honourable citizens, we have the best health care in the world. So boasted the Minister, boasted, healthcare in the world, but yet, big up in the dance ones fly out, they fly out the country. So why has—and fly out with four golfing partners, I believe. I guess they all went for check-ups as well.

Why has the Government not been able to provide sufficient medical equipment as I say, breast cancer screening, mammography, prostate screening throughout the country and in different centres? What about screening for bowel cancer, which is the second highest cancer in men after prostate and in women it is almost as common as in men. The hon. Finance Minister quoted stats for NCDs, but the CSO has not been able to provide the country with stats to deaths related from these different diseases. So when the Minister quotes these, where is the Minister getting the information?

In the absence of this information adequate planning has not been and will not be implemented, and that has been the hallmark of this Government over the last nine years. This Government has been promising to have an effective mental health programme, but there is no evidence of any efficient mental health programmes within the national community. There is a shortage of some of the pharmaceuticals that are urgently needed for patients who are acutely mentally ill. And when you examine the accurate picture, health care continues to be an abysmal failure and they always say, many patients enter the hospitals walking in

but they are brought out on stretchers as corpses.

Hon. Members: Shame.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I turn now to the education sector. It was shocking to hear the Minister on Monday, on education, speak about how in the past decade they have not merely discussed enhancement but have turned words into actions. The facts speaks for themselves. The education sector has been at its worst in nine years—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and thousands of student have failed in our education system. After nine years of governance the Minister is talking about introducing a numeracy adaptive learning platform by January, a numeracy and adaptive learning platform by January. For nine years they sat and did nothing about the digital system within the education sector, after we have paved the way for massive digitalization in education. They have failed miserably by stopping the provision for laptops to students, for teachers, for principals and training teachers, principals and school personnel to continue an ICT education. All the ICT apparatus and computer rooms are being done, what, left to disintegrate and decay.

Hon. Members: Shame, shame. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: All the ICT technicians have also been left out of the system. Nine years later they come “unashamedly, bold-facedly, brass-facedly”, they come to talk about the digital system within the education system. That is shameful.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you all very much. The Minister tried to bring to the population a list about six or seven schools we had started. Let me

remind many of us who have been in this Chamber for some time, under my watch about 106 schools were built.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Five years, not nine going into 10, in five years 106 schools. And the hon. Prime Minister kept saying, well, what are they, where are they? And one day we published it and the then Minister of Education, thereafter, stood up and recited the names of all 106 schools. And you will go up and see on our website and elsewhere photographs of the 106 schools.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When the Minister speaks I would like the hon. Minister of Education to tell us how many schools they built in nine years. And so the Minister talked about a list—the Finance Minister—six or seven schools, they were started by us. Most were 50 per cent, 60 per cent, 70 per cent complete, some were 95 per cent complete. In my own constituency two huge schools have been left for vine to grow all over it, moss and decay, all the money that we spent on those schools, the Shiva Boys' Hindu College and Parvati Girls' Hindu College, they have gone to nature, covered in moss and in vines. For those schools to be restarted I think it is going to cost you a lot of money just like they did with the highway to Point Fortin, going through on the southern side, not through the Mosquito Creek, but on the other side, through Mon Desir and so on, just abandoned, abandoned. All these things will cost massive amounts of money to get them restarted, in the same way that that Refinery will cost us massive amounts of money.

So here we are nine years later, the Minister discussed completing a few of these schools. What a shame.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Over five years while in government, as I said we completed over 5,000 repair projects using more than 500 contractors in the education sector. The Minister is now trying to tell the population, Finance Minister, about School Support Services, such as, social workers, but it was this PNM Government which reduced the number of schools social workers and other relevant personnel who would have been helping students in the learning support systems. We gave 500 national scholarships, about 150 open schols, 350 additional schols, and by that I mean scholarships. You have now reduced that to 50 open scholarships, 50 open scholarships from 150 and then you say you have bursaries for students who have done well. What is the criteria for these bursaries? You have never been able to tell the population what criteria is being used to award these bursaries. Do you even have a list of these students who have been given the bursaries and on what performance and what merit have been given to these bursaries? So everything is secretive, hidden with a political agenda in education. Imagine a political agenda in education.

Hon. Members: Shame.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Shameless. I turn to public utilities just quickly and just for one main point here. My colleague from Princes Town will go further into public utilities.

12.10 p.m.

In the Minister's budget statement, the Minister sheepishly addressed the previously touted rate increase in water and electricity rates without giving any specifics and updates on Government's plans moving forward, especially since the electricity rate review is currently before the Cabinet and the water rate review is

before the RIC. This in my respectful view is an attempt to pull wool over the eyes of citizens. This come as no surprise in an election year despite Government's previous position that the water and electricity rate review was paramount to them to collect additional revenue for citizens. The population must now go into the next general election with their eyes wide open on the issue of increased water and electricity rates.

The Government cannot leave this issue in limbo and therefore, whether it is the Minister of Public Utilities or the Prime Minister, or the Minister of Finance, the public must be told how much the rate increase will be; and from when will it be effective under a PNM Government?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: To do otherwise is playing smart with foolishness, since citizens are very aware that the Government has adopted a holding position on this issue until after the next general election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Government's handlers have told them to back off on this issue since they have received widespread public opposition. If citizens take God out their minds and vote the PNM back into office, you could rest assured that one of the first acts of this Government, should they go back, will be to increase water and electricity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC commits that upon assuming office, Government, we will immediately halt any plan to increase water and electricity rates at this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC determines its policies based on the needs and circumstances of its population, not on the advice of public relation handlers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I turn now briefly to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). According to the Minister of Finance, a recently completed National Financial Inclusion Survey Report dealt specifically to determine access by MSMEs to online payment options, determined that, and I quote:

77 per cent of micro, small and medium enterprises lack business bank accounts or accept digital payments, limiting their growth and access to digital markets.

In fact, the 2023 study went further, revealing that and I quote:

70 per cent of the population that are MSMEs and do not accept digital payments stated that the main reason they do not accept digital payments linked to a business account is because they do not have a former business account for their business.

They found the application process tedious. They were concerned about cyber theft and were opposed to banks charging fees for processing transactions. Faced with this report and the known media reports of the severity of other challenges facing the MSME sector, including excessive crime levels and the inability to access foreign exchange, the Government has created yet another roadmap instead of providing solutions through the constraint identified by the sector.

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, Standing Order, 53(1) please. Those Members opposite—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. Moonilal:—*[Inaudible]*—to be engaged in some conversation. I gave them about five minutes.

[Mr. Hinds stands]

Madam Speaker: All three of us cannot be on our legs. Member for Oropouche East, thank you for inviting me to rule on 53(1). It has not yet been disturbing me and I think, you know, Member for Siparia is doing quite well. Also in doing that, we are disturbing her. So Member for Siparia, please continue and I will ask the Members on my right to be sensitive to Standing Order 53. Let us all do unto others like we would like done unto us when our turn comes. Member for Siparia—

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Member please, I have not recognized you. Please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am not giving way to—

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: “You just wake up?”

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Did you just wake up?

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia. Member for Siparia, are you ready?

Hon. Members: *[Crosstalk]*

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia, let us proceed please.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. So I was talking about the MSMEs, the micro, small and medium enterprises. Once more the Minister is paying lip service to the sector having abandoned the MSMEs during COVID-19 while providing support for other entities. In this budget, the Minister

continues to undermine the financial interest of this expansive business group. Question: Who will facilitate the cost associated with these struggling entities going cashless? As I said, the UNC supports a hybrid payment system including digital transactions or cash.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No incentive has been offered in this or any of the previous nine budgets to provide support for business registration for the kind of details that banks demand, all of which are general requirements for the procurement of the equipment and facilities to pursue cashless transactions that the Government is so anxious to promote.

In effect, while the Government utters buzzwords about promoting the MSME sector, the Government continues to deliberately disadvantage them. What is required is financial support, perhaps training and education in operating these small entities and not additional costs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The introduction of recent legislation requiring these micro, small, and medium-sized businesses to complete a full registration process to have proper accounting and to comply with certain rules at the risk of significant fines for noncompliance, presents challenges to these MSMEs which make it unattractive to continue.

Blockchain technology offers opportunities. By integrating blockchain into property and asset management, the Government can create a secure transparent system for tracking ownership and transactions, protecting businesses from fraud and providing certainty in their dealings.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Artificial intelligence tools can also be critical in business optimization. AI can automate customer service and inventory management processes, providing MSMEs with tools to enhance efficiency and reduce cost. By supporting the adoption of AI in sectors such as retail, agriculture and logistics, the Government can position local businesses to compete better.

I turn now, Madam Speaker, to the Clico fiasco. Last Monday after the budget was delivered, I was asked by several persons in the media briefing what was my comment and I said I will deal with it today because I wanted to spend a little more time to see what the Government was proposing. On Monday then, we learned from Government that the Government intends to divest Clico Life Insurance Company Limited from which it expects to earn several billions in revenue to finance Government's spending in this upcoming election year. In 2017, the same Minister of Finance announced that the Government had no intention of winding up that company. So then, the Minister says he is not going to wind it up. Today, the Government is planning to sell it off. Divesting means sell it—sell it off. And the initial bail out of Clico we have to remember cost taxpayers, our taxpayers, \$24 billion according to the Central Bank.

The Minister told us that \$13 billion of the debt is still outstanding, even while the Minister boasted that significant Clico assets were tied up in the NIF. But the Minister has questions to answer: What was the revenue earned by the Clico group including the assets tied up in the N-I-F, in the NIF? Because the revenue from those NIF-based assets is now being used to pay dividends to private investors and corporations instead of to repay taxpayers.

12.20 p.m.

So much of that revenue from each company in the CLICO group has been

used to retire the debt over the past 15 years? What is the value of CLICO's assets that have already been sold off, including the CLICO shares in Methanol Holdings? The same Colonial Life Insurance Company that the Government is looking to divest recently announced a \$2.3 billion profit. Is this why the Government is anxious to sell off the company to the financiers on the eve of a general election?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Why now? Why now? I call on the Minister to provide a comprehensive report on CLICO publicly. No more secrets.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I call on the Government to amend the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act, to bring this proposed divestment of CLICO, as well as Magdalena and the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery under the watchful eye of the Office of Procurement Regulation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I watched an interview with the regulator—the OPR's regulator, Office of Procurement Regulation, and a very strange thing emerged. Whilst we have regulations to deal with divestments, selling of property, there seems to be a distinction between personal property and real property. So the person was saying that you can sell the chattels. Chattels are moveable things, desks and chairs and furniture, fridges and stoves; chattels. But you cannot sell—there are no regulations governing the disposal a personal property, real property. But then the refinery is on real property, it is on land. Are we going to lease it? Are we going to sell it? And there are no regulations now that would govern how that process will go under the procurement laws.

Similarly, for the Magdalena, Magdalena is on real property. So whilst there may be chairs and tables and beds, et cetera, et cetera, there are regulations apparently for that, but there are no regulations for the lands. This is a serious matter because that same Petrotrin, that same Pointe-a-Pierre compound has numerous properties, bungalows and the land that they sit on, they affixed to. I do not know what has become of that. Have we divested those? Have we sold them or are they there rotting? Those are really lovely homes there in that Pointe-a-Pierre compound and in others.

So we need to move swiftly and rapidly to bring procurement legislation to deal with the disposal of public property as it relates to CLICO, as it relates to Magdalena, as it relates to the refinery. Then and only then should the Government proceed to divest—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: These are huge assets. And if it is that the Office of Procurement Regulation told us, \$5 billion in contracts awarded, and the sales and things that took place under the procurement of \$5 billion lost cannot be accounted for, can you imagine with these massive things as the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery, as the CLICO assets, as the Magdalena? Bring it under the Office of Procurement Regulation and if you do not do it, then we are very clear what it is you are up to in an election year. We will be very clear that you want to divest these properties to your friends, and your families, and your financiers without the oversight of the transparency of the procurement regulations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I turn now to VAT bonds. Once again, the issue of outstanding VAT refunds emerged. The Minister announced his intentions to

issue another tranche of interest-bearing VAT bonds up to TT \$3 billion in 2025. These bonds would be used for larger VAT refunds owed. The Minister has committed to settle cash VAT refunds to small and medium-sized companies by this December 2024—still in fiscal 2025 but by December of this year. This VAT bond issuance will be the third such bond. The Minister acknowledged that 80 per cent of the VAT refunds are due to energy companies.

Previously, these bonds were issued with coupon rates of 3.15 per cent, first iteration, and 3.3 per cent, second iteration, paid interest semi-annually and were both oversubscribed, displaying the desire from taxpayers for this facility. There is an obligation to settle these VAT refunds expeditiously. However, the Government appears to delay refunds, thereby benefiting from, what is in effect, a forced effective short-term loan from businesses, while simultaneously negatively affecting the businesses' operating cash.

Nonetheless, businesses that are owed substantial VAT refunds will benefit from an improved cash flow position as they can redeem these bonds or trade them on the secondary market should the Minister keep his promise. This is particularly crucial for companies that traditionally experience high VAT refund delays due to a large volume of zero-rated and VAT-exempted supplies. Many companies have, in practice, encashed their bonds with financial institutions in exchange for the full face value or a limited discount in an effort to secure their operational and other commitments.

The Minister has not addressed the root cause of the delay in VAT refunds. There is no indication of whether this \$3 billion would be enough to clear the backlog of VAT refunds due entirely. There is no indication whatsoever. Some have recommended that there be a review and revamping of the VAT regime to

determine whether a sales tax should replace this VAT, and then whether a reverse VAT charge can reduce a VAT refund claims made by companies, so that net sales tax is remitted to the State.

Now, this is happening in other parts of the world. This VAT system came in many, many years ago and it has been a perennial problem that businesses do not get back their refunds and have to wait, and wait, and beg and therefore, it is time perhaps for us to consider revamping that system. In some other countries, they have a sales tax. They just do a sales tax. There is no, what is exempt.

For a businessman, especially for smaller businesses to go through all those customs forms—today you exempt curry, tomorrow you exempt corn beef, or whatever it may be, and to see where to seek the exemptions, it is a very tedious and convoluted exercise. So there are suggestions, this is something that a new UNC Government will certainly consider and in the transitioning period, we can look at where there is a netback, claims made by companies, net sales tax is remitted, so we can have—what is it? If you are owing X dollars, then we can—you do not have to pay. If we are owing you money, that is it. If the Government is owing you VAT refunds, then we match it together and you do not have to pay for your next area and time period for paying VAT.

I turn to plans now to secure and rebuild Trinidad and Tobago, and these are—what time is it now?—12:28. Okay. How much time is that?

Mr. Lee: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Okay, great. I am on track. I am on track, Madam, not to punish you for five hours. I will be done long before 5 hours and—5.13—5.1, 2 and 3.

Our plans for the criminal and civil justice system reform for a new UNC

Government: The criminal and civil justice system is in a mess. We have to fix it. That is why I had created the Justice Ministry to focus on improving the justice system.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: They shut it down.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, this PNM Government shut it down, further endangering the justice system in our country. We have some plans here, Madam, helping to improve our justice system. One is that we will recreate the Ministry of Justice when—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will undertake a comprehensive review of all criminal laws to weed out obsolete laws that are oppressive to a free, democratic society or that cause unnecessary bureaucracy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will categorize the offences of murder and rape into first degree and second degree.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.30 p.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will introduce a constitutional right offering accused to have a trial within a reasonable time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We have always been told that justice delayed is justice denied and there are persons in that system who are there 10 years, 15 years, 8 years awaiting justice in our courts.

We will place victims at the centre of the criminal justice system from the

beginning, provide support for victims including restitution, job placements, housing and social groups.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Due to the current low detection and conviction rates, this support will be given regardless of whether somebody is caught or convicted; that is victim support.

Five, we will provide the needed resources to ensure that cases involving offences against children and sexual offences are determined rapidly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will increase the number of functional courtrooms. Right now, there is a deficit of courtrooms. Each judge of the High Court must have a designated courtroom to ensure he or she can sit every day. We will provide more courtrooms in highly populated areas outside the capital, that is for example Chaguanas, Rio Claro, Sangre Grande, Diego Martin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will create smaller detention centres around the country so we can break up gang activity and thereby, also ensure closer family support to prisoners by enabling regular visitation rights. We will also ensure that incarcerated persons are allowed frequent visits from their children. We will establish lower security prisons for first-time non-violent offenders with work release during the day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will modernize prisons and break up large prisons, as I say, into smaller ones where inmates can be better monitored. We will utilize intelligence services for crime fighting and not for spying on political

opponents.

Dr. Moonilal: Correct.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will implement appropriate social programmes involving training and life skills to help with repeat offenders. We will comprehensively reform and reorient the education system to cater to all children, not just academically gifted ones and in particular, to identify young persons with learning disabilities or vulnerabilities so that they can be challenged to productive activities such as trades or remedial learning. Most criminals have not been successful in the formal education system.

We will encourage the participation of NGOs and service organizations in mentoring youth. Targeting and mentoring at-risk youths is critical to preventing them from falling under the influence of gang leaders and falling through the cracks.

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

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Ma'am, I am being disturbed this time. I do not need a water break, I am just being disturbed. Please can I have your protection?

Madam Speaker: May I invite any Member who finds it difficult, to leave the Chamber at this time? I mean we really have to give the Opposition leader her opportunity to present the budget. So any Member who cannot at all maintain their silence at this time, I invite them to leave. They could return in a short while, as they wish. Member.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Ma'am. We also will, and I was saying, encourage participation of NGOs and service organizations in mentoring youth. Targeting and mentoring at-risk youths is critical to preventing

them from falling under the influence of gang leaders and falling through the cracks.

We will seek to provide support for single parents including after school care to ensure children are supervised. We shall reintroduce homework centres.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, it is amazing when you go through the data and the history, how many things this Government has shut down. How many things that were working and helping the population have just been shut down. No explanations, just shut down.

We will introduce a system of rewards to police officers and divisions where crime is being kept low—[*Inaudible*].

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will invest resources in the DPP's office and the Public Defenders' office and ensure better conditions, so staff are encouraged to stay. We will work with all stakeholders to convene a national consultation on crime and criminal justice within one month of forming the Government. We will revamp plea bargaining legislation to make it easier for the accused to plead guilty and be sentenced on a fast-track system including for manslaughter. We will revamp and refurbish Magistrates' Courts infrastructure, which has deteriorated substantially since COVID, with no repairs being done. We will reform the judge-alone trial process to provide for three judges to sit in capital cases. We will ensure capital cases are heard and determined expeditiously.

We will consider maintenance grants for families of murder victims and victims of serious sexual offences whilst they cannot work. We will look at the structured and expanded psychological services and support, and support of

victims must not be ad hoc. Look at restitution mechanisms so prisoners can work to compensate victims and receive time off their sentences for contributions to victims. We will seek to train police officers in victim management and support. We will ensure children of victims receive adequate support in school.

We will develop mechanisms to ensure victims have the right to information about the progress of cases. We will need to increase the number of safe houses for women and children who are victims of domestic abuse. We will seek to decentralize the services offered by the Children's Authority. We must train prosecutors in victim advocacy. We will introduce additional mechanisms to hear and invoke victims in the sentencing process. We will introduce a victim's rights act to include a charter of rights for victims of crime.

We must invest in forensic sciences in conjunction with The UWI to ensure timely sample analysis, including drug and firearms analysis. This will include scholarships to encourage more people to enter the forensic science profession.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, the Forensic Science Centre is one of the much repeated, repeated, repeated broken promises and it rears its head again in this 2025 budget. It is repeated, repeated, repeated and the promise never materialized.

I turn here to health care plans by the UNC—UNC's plans for health care. This Government has misplaced priorities regarding investments and expenditures in the health sector. While critical supplies, drugs and equipment for diagnostic and surgical procedures are ignored and they choose to build a vanity Ministry of Health at San Fernando hospital car park. No beds, no medicines, no surgeries but you have a vanity car park.

A UNC-led Government will work to ensure that all citizens receive proper health care. A UNC Government will work to ensure that all citizens receive proper health care. A UNC Government will improve the health care sector in some of the following ways: Review the Children's Life Fund to enable more applicants with diseases not currently included—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—to get access to the Children's Life Fund. We will ensure that the Couva children's hospital is fully equipped, staffed and up and running.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will install a centrally specialized burns unit close to the Point Lisas Industrial complex. This unit can be part of the Couva children's hospital and multi-training facility.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will work towards purchasing and maintaining modern equipment at all medical facilities. This will also include having qualified and trained staff to operate the equipment. We will fix the supply chain issues to prevent the shortage of drugs, equipment and supplies, which now hinder the work of doctors and nurses and many of our health care facilities.

12.40 pm

We will establish guaranteed maximum waiting times for clinic appointments, diagnostic tests, and surgical procedures. We must immediately treat the backlog of patients awaiting critical diagnostic tests and surgeries, including cataract and joint replacement surgery. We need to create a national stroke rehabilitation centre.

UNREVISED

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must treat the chronic NCDs burden promptly and innovatively, including, reintroducing extended opening hours at our health centres and having school and home visits. We had extended these already, you all remember? We had extended the opening hours for health centres. That too has collapsed; they closed it down. Many persons that are working cannot go in the daytime. They may be able to go to health centres in the evening or go on a weekend, but this Government, again, does not see the value of being people-centred in that regard. We will settle negotiations in the health sector and consider better terms and conditions for all doctors, nurses and other staff.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will introduce legislation to create a unique medical malpractice court and a special investigative unit, aided by foreign experts, to handle suspected medical malpractice cases.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Most medical malpractice cases are civil matters. So we will also have to establish a no-fault compensation fund so that affected citizens can receive some relief even outside of the courtroom.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will conduct a skills audit within the public health care system to train qualified staff in highly demanded areas or specializations. We will provide opportunities and funding for doctors and nurses to specialize in particular fields. We will do a full review of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago for clinical management and economic impact. We will do a commission of enquiry into the mishandling—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will do a commission of enquiry into the mishandling of that COVID experience. We will revise the patient's charter to give patients a greater voice in public health services.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We had started so to do, but again, this Government shut it down. We will implement a national health card for all resident citizens so that your medical records can be accessed at any public or private health facility. This will save time and allow the healthcare provider to access your information readily at their fingertips. This means faster delivery of health services and will make the issue of lost files a thing of the past.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will also then have to implement data protection systems to back up these electronic medical records safely and securely. We will have to review the entire IT system at all RHAs and procure the latest IT technology and systems for all RHAs to mitigate against cyberattacks and hacking. We will have to conduct an audit of the number and qualifications of the many foreigners working in our health sector, while our citizens are what?—jobless. Jobless, while we have all these foreigners working in our health sector.

We must work assiduously to employ our local doctors and increase the number of doctors in the public health system to achieve the required complement at all public hospitals and health centres, and in this way, increase the number of doctors to the number of patients, that ratio.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must work to employ local nurses. We must increase the number of nurses in the public health system by focusing on training and the certification of nursing programmes, and the availability of jobs within our public sector, thereby increasing the number of nurses. Again, the ratio, the number of nurses to the number of patients.

We will employ local technicians and increase the number of cardiovascular, radiographic, and other specialist medical technicians. We will focus on decreasing wait times for clinic appointments and surgeries by increasing nursing staff and medical doctors to these facilities or departments to reduce the workload on existing staff. We will seek to train primary care doctors. Increasing the number of primary care doctors will decrease NCDs, such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and obesity. We must do an equipment audit. We had left that Couva Children's Hospital with a lot of equipment in it. I am now being told it has been gutted, vandalized, and/or looted. We have to do a full equipment audit—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—of all diagnostic and radiographic equipment to determine any deficiencies with a mandate to equip medical professionals with the necessary equipment. We have to move swiftly to build cath. labs. We must complete the construction, equipping, and operationalization of cath. labs at all major hospitals. This will include: San Fernando General Hospital, Arima General Hospital, Sande Grande Hospital, and Scarborough General Hospital. That hospital in Scarborough has a cath. lab, but I am told there is no attending cardiologist, interventional cardiologist. If we have these cath. labs at these major

hospitals, it would enable cardiac stenting on a 24-hour basis within minutes of the arrival at the hospitals.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This is very vital. That is the difference between life and death. So you reach the hospital door and you think, okay—but no, if it is a heart condition and there is no cath. lab, “yuh dead”. The cath. lab must be there, and therefore, we will commit to putting systems in place to enable a nationwide 90-minute policy of heart attack to stent, a 90-minute policy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Dialysis in the clinics: Again, complete the construction, equipping, and getting working dialysis clinics at all major hospitals with the relevant staff, to again, do 24-hour dialysis. Thus, the State’s bill to the external patient programme will be reduced by at least \$100 million per year, Madam Speaker. At the moment, we send persons to these private places. I “doh” know who they are. I “doh” know how the favoured contractors that they go to for external private patient care. Should we equip our hospitals so we could cut our bills for this by almost \$100 million a year? Only emergency cases could continue to go to private providers, and that will be paid for by the State.

The ambulance service will be expanded to rural areas in central and south Trinidad, creating a central and southern hub for cleaning and outfitting. We must set up a national lab centre. This state-of-the-art lab, adjacent to the Couva hospital, and outfitted with equipment and staff, will enable the quickest turnover in testing. A national cardiac centre, a state-of-the-art cardiologist centre, adjacent to the Couva hospital, equipped with two operating theatres, one ICU, one CCU, and a cath. lab to allow bypass surgeries to be done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This would reduce the bypass backlog. Patients currently have to wait at least 12 to 18 months for urgent bypass surgery. This could be remedied should we set up a national cardiac centre, and we could do that at the Couva children's hospital. We must set up strategic partnerships with international health educators for internal medicine, cardiology, and nephrology. CDAP: We must review and update CDAP to streamline medication and increase service to rural communities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Newer drugs that are very effective in hypertension and diabetic treatment should be included on this list of CDAP medications. We must look to childhood obesity, which then leads to great strain on the health sector and the cost of health care. We must look to legislation for front of package warning and labelling to be implemented on retail food products to warn consumers of high sugar, high sodium, and high-fat items. This will intensify the existing awareness programme for combating childhood obesity and expand their rates.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.50 p.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So upfront, on the labels, if you still wish to buy it, that is your choice, but at least you were forewarned and being forewarned is to be forearmed. We will look to implement a modern, prenatal, maternal, baby and early childhood care strategy; expand access to immunization; implement a multipronged strategy to deal with reproductive issues; and empower women to seek good health during pregnancy. Maternal and child health policy and standard

operating procedures—obstetrics and midwifery—will be updated and implemented. Anti-natal and post-natal care services will be improved by purchasing additional equipment to track the health of mothers-to-be and their babies. Again, we will reintroduce the baby grant.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: An emergency response plan will be developed to cover medical crises ranging from natural hazards like oil spills to infectious diseases. The Health Ministry will make an inter-ministerial arrangement with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, the Ministry of the environment and water resources, to address the effects of climate change on human health. We must initiate a national awareness campaign on mental health. Public-private partnerships will be formed to widen the Ministry's reach in mental health promotion. Some persons desperately need mental health help but they do not even know it. We will formalize the draft national comprehensive mental health implementation plan. We must formalize this draft national comprehensive mental health implementation plan, and we must do that at the earliest.

Mental health services will be integrated into all routine health service delivery systems. We will increase the number of trained staff at the Ministry of Health research unit so that more health research can be accomplished, and timely data can be provided. We must formulate a health care financing policy. So, whilst I speak of all of this, we have to work together to formulate a health care financing policy including introducing/implementing a comprehensive national health insurance system and create mechanisms for sustainable financing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: The Ministry of Health will collaborate with the

Ministry of Education to issue education, skills trading, and research institutions focused on the health sector to develop a comprehensive plan for T&T's health awareness, health wellness, and preventive medicine. And, of course, given the dengue outbreak, we commit to refurbishing and adequately resourcing the Ministry of Health's Insect Vector Control—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—Division. We must not forget the centre for dealing with cancer that has been promised, and promised, and promised, and promised, and promised, and promised, and promised, and back on—well, this year it was not included but that is so desperately needed. And there seems to be a growth in persons exhibiting cancer symptoms, so we really have to get that cancer centre going at the earliest opportunity. So, after nine years what is the status of it? What needs to be done to get it off the ground?

Madam Speaker, Education Policies: The Ministry of Education is a key leader in formulating UNC's strategic national development plan. As the Ministry is responsible for the education development of almost 300,000 students at four levels of education, and over 12,000 employees, it is crucial to ensure that the Ministry of Education's sector plan is fully integrated into the strategic national development plan to deliver impact, value, and benefit to citizens of our country.

The Education Ministry has three key policy direction imperatives to transform the education system and contribute to progressive national development. The imperatives are rooted in the vision of the child which affirms the following outcomes for our children: Children will achieve their full potential; children will adequately prepare educationally to fulfil their potential; children who are adequately developed socially and culturally; children who are healthy and

growing normally; children who are emotionally developed, mature and happy. To achieve the above, the education system has three major priorities:

1. Focus on our children;
2. Focus on parents;
3. Focus on the elements and the components of the education system.

Fundamental actions must be performed if the education system intends to support every child and achieve equity, access, and quality. The Education Ministry can deliver the best results to the nation through the following primary considerations at the operational level. One, preparation of all children to maximize education opportunities. The UNC will perform the following actions to achieve this: Universal screening and treatment of children between the ages of four to six about neurodevelopmental physical well-being, mental well-being, and socioeconomic well-being.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It is expected that specialist consultants (neurodevelopmental) will be engaged to assist in planning, conducting initial screening and treatment, training and development with specialists, and other advisory support, and other requirements as deemed necessary. The Children's Authority and the Student Support Services Division of the Education Ministry will be re-evaluated concerning their purpose, roles, institution construct, performance expectations, to satisfy best the preparation, development and care of our nation's children, including operational delivery of services, and in terms of regulatory frameworks.

Neurodevelopmental specialist expertise will be hired to enhance the competence of existing resources and fulfil the transformational initiative's

performance. Further, international alignment with neurodevelopmental science research centres will be pursued to stay abreast of learning and development. Moving along, the Student Support Services Division of the Education Ministry will be re-engineered to become the primary operation for screening and treatment of all children in the country, between the ages of four and six, and to lead and manage the entire screening process on a sustainable basis into the future.

The Children's Authority's role will be re-examined to give it a more focused, regulatory, and overarching supervisory role in protecting and developing our children. At present, the role is mixed between reacting to reports of at-risk children and being a regulatory measure. A computerized development tracking system for the understanding of all children will need to be developed. This should form the basis for tracking the developmental performance of children throughout their schooling. This will be a major digitalization project which must be planned, developed, and managed. This is an opportunity to focus on the development of local business organizations with possible assistance from foreign consultants, but the opportunity must be locally led to derive benefit from capital expenditure.

Two, progressive preparation for children to get the best education. Preparation of parents and guardians to assist children to maximize education opportunities. Parents and guardians provide pivotal support for children in their education journey, however, not every parent or guardian has the requisite skills, abilities, and experience. The UNC will provide parents and guardians with the following types of support to enable them to best assist their children during and beyond their school years:

- Parental training of parents, guardians, and caregivers.
- An inventory of all parental training programmes and corresponding

resource employment will be undertaken within the Government and the private sector.

- An exercise will be conducted to consolidate understanding of the nature of parental training programmes in the Government and private sector.
- A team will be established to develop a parental training framework of critical understanding that all parents should have to allow them to best contribute to the development of our children of our nation.
- Standardized parental training programmes will be designed and developed using lessons from the nature of existing programmes.

1.00 p.m.

- A parental training management division within the Ministry of Education will be established to oversee all parental training.

This is considered appropriate only because the Ministry of Education has an appreciation and possible understanding of who parents, caregivers and guardians ought to be because of their correlation between the children and the parents. The parental training programme will be initiated on a volunteer, participation and incentive system, but will be prepared to institute legal and regulatory requirements to ensure parental training participation and recognition of responsibility. A certification-type process will be instituted to verify parental training participation. The opportunity to use a computerized system to manage parental training is also available.

I move on to transformational initiatives to improve the education system. The framework for a leading practice education system was developed under my watch 2010 to 2015. The basis and substance of the model remain valid and can now be enhanced and improved through the following activities, interventions and

initiatives.

- Student support: Provision of tablets and laptops to facilitate digital learning—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Provision of tablets and laptops for digital learning, research and technological competence. You want to go into the digital age? This is where you start. You start with the children.

- Procurement of learning material, such as textbooks, for enactment of the curriculum;
- Establish literacy libraries in every classroom to improve reading and comprehension skills;
- Provide students with reliable high-speed Internet and bandwidth.

No sense giving them the laptops and you do not have Internet, you do not have bandwidth, like what is happening by the Arima Dial.

Dr. Moonilal: And you have to go by the Dial with your Wi-Fi.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When you go by the Dial, looking for Wi-Fi.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:

- Review and improve homework centres.

As I said, we will re-establish the homework centres. We will introduce the peer discipline concept. We will provide continuous career guidance and advice.

I turn now to curriculum delivery within the education sector. We must activate a teacher management and development unit at the curriculum division to facilitate current and future training requirements. We must establish master teacher positions to improve curriculum delivery and provide localized teacher

support. We must recruit outstanding retired educators in language and math to continuously conduct workshops and training sessions in these key subject areas; math and language. We must create teacher specialists at each level, at primary and secondary schools, to enable more focused curriculum delivery.

Looking at school management and leadership, we could establish a position of master principal to lead and manage high-risk schools based on school improvement ability.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I beg to rise on Standing Order 53(1)(e), please. There is a constant disturbance in the Chamber. I myself am having difficulty hearing the Member for Siparia.

Madam Speaker: You know the—thank you so much, Member for Barataria/San Juan, but I have observed that the noise is coming from both sides. So I do not understand why Members should be having a difficulty. I think we all would like to support the Member for Siparia. And again, having regard to the time, if any Member wishes to leave—because it is both sides, I am not putting out anybody—but if any Member wishes to leave, to go out and relieve themselves of, you know, the sort of strictures they find themselves in here, they can quite freely do so and return. All right? So I am not going to stand again, I think people understand. Member for Siparia—but it is both sides. Okay? Member for Barataria/San Juan, you might have seen one but I have a view, it is both sides.

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

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: School management and leadership, I was on that topic. We need to provide continuous upskilling training for teachers and

principals; provide compulsory training for persons seeking promotion.

Examination and assessment: We must reintroduce the continuous assessment component on a phased basis as part of the SEA exams because this allows a fairer assessment of the multi-intelligence principle of students than the present model.

School supervision: Re-engineer the school supervision division to be more focused on school performance; establish independent cross-disciplinary school intervention teams as another layer of school support and evaluation.

And we must not forget tech/voc education. We need to establish a full-fledged technical university to provide the highest level of tech/voc training—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—to include a tech/voc teacher training division independently or in a private-public partnership. We need to integrate the tech/voc schools into the secondary school system. Students interested in tech/voc education can attend the tech/voc institution full-time for two days per week from Form III. They can graduate with a combination of O levels and CVQs at a comparative level. We must engage the National Training Agency more directly in delivering tech/voc education. We must create more positions of tech/voc curriculum officers to facilitate tech/voc expansion. We need to review the staffing certification and quality of technical education for performance standards.

Madam Speaker, I come to something which is like an elephant in the room, and we really do not like to talk about Service Commissions. But we have to talk about the Teaching Service Commissions, because they just cannot cope with the amount of work. The system has grown so tremendously over the years since this body was initially established. So we must seek a full-time Teaching Service

Commission—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—to address the volume of work adequately. We must urgently work with the Teaching Service Commission to seek to delegate more responsibilities to the Ministry of Education, since the Teaching Service Commission mainly functions as an HR contractor of the Ministry of Education.

Madam Speaker, there is so much delay in the system. There is so much—what is it? It is just not moving. It is not just flowing. It is—

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Bottlenecking.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Bottlenecking might be the right word. Thank you, whoever sharing that word—Member for San Fernando West, thank you. It is bottlenecked. You are totally correct. And not just bottlenecked, I mean, it is moving into shutdown mode. We just cannot provide the teachers fast enough through the TSC for the schools. And there are a lot of schools where teachers are not being appointed, whether deliberately or whether it is because of the sheer bulk of the system, and this is something we really need to pay attention to. And it is something we will have to pay attention to the other Service Commissions like the PSC. It is the same thing. The persons are not being appointed and the system is just shutting down, backlogging.

We must improve alignment with the Ministry of Education's processes. Physical plant and equipment: Work urgently to complete schools, which are in an advanced state of completion—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—plan and perform refurbishment at distressed schools; provide schools with the required funding and supplies to deliver quality

education.

I turn to the legislation: Review reports of consultations to determine the way forward on amendments to the Education Act. When last did we amend this? When last did we amend this Education Act? Education and the education sector is so vital to the country's development and progress. We would need to review all the various reports and consultations, looking at the way forward on amendments to the Education Act.

Since 2017, MP Padarath, the MP for Princes Town, has advocated for something called a parental responsibility Act to address violence in schools and bullying as the long-term measure to deter crime. Several other Commonwealth countries, such as Canada, United Kingdom have similar pieces of legislation which have assisted them in reducing deviant behaviour and bullying in schools. The UNC will pursue such legislation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.10 p.m.

I turn now, Madam Speaker, to the UNC's workers' agenda. Our party, the UNC, grew out of the labour movement, and it is strongly bonded with the labour movement. And so, we have had about nine meetings of intense dialogue with executive leadership of the various unions—of the JTUM (Joint Trade Union Movement); the OWTU (Oilfields Workers' Union); the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union; the National Trade Union Centre; the National Union of Government and Federated Workers. And from those discussions, we have compiled a UNC workers' agenda, aiming to restore prosperity to the working class.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This workers' agenda contains critical components of an incoming UNC Government to holistically enrich, empower and develop the way of life for our nation's working class citizens. This agenda is built on some core commitments to our nation's workers and trade unions. I would just share some of the key components of this. The UNC rejects the unjust 4 per cent and 5 per cent imposed on all state sector workers and commits to engage in the free and collective bargaining process through the office [*Inaudible*].

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC is committed to creating a living wage to ensure that all workers earn sufficient salaries to support themselves and their families comfortably.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC is committed to amending the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority legislation for the PSA union successorship, to ensure representation of TTRA workers—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—so that the public sector and the PSA will be the successors to ensure that the workers whenever they shift to the TTRA as the court has determined, that there would be successorship of their representation. As the law stands now, they have no rights for successorship.

Contract Workers: The UNC will oppose the proliferation of contract workers—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—in the public service's statutory bodies, and state enterprises. The last time I spoke here, we were dealing with a Bill, setting up a whole lot of contract offices, I think it was in the Judiciary, if I am not mistaken, a

whole lot of them. We voiced our concerns about this proliferation of contract workers and I have made the analogy that we have contract workers all over like slaves, because they are at your beck and call. If they do not do your bidding, they could be fired tomorrow morning. They cannot afford a mortgage to buy a car, because they have no security of tenure. So, we are together with the workers, we are opposed to the proliferation of contract workers. That is one aspect.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The second aspect of it is the recruitment of these contract workers. How are they recruited? What is the criteria? Who recruits them? Are they handpicked, hand-selected friends and family, and PNM party group members? How are they selected? There is so much secrecy surrounding that. So we do not support that proliferation of contract workers. We would facilitate the recognition of unions who have applied for recognition status as state companies based on tripartite arrangements and expert advice from the International Labour Organization.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC commits to a holistic review and modernization of the Industrial Relations Act by our Cabinet legislative review.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar: The UNC will propose legislation to introduce a criminal offense of corporate manslaughter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar: This is following upon what happened to the Paria divers down at Pointe-a-Pierre.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC will facilitate the discussion on providing a contributory pension plan for daily-rated workers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: A UNC Government will go beyond re-establishing the national tripartite advisory committee (NTAC) to improve dialogue with labour, and ensure that labour has a representative on state boards, giving labour a strong, sustainable and effective voice.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Government I led in 2010 to 2015, every state board, on almost every one we had a labour representative.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC will work with all unions to ensure accessibility to HDC housing is a priority.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC Government will act urgently to use the free collective bargaining process and resolve outstanding settlement negotiations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We are committed to preserving the cost of living allowance to workers where it presently exists based on the collective bargaining process.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will commit to an improved health plan for all public sector workers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: A UNC Government will strengthen the praedial

larceny unit through proper funding, policy and legislation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: A UNC Government is committed to land tenure for farmers to boost our agriculture sector, rural community development and employment.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Through robust incentives and support for farmers, a UNC Government will reduce the food import bill.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC will strengthen the role of all agricultural agencies within the public sector to support farmers in their local regional and international commercial activities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC will work to modernize all labour legislation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, in terms of sector plans, my colleagues will deal with those that I have not dealt with. I have full faith and confidence in their ability. So, I will pass on to the last sectorial area where I would like to suggest some plans of the UNC. And this has to do with the number one issue in the country, which is crime. Anticrime plans and policies: The UNC would work to pass stand-your-ground laws.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC would create offense of home invasions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The UNC will allow the right to bear arms, a modified current legislation to make acquiring firearms by law-abiding citizens easier.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will change legislation to make the gating of communities easier.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will increase the complement of municipal police.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will introduce police officers full time in all high-risk schools.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Did you find out if it was true? Did you find out about the students at St. Francois? We will restructure the Ministry of National Security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That is to say, we will create a ministry of home affairs, a ministry of defence and a ministry of justice.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will increase the retirement age for the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force to align them with other arms of the protective services.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will provide diploma, undergraduate, and post-graduate degrees in policing for recruits combined with a police apprenticeship programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will undertake pre-trial detention and bail reform.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will implement individual risk and financial assessments. We will establish minimum-security detention centres. We will implement laws to prevent incarceration of non-violent drug offenders, such as addicts.

1.20 p.m.

We will implement laws to prevent incarceration of non-violent drug offenders, such as addicts. We will implement ankle bracelets and house arrest systems through legislation. We will establish state support for children of incarcerated persons. We will establish a fund for children who have lost one or both parents to crime.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will implement the revamping of the Witness Protection Programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I remember the very first meeting we held with the hon. Prime Minister and his team—the Opposition held—up at the then Office of the Prime Minister. This was one of the top recommendations that we made up to today. Nine years, eight/nine years later, it has not been done. And then we say,

citizens know something, you must know, you must come forward. They do not come forward because they do not feel safe. The Witness Protection Programme is totally at its worst possible. If we want to have persons coming forward to help us to solve cases and bring persons to justice, we must improve on the Witness Protection Programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I recommend that we construct a forensic science centre—a centre/complex and training facility at the UWI Debe Campus.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will reconsider providing personal licensed firearms to active TTPS officers and prison officers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must work to ensure the enforcement of the drug and liquor laws regarding minors. We must enforce a zero-tolerance approach to any physical violence in schools. Any student physically attacking another student must be removed from the school and only be allowed to return after completing neurodiagnostic testing and proper counselling programmes approved by the State.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must review legislation to enable citizens to hire private lawyers to represent their interests at hearings for party and bar licences. And this is a very important matter because you use state prosecutors, but there are allegations that the state prosecutors choose a side, whether for benefit, gain, or otherwise. So that, parties involved where you object, I know MP for St. Augustine has had a lot of problems with noise—

Ms. Ameen: Noise pollution.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—noise pollution, that persons be allowed to hire an attorney to be present to ensure that the proceedings are not biased in one way but are more balanced. We must implement legislation for mandatory cut-off time for all public events requiring a dancehall licence not held within an enclosed building. Again, this is cause for grave concern for noise pollution in residential areas and so on. Of course, exceptions to be made during the Carnival season.

We must carry out a performance assessment of social projects in national security. We must restructure social programmes that have become gang and criminal activity havens. We must perform a short-term assessment to identify the scale of involvement of illegal immigrants in criminal activity. We must ensure that all schools have the full complement of required deans of discipline, security officers, and school safety officers. We come back again to the Teaching Service Commission and the Public Service Commission.

We must ensure staffing in the full complement of student support services which constitutes guidance counsellors, guidance officers and school social workers with educational, behavioral and clinical psychologists looking after our students in need. We need to introduce proper and continuous testing and neurodiagnostics of children to test for special needs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Special needs students. Consider introducing a financial incentive programme for dedicated and high-performing teachers based on students' end-of-term results across all levels. Introduce the anonymous anti-bullying app for students to make reports.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Introduce parent patrols in schools.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, introduce parent patrols in schools.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Implement a policy whereby all students must undergo free, mandatory annual physical and medical screening by state-approved private and public doctors to examine for physical abuse, substance abuse, sexual abuse, malnutrition and diseases.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must work to ensure after-school meals for children who apply, which is to be supplied by the School Feeding Programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Establish free counselling sessions. Establish parental support groups for single parents and victims of family violence. Implement peer mediation. Implement parenting workshops to address parent-child conflict, parental rejection, parental communication, proper parental supervision and identification of criminal behaviours in children.

We need to establish a fund for faith-based weekly community mentoring and guidance work.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We could work with the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to ensure that councillors would oversee formation of community support groups, support councillors in the PDs in their electoral district. We must strengthen a rebranded highway patrol unit.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must properly staff the E99 Call Centre. We must reactivate the community comfort controls.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must increase and maintain CCTV cameras throughout our country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must properly support the Transnational Organized Crime Unit. We must increase covert operations at seaports and airports.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We must enhance and fully re-implement the National Operations Centre.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Install security electronic billboards.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Provide electronic data access in all police vehicles.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Integrate a fully computerized crime stats reporting system to include computerized vehicle maintenance and service records, computerization of all police stations and provision of internet access via the NOC data. Equip stations, police vehicles with GPS and link via the NOC. Establish indoor and outdoor shooting ranges for all the protective services. Establish a training swimming pool facility to train all arms of the protective service, police, fire, coast guard and army for their rescue operations. Establish a simulation

training theatre for the TTPS. Establish proper health and fitness facilities for the TTPS. Provide customer service and public relations support for the TTPS. Standardize and acquire fit-for-purpose vehicles for the TTPS.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: These are some of them, Madam, and before I close, I will tell you how, because I know you are all mind-boggled as to where this money is coming from.

And I will spend a few minutes to explain what we see. But before I give my conclusion, Madam Speaker, being the opening batsman on this side for my team, I want to turn briefly to a matter which has captured the attention of cricket lovers across the globe, and our passionate supporters of our beloved Trinbago Knight Riders.

I first wish to congratulate the entire team, management staff and corporate drivers of our TKR.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: A special word of thanks to our inspirational captain and West Indian powerhouse, Mr. Kieron Pollard, for his outstanding leadership, mature captaincy over the years and particularly in recent circumstances.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I take this opportunity to single out our national and regional pride in the person of Dwayne Bravo.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Known across the globe as DJ Bravo and Sir Champion. I select him out as a really outstanding player for Trinidad and

Tobago. We thank him for his decades of service to our nation and the regional sporting fraternity. This true legend has been a tower of strength, courage, and inspiration to a generation of youth. We express our heartfelt gratitude to Dwayne for his lifelong achievements, unparalleled accomplishments and iconic leadership on and off the playing field.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, the circumstances in which our TKR departed the ongoing Caribbean Premier League tournament has left a sour taste to many sport lovers. Madam Speaker, outrage led to outrage in some quarters. Outrage led to outrage. I am really not the expert in cricket, so I will leave the pros and the cons of what happened to the experts in that field, but I do want to thank, as I said, our teams who have made us proud, and all the other teams who participated in the CPL. And we have hosted before, finals during our years in office. I want to place on record the desire of my incoming Government to approach the CPL to once again work with them to host eliminator matches and finals for the CPL.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This will bring enormous economic opportunities and foreign exchange to our shores, but it will also signal our deepest commitment to the sport and the future of West Indian cricket.

Madam Speaker, as I close, I say we live in a time when a government puts endless pressure on the average citizen. We all know there is a better way. We know that our children deserve a better education. We know that we deserve the best health care, and after nine years of PNM abuse and neglect, we have to say it is time to say no to another five years of this—[*Inaudible*].

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: After nine years of poor health care, where citizens lay helpless in the corridors of hospitals, whilst the Government politicians live like kings in the corridors of power, PNM Ministers roll around with blue lights and armed security, but do not want you to have a licensed firearm to light up criminals. How can that be fair?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: PNM Ministers roll around all day on the Bus Route while you have to face the traffic and the potholes. How can that be fair?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I was told that for one of the CPL matches being held down at the Brian Lara Stadium—

Hon. Member: Four and a half hours.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—that there was a lane, a particular lane was created in—is that true? In the middle—

Hon. Member: They created a lane in the middle for their Ministers.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They created a lane in the middle. A middle lane that was only to be used by high officials of the PNM.

Hon. Member: “Hmm.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: How can that be fair when others were stuck for over four hours in traffic?

Hon. Member: Four hours consistently.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And so it is time to bring back people- centred UNC Governments to T&T. No amount of lies about the UNC will save this Government this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member, just retract that word. You did well with a lot of words today. Just retract that word and—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Which one?

Madam Speaker: The Chief Whip will tell you. Just retract it. You will find a way.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much. I will not use the word “lie”, I will use the word “untruth”.

Madam Speaker: No, no. But—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I withdraw “lies”—

Madam Speaker: Withdraw the word.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and I said thereof—

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—untruths.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So no amount of untruths—thank you, Madam Speaker, for your guidance—about the UNC, will save this Government at this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No amount of cries about no money, no amount of mamaguy about the economy turning around will save this Government at this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Keep the untruths, the cries and mamaguys. The people are fed up with it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This PNM Government has systematically been making the rich richer and the poor poorer. And the current budget continues this disastrous trend, and they think their propaganda will last another five years, but the people are waiting to reject you whenever you call that election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Prime Minister's mantra is "There are difficult times ahead" while his own Minister of Finance says the sectors are booming, Madam Speaker. He said the economy has turned around, Madam Speaker. He said "I can see it clearly now". So which is it? Tell us, make up your mind. From day one, the Prime Minister has been singing the same song of difficult times ahead. This form of fear mongering has lost its effect. People are now asking, "Where all that money gone"? "Where all that money gone?"

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The systemic, organized corruption in high places is invisible and deeply entrenched, operating behind a veil of bureaucracy and political gamesmanship. It thrives in the shadows woven into contracts, policies, and decisions that appear routine but it is designed to benefit a select few, while the public remains unaware of the full cost. When the hon. Prime Minister said he was about making the rich richer, believe him. Part of the strategy is to tell you that difficult times are ahead. Madam Speaker, please, I do not have much longer.

Madam Speaker: Please continue, Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Part of the strategy is to tell you that difficult times are ahead and that you must tighten your belt while others eat off the fat of the land. There is very organized and systematic

infiltration at all levels. As I said, where has all that money gone? So from the John O'Halloran scandal to the Calder Hart scandal, and now the missing billions under this Minister, exposed by the Auditor General, when their corruption becomes too massive, it becomes disorganized. They then lose, change the players, and reboot the machine, and that, Madam Speaker is the PNM playbook.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: And that is why they are afraid to call the election, because it is time to reboot. It is time to put them out of office.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: A very wary, burdened, and cynical population has opened their eyes to the reality facing them every day; mayhem and murder, empty pockets and cashless. Even if the Minister had taken 10, 12, or even 24 hours, the Minister would still have been short on credibility, because the Government is not just broke and bankrupt for cash, they are broke and bankrupt for solutions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Despite the five hours and 13 minutes of the Minister's rant, the population had tuned out long before the Minister's statement on Monday. Ever since, the Prime Minister had to signal the actual state of play. In this Minister's 10th budget statement, the Minister attempted to eulogize the pathetic performance of his Government. The Minister spent long hours painting, glossing, varnishing, putting up new curtains, smoke screens, and mirrors. This time though, there were very few buyers. Like the Emperor without clothes, everyone except his 21 colleagues in the House had finally seen a decade of destruction.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The real issue is not the five hours and 13 minutes of the Minister's tirade, the real issue is a decade of destruction citizens have endured.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: A whole 10 years.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Many citizens went into the budget exercise expecting nothing because they had grown accustomed to receiving nothing after nine years and counting. For many citizens, death has already reached their doorstep, as I said, by way of murder or health care, mismanagement of COVID, and the lack of will to continue struggling each day to survive. For others, the reality of joblessness, empty kitchen tables, dry pockets, and depths of poverty, has fully set in. Therefore, Madam Speaker, I understood the Minister's talking strategy until he was blue in the face. First, he had to convince himself that things were ripe and rosy, because no one outside of here believed that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker, say where will we get the money for all these plans and policies we have in place? The UNC has put out a very comprehensive economic transformation plan, which I will not punish the Members here to listen to today, but I will invite you to go up on the UNC's website. I shared it before in this Parliament, to go up on the UNC's website to look at our economic transformation plan, to see where we would source the funding to carry out this—[*Inaudible*].

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Further, what we would want to do, and have to

do is to wipe out, scrape off, remove the waste, the corruption and mismanagement, thereby, keep taxpayers' dollars for delivery of goods and services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

1.40 p.m.

So today, whether the Minister speaks for five, 10 or 24 hours, it will change nothing, it will fix nothing, it will deliver nothing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: However, the average citizen of this country knows the UNC cares and I care. This Government will soon hear the voices of the 99 per cent on election day. I thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young SC): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, if I was asked to sum up this year's budget in one word, the word that I would use to the population is "responsible".

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: What was delivered this year by the Minister of Finance and by this Government is nothing short of a responsible budget that takes into account, not only the needs of those who are most worthy in society but also in the balancing exercise.

We sat here, Madam Speaker, and we listened to just about three hours and 40 minutes by the Leader of the Opposition, and it is very easy when one is in Opposition with no responsibility to say, I will implement this, I will build stations

to hold persons across the country, in other words, jail cells across the country, as one of the plans for how they would deal with crime. But the question that was raging through my mind as a citizen is, where would the revenue come from? Because it is easy to stand and it is easy to sit and it is easy to say, "I will do this, I will do that," but where does the additional revenue come from? I waited very quietly to be told as a citizen, "Go onto our website and look for a document as to where revenue would come from."

You see, Madam Speaker, that in itself sums up for me as a citizen how irresponsible certain people who aspire to office and to guide this country are. Because a budget is all about a balancing exercise. On one hand, you have to legally and legitimately raise revenue and on the other hand, you must balance it also with legal and legitimate expenditure. That is one of the most important tasks that a government has, fiscal maturity and responsibility, which we can see, having listened for three and a half plus hours, will not come from those who are offering themselves for office.

This Government, Madam Speaker, despite what was said, has been focused on raising revenue.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

This Government has spent the last nine years ensuring, not only that there was sufficient revenue for the present period of the nine years but also securing the future of Trinidad and Tobago by ensuring that in very difficult and volatile times, that there will be a revenue stream for the future.

One of the things that citizens have to give consideration to is, who will manage that period? Who will manage the period to ensure that those revenues, especially the revenues that will begin to flow from the first or second quarter, at

latest, of 2027, back into the coffers and the Treasury, who will manage that in a responsible way and manner? What we just heard, starting at the three and a half hours ago, started off, unfortunately, with what has become the norm, what we call the modus operandi of those on the other side and unfortunately, by the Leader of the Opposition and the UNC of two things: One, personalizing attacks on individuals, which is something, as the Member of Parliament for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West and as a concerned citizen, I dismiss and I condemn here today. The continued personalizing of attacks on individuals, both inside of Parliament and outside of Parliament, by the Leader of the Opposition as well as those on the other side, is something that we, the citizens, will see, have seen and condemn.

The second thing that we have seen, unfortunately, and we have had to listen to during the former speaker's contribution, is a number of untruths, a number of attempts to mislead the population, which, unfortunately, once again, seems to be straight from the playbook and has become the modus operandi. I sat here and I listened, and the two best examples that jumped out at me and it was repeated twice—it was stated twice, it was repeated after the first time, an untruth told by Senior Counsel, by the Leader of the Opposition is that this Government has raised electricity rates and water rates in the last nine years. Completely untrue.

And the first time—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. S. Young SC: Yes, to use unparliamentary language, yes. The first time the submission was made by the Leader of the Opposition was, again, in personalized attacks by the Member for Diego Martin West, the Prime Minister, and myself on the Houston gas deals, and as a result of Houston gas deals, we were forced to

increase electricity and water rates. Complete untruth. And for someone who is aspiring to lead this country, and someone aspiring to hold the office of Prime Minister again, to make such a blatant misrepresentation—and not even a misrepresentation, an untruth deliberately to the population, what are they taking us in the population for?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: And that was the tone of the whole three and a half hours.

The other thing that was disturbing immediately—and ending with it, once again—is the complete politicization of an independent constitutional office of the Auditor General. We have sat and looked at, in the last few months, that office of Auditor General basically being hijacked by those on the other side and utilized to create and to fabricate yet another untruth. There is absolutely no money missing. And to keep pumping that at the population, to interfere with our psyche, that there are billions of dollars missing, there is nothing further from the truth. But it shows from the last speaker's contribution, a complete misunderstanding, lack of appreciation of how accounting matters work because the next thing that jumped out at me is the continued submission about borrowings being part of revenue. It frightened me, quite frankly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to have someone who is a former Prime Minister, someone who is now aspiring to that office once again, to tell the population that the revenue proposed in the budget of \$54-odd billion is to be added to borrowings. Since when do borrowings become part of revenue?

Mr. Imbert: Never.

Hon. S. Young SC: But this is something that is repeated every single year annually, and I ask through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the population take very careful note because it is one of two things or both. It is either that we are being

taken for stupid or that you are deliberately, in front of our faces, trying to mislead us as a population. Well, I am happy to report that the vast majority of the population, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is neither. We are not prepared to be misled and we will not buy into those fabrications.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: The addition of \$16 billion borrowing and the creation of this hype that something was wrong in that, out of the \$16 billion that are borrowed, the vast majority of it is for refinancing. And to give the Member for Siparia, who, along with everybody else who has left the Chamber, the vast majority—and on that point, I would like to say that I am glad that five Members of the UNC turned up 53 minutes late. And when I came to Parliament and saw the bus loads that were being brought in, it is obvious that they did not give the five on the other side the right time for the bus that was coming to Parliament this morning.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: The refinancing means that when loans and when borrowings become liable to be paid the principal sums, it is either you have that money to pay it then or you negotiate a refinancing. When you refinance, that adds to the borrowing, so it is not new borrowing, so to speak. To continue to compare a five-year term—that is, between 2010 and 2015—with a 10-year term, again, the population will not be fooled with that.

1.50 p.m.

To say that \$107 billion was borrowed in nine years—when you divide that by the 10 years, that is \$10 billion a year. The vast majority is refinancing. And to remind the population in 2020, when the world was facing the COVID pandemic, which was unprecedented, certainly in the last 100 years, this Government, again

in a responsible manner, made sure that everybody was kept whole, even though there was a \$13 billion deficit that could only be plugged by borrowing. And even in the management of that, you have seen the responsibility, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the Government, that not a single loan has been defaulted on, not a single public servant's salary has not been paid at the end of the month. Not a single—

Hon. Member: Old-age pension.

Hon. S. Young SC:—old-age pension has been missed. All of these things—the social services sector, has been kept whole by the Government. Not only the pensions, the disability grants, the teachers' salaries being paid. Another ridiculous submission I heard from the Leader of the Opposition was when talking about going to e-books, and asking well, where will the connectivity come from. The school system has gone through that during COVID. One of the things that was upgraded in schools during COVID was connectivity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: But what it shows, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the complete disconnect, that we heard today from the Leader of the Opposition, and what is really going on, on the ground; what is going on in our school system; what is going on in our finance system; what is going on in the education system; and the health care system. An inordinate amount of time spent attacking the health care system. Something that we saw first-hand, arose in COVID, when those who are mandated with the responsibility in an unknown virus that was sweeping the globe, keeping us alive, keeping us whole—the CMO, Dr. Roshan Parasram, ORTT and his team.

We saw those on the other side attack relentlessly, week after week, those health care professionals. We saw it again today. That is reprehensible, and I

condemn it. And I use the opportunity today to give genuine thanks to every health care worker in the public health care system in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: You have seen a government that has completed a number of state-of-the-art hospitals, and as the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, I thank the Government for taking the difficult decision to find the money to build the central block at Port of Spain General Hospital, that will be completed early next year. Because that is for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. A health care system that is functioning.

A few weeks ago, I was with the Minister of Health, where we had Corporate Trinidad, one of our energy sector companies that was also attacked today, by the Member of Siparia—and I will come to that in a short while. PPGPL, donating over US \$10 million, to the health care system in Trinidad.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: Talking about cancer care? Under this Government, cancer care is being provided to the public with no corruption.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: And that is what the population has to remind itself of. For the last 10 years, this Government has been able, in difficult times, to provide everything, health care; education; the police service; the prison service; senior citizens grants; and pensions, without any corruption that we were hearing about, every single week.

Hon. Member: “Dey tief” from the Children's Fund.

Hon. S. Young SC: And yes, we will continue to work to pay our debts. And another thing that I would like to put on the record, through you, Mr. Deputy

Speaker, is there can be no better independent measurement of a government, and of a country's fiscal stability, than the IMF and the rating agencies. And I noticed today we did not hear the launch of attack on either. And you know why that is, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Because I can stand here today without fear of contradiction and tell the population, that having just completed an Article IV by the IMF, as well as Standard and Poor's, Moody's, and CariCRIS and Finch. This Government has managed us very well, and all have continued to give us the highest levels of ratings.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: There is no better measurement of that. And in fact, they are so in tune with us that when we had a recent FID taken for Manatee by Shell, Moody's, I believe was at the time, came out with a supplemental on Trinidad and Tobago, to talk about exactly what the Government had told them would happen, has happened and it augers well for the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

So I am asking, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the population through you, to play absolutely no heed and no notice, to the naysayers on the other side and those who may try to affect our psyche or otherwise. Because when you look at those rating agencies, if they had downgraded us, or if they had said there were problems coming, they would be the red flags. They are independent, and that is their job. And this Government has consistently—and in the most recent ratings, along with the Article IV of the IMF—got the highest level of scorecard. And they have said the exact same thing, that the hon Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance said in his recent affidavit evidence. And again, it is this Government being truthful. We recognized that production has been down. At no point in time over the last nine years, as we dealt with reducing oil and gas productions, has this Government

ever come, either here in Parliament, or publicly and told the population any manner of untruth, when it comes to production. Unlike what we faced in a previous period when production dropped by 500 million scfs a day of gas—and I will come to that. Because the UNC likes to forget the period from 2010 to 2015. The decline began under them, and what was the excuse given to the world? Maintenance. So, 500 million scfs of gas just disappeared. You know how many plants that is?

So to sit here and to listen to those on the other side who did absolutely nothing to protect our energy sector, which is our main revenue earner in Trinidad and Tobago—because even in the non-oil sector, and in the manufacturing sector, big elements of that revenue are earned from the manufacturing of ammonia, methanol, urea, UAN, and other by-products of our gas sector. The gas dropped from 4.2 billion standard cubic feet a day in 2010 to 3.8 standard cubic feet by 2015. That is 500 million scfs—

Hon. Member: Tell them that.

Hon. S. Young SC:—and the decline down to 2.7 billion standard cubic feet is as a direct result of no single gas supply contract being negotiated over that period of time. Every single contract expired in the first period of the year, when this Government came in, in to 2015 to 2016. And what we have done—and I have given those statistics before and the examples of everything—is we kept it at that level. And now, we have done the almost impossible, to secure that from a period not too far—they keep saying, three years from now. We are now in October 2024, the first quarter of 2027 is two years away, and there are things that may come in during that period of time.

So to sit here today, and to listen to once again an attempt by someone who would like to aspire to lead this country again, mislead the population, and to say nothing had been done for revenue. And to personalize attacks—personalize attacks on the hon. Prime Minister, saying how many days he has traveled out of the country. Every single—all of those trips over a nine-year period, have led—I have asked for it, I have asked for it and I have gotten the results here today from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. Negotiations, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from those trips to London, to Houston, to the Hague and to other places in Europe have led to the following revenue that Trinidad and Tobago would not have gotten. I want to repeat that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, those trips resulted directly into the following: \$17.6 billion in revenue from two companies.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.00 p.m.

Hon. S. Young SC:—from two companies, \$17.6 billion that we, the population of Trinidad and Tobago, would not have seen. So do not come here today and say this Government has done nothing about revenue. And then a most ridiculous story, saying how, when BP told us that we would earn no tax and no revenue until 2024 as a result of the fiscal policies put in place by the previous Government, and to try and categorize that as not telling the truth, and then say, “BP paid billions in tax”.

The result that we collected those billions from BP in tax is because this Government in 2017 introduced a royalty at the wellhead of 12.5 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Exactly. “Is we do dat”.

Hon. S. Young SC: It is us who had the fortitude and the courage in 2017 to say

that every single molecule of gas, every drop of liquid oil coming out of the ground, should be taxed at the wellhead. So you cannot go and deduct expenses off of it because what their policy was, was to allow the expensing of everything, all of the money being spent as against profit, which meant you would receive nothing.

So I find it offensive, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to sit here and to think that persons who want to lead this country would be so blatant in their attempts to mislead a population and to tell untruth after untruth. I also want to use, because I think it is very useful when we use independent people and it is not the Government speaking about the Government, an article published in the *Trinidad Guardian*, on the 5th of September, by someone who is not known to have any favour with the Government or to say the nicest things about the Government at times, an economist from the University of the West Indies, Dr. Vaalmikki Arjoon, speaking about revenue. All that I have just said, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you would allow me, on the 5th of September of this year, this is what he said:

“However, Arjoon explained that the returns were far lower...”—

This is about energy revenue:

“...for the first nine months of this fiscal year compared to last year. The returns were in fact good compared to even some of the pre-pandemic years due to the government’s renegotiation of energy prices for the sector.

‘What is noteworthy is that the energy revenues for the first three quarters of this fiscal year are in fact higher than the energy revenues from the immediate pre-pandemic era. So what the data shows us is that the revenues earned for the first nine months of this year are in fact higher than the energy revenues for the same period in fiscal 2018 by about 2.4 billion, and higher

than the energy revenues earned in fiscal 2019 for the same period by...1.2 billion, despite production being higher in those years...”—i.e. the pre-pandemic years—“...by well over 1 billion standard cubic feet of gas...” said Arjoon.”

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Arjoon say that, boy?

Hon. S. Young SC: So a billion standard cubic feet of gas more, meaning 3.7, and we continue to earn the same higher revenues as a direct result of what this Government negotiated.

I want the population to understand that is why we were taking all the trips that we took with the Prime Minister, and I can also say that there was no entourage on all of those trips. It was always the bare minimum of persons on those prime-ministerial trips. And I will come, because I have also gotten the information to do an apples-by-apples comparison, and maybe now is the appropriate time to tell the population of what it was going on during that period, seeing that you have the audacity to attack the salesman and the statesman who has earned, from two companies alone, over \$17.5 billion for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Compare that to the following, the period of 2010 to 2015, and I will come to the Prime Minister’s expenditure for this—not expenditure, the budget for this year. The Prime Minister’s establishment for the period 2010 to 2015, \$122.6 million; events, \$47.8 million. The total spend for that period, \$170 million, compared to the period of 2016 to 2020 of \$52 million. Madam Speaker, \$120 million dollars spent by the Member for Siparia for entertainment and two—it had to be two, maybe three, but two Prime Minister residences that they were running at the time; \$170 million versus \$50 million, a savings of \$120 million, and then to

come and talk about travel.

The travel figures during that period of time, which resulted in not a single cent of additional revenue to Trinidad and Tobago, not a single cent, overseas travel for that period of time, \$19.5 million for the Office of the Prime Minister alone. And we know on some of those trips, two come to mind, Brazil and India, they had everybody, all the friends and the financiers, and all the state companies joining the massive entourages.

Mr. Imbert: Fete. Gone to fete.

Hon. S. Young SC: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is offensive to me as a citizen and as a Member of Parliament, as somebody who is working responsibly to ensure that there is a future for this country, to sit here and to listen to any comparison and to the personalized attacks, because it will continue, and I denounce it and I condemn it.

What this country can see here from independent sources like the IMF, Standard and Poor's, Moody's, and our economists when they are being truthful, is the results of what this Government has done responsibly for the people of Trinidad and Tobago over the last 10 years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: And that was part of the whole personalized attack, "Well, where is the greatest salesman? Fail, Rowley and Young failed. Houston", and then tying that to an increase in electricity rates that has never happened. A complete figment of their imagination, but I put the population on notice, typical of those on the other side as they continue to attempt to interfere with the psyche of the population of Trinidad and Tobago and to tell untruths to the population of Trinidad and Tobago.

The next amazing submission, amazing, was that the UNC has consistently brought legislation to protect children—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. S. Young SC:—and listing a whole suite of legislation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, through you, the legislation might have been brought under their Administration, they did absolutely nothing to implement it. Not a single thing. They introduced a Children's Authority, and you know what is offensive to us, the citizens? The day after they demitted office from 2015, the same former Attorney General who is on criminal charges—not one, not two, he is on bail for a number of criminal charges—launched a suite of litigation against the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago for the same suite of legislation, one after the next, for a law that they passed and proclaimed without putting a single thing in place, because that is the model. The model is to abuse the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

And then, you know what I also recall? When we on this side were passing legislation to amend the age for children to be married or not to be married, to stop child marriages. I want the population to remind themselves of what happened on the other side—not only did they do, in my view, what I continue to hold is an unconstitutional switching out of Senators. Because, you see, you have six Senators on the Opposition, if they are sick, if they are ill, or if they are out of the country, they can put in a temporary. But we saw it in that debate, bringing all manner of people to make the submission that young girls should be subject— young girls under the age of 12 should be subjected to child marriage. That is the UNC policy.

It is only when the sensible people in this population, of which there are many and there is a majority, rejected that, that the legislation was passed. So do

not come here again today in a pious way, holding yourself out as some virtuous person, talking about children's legislation. Today, I take the opportunity to applaud the Minister from Tobago East for the work she has done over the last nine years—

2.10 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC:—of building out and implementing that legislation, often under pressure from us, her Cabinet colleagues, to reduce cost, but she has done it.

Dr. Rowley: What about illegal abortions?

Hon. S. Young SC: That pays for houses down in the “pink palace”.

Dr. Rowley: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Imbert: They do it there?

Hon. S. Young SC: And then asking about 400 or \$200 million allocated to the Office of the Prime Minister for building, and what this is about? To try to create, once again, the spectre as though there is something amiss with that. Let me tell the population, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Office of the Prime Minister and the hon. Prime Minister is the line Minister for UDeCOTT.

Mr. Imbert: “They doh know dat.”

Hon. S. Young SC: UDeCOTT is the single largest, competent deliverer of infrastructural building projects.

Mr. Imbert: “They doh know dat.”

Hon. S. Young SC: So, that is for the same Red House we are in here. It is for the renovation of the Whitehall, of Stollmeyer's Castle, of Mille Fleurs; President's House, it is for the central block that you are seeing being built there now. It is for all of those types of UDeCOTT projects. So do not come here today—

Mr. Imbert: Health centres.

Hon. S. Young SC:—to try and cast on us—

Mr. Imbert: Police stations.

Hon. S. Young SC:—the behaviour that you are accustomed to, and that you participate in. You will find no element of that here on this side and we do it openly. So the money that has been allocated to the Office of the Prime Minister, in the hundreds of the millions of dollars is to ensure that UDeCOTT has the money for those projects.

Mr. Imbert: Hundreds of projects.

Hon. S. Young SC: Hundreds of projects, some of which the Minister of Finance touched on in his budget presentation.

“Government took away laptops, how will the children be able to access—what devices would they use?” Mr. Deputy Speaker, this laptop cry has really reached the end of the road, because this Government does have a laptop provision policy in place.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: But this Government has done it responsibly because there is no corruption in the procurement of the laptops. What we did is we grilled the Ministry of Education. We made sure you have the right specs for the children. We made sure that the laptops could stand up to the rigours of use by children in school. And then, we did not just go and hand out laptops to everybody who wanted one. We made sure that taxpayers got the maximum benefit of their money and their dollar, by making sure a means test applies, and every child who cannot afford a device is provided with a device and the same goes for teachers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: That is how the PNM implements policies on behalf of the taxpayers. Always protecting the taxpayer's dollar in a responsible manner. So to say that we got rid of the laptop programme is untrue. We trimmed it down to where it is supposed to be, and schools have the Wi-Fi, schools have the connectivity, and those that do not, will be provided with it. But we have proved that the system can work, as the population should remind itself, when we came out of the COVID period, and the Government will continue to provide laptops and devices to those children who need it and their parents cannot afford it. The same way we implemented the book grant system again this year. And you know, it is not that this Government does not want to do more you know, but it is because this Government continues to be responsible and is not populist and we are not going to do exactly what the Leader of the Opposition said, "put the future generations in debt", for populist decisions. I was shocked at the end of the Leader of the Opposition's contribution, to say that they will reintroduce the baby grant.

Mr. Imbert: Imagine that?

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Hon. S. Young SC: I was shocked to hear of the type of policies that they are openly saying they are going to abuse the taxpayers with, not a single one is responsible. Even the right to bear arms and the right for—

Mr. Imbert: "We in America?"

Hon. S. Young SC: It is all tied back to exactly what Justice Stanley John spoke about, "a well-oiled criminal enterprise", as is being discovered now.

In the ridiculous propositions that continued, and this is one that they keep repeating and the Member for Siparia is at the forefront repeating it. So for the population's sake, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was no Trump phone

call for \$16 million.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. S. Young SC: I could not even figure out where that came from.

Hon. Imbert: “Nah, wah is dat?”

Hon. S. Young SC: There was a phone call by President Trump, one of the early phone calls, as he was making calls when he became President to leaders across the world, Trinidad and Tobago, because of its importance in the region, was one at the top of the list; it was Panama, then Trinidad and Tobago. I was with the hon. Prime Minister when he took that call in the US Embassy at the request of the President of the United States on a secure line and the call did not even cost us the cost of a TSTT call.

Hon. Members: Sixteen million.

Mr. Imbert: Sixteen cents.

Hon. S. Young SC: But they continue to propagate a blatant untruth.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: Outrageous

Dr. Rowley: They are liars.

Hon. S. Young SC: They are blatant untruths.

Dr. Rowley: They are liars.

Hon. S. Young SC: Yes they are.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, please, Member. Hon. Prime Minister, please, please.

Dr. Rowley: I am not on the Floor.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please. No well, this is why, this is why. Only Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West—

Dr. Rowley: I am on here to—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you Mr. PM. Okay, Mr. PM. Right. Proceed, Member.

Hon. S. Young SC: Thank you very much. But you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is important that we tell the population and we put on record that these are the types of just blatant untruths, figments of their imagination, but it is more than that because it is not innocent. It is deliberate. And what they are trying to do is create a false, a fake and an improper narrative out there. So the sensible citizens must heed, and must note, and must take warning. How could you have somebody putting themselves forward to lead this country making up something about a \$16 million phone call?

The next one that was repeated right after that, \$400 million on Train 1.

Mr. Imbert: “Wah”?

Hon. S. Young SC: We watched in this Parliament, it go from the right amount that was paid of \$23 million US; \$23 million US is the correct figure that NGC paid to keep Train 1 alive during a very important period of negotiations, as part of a strategy that worked for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That has mushroomed today to \$400 million and I want to tell the population today, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, every single cent of that was recovered for NGC and for the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: More.

Hon. S. Young SC: And more.

Mr. Imbert: And more.

Hon. S. Young SC: So not a single cent was lost on expenditure for Train 1 and as we now know, Atlantic LNG went on to be restructured, five years it took; has

never been done in the world. As we just heard economist Arjoon say, those are the types of things that have earned additional revenue. So to come here and say there is a reduction in production of ammonia, of methanol and of LNG, we are not denying that, it is a fact, but what you have seen, and the population has seen, is a Government work hard, a Government work overtime to change that course because even when you negotiate a contract today, the gas is not going to come tomorrow and that is why we can say with certainty, from 2027, production is going to go back up to those levels. Because they can shout, they can scream, they can say what they want, Manatee has taken FID, final investment decision by Shell in July of this year.

That is the single largest hydrocarbon project in decades and Manatee was complicated because we had to de-unitize it from Loran in Venezuela. And as the Prime Minister hinted to the population on Friday last week, we are deep in conversations and negotiations to get the Loran field from Venezuela as well, which is over 7 Tcf of gas. We have secured Dragon, much to their dismay, because it is right here that we heard the attacks coming week after, week about supporting President Maduro and Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez and that “oh, where de dragon”? “The dragon wouldn’t dance.” Quietly, efficiently, competently, as a result of the confidence that we have, we negotiated with the United States. We put in our application. We were one of the first entities to receive an OFAC Licence in January of last year for Dragon. Then the cry became, “oh, well, Maduro will be vex because you cah pay in cash”. We continued to do what we do, quietly, competently making the trips to Washington, making the trips to Caracas; diplomacy at its best, strategic thinking at its best because that is what this Government not only has to offer but does for the people

of Trinidad and Tobago. By October of last year, we had gotten an amended OFAC Licence, that we paid in cash by the 21st of December, 2023. So this is why I am reporting on it. Since the last budgetary period, 21st of December, 2023, I am proud that we were able to negotiate and secure a 30-year licence for exploration, production and exportation of gas to Trinidad and Tobago, from the Government of Venezuela.

2.20 p.m.

And I can report here today that a survey ship is about to enter the waters of Trinidad and Tobago. Within the next week, a survey ship is about to enter the waters of Trinidad and Tobago, to launch from here, to go and survey the Dragon gas field because things are proceeding at a pace with NGC, Shell, and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: We have delivered the plan as to how we intend to explore and produce the Dragon gas. The survey ship is coming in within the next week and very shortly, it will be in Venezuela.

Cocuina-Manakin, another one. Those on the other side were screaming and shouting, when one of their people who writes for Reuters came out with an article saying that when the general licence for OFAC in April of this year expired, “That is the end of Cocuina, BP will pull out.” The facts are, we had already begun our discussions with the United States, put in our application, and as the country now knows, shortly thereafter, on 28th of May this year, we got an OFAC licence that carries us all the way to 2026, to go ahead, explore and produce and export the gas from Cocuina, which is part of a unitized field in Venezuela; May.

By the 24th of July of this year, once again, I am proud that on behalf of the

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people of Trinidad and Tobago, we were able to go to Venezuela and obtain and execute, and we have in our hand a 20-year licence now for BP and NGC to produce the gas from Cocuina. And you know what is better than that? A few short weeks thereafter, we had a state-of-the-art 3D seismic survey vessel go across, survey Cocuina as well as Manakin, and they completed the surveying of that field in August of this year. That is a government working for you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: That is what this Government does. That is what our revenue will do.

And it does not end there, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That same 3D seismic vessel has now gone on to survey a block in Trinidad's waters called UC. That has broken the record in this country for going out for a shallow water bidding round to an award, to a negotiation of a PSC, an award of the PSC, and the seismic is going on as we speak now, all in the matter of months. So we are doing everything possible with our domestic fields as well. And I have here a long list because they like to say, "Nothing will go on apart from Dragon," and these things. This year alone, this is what has happened since the beginning of the last fiscal, with:

1. BP: Infill drilling in Savonette, Mango and Angelin.
2. Cyprenatural gas development commenced drilling in quarter 2024.
3. Ginger development plan submitted to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries in quarter three of 2024. The drilling is expected in quarter one 2025, subject to our approval of the plan and FID.
4. We secured the Cocuina licence from the Government of Venezuela, with NGC as a partner, to advance work on the Manakin-Cocuina cross-border field.

5. Manakin seismic acquisition as part of the cross-border Manakin-Cocuina field, completed. Seismic acquisition in deepwater over blocks 25a, 25b, and 27, joint with Shell. We have completed the survey over the three deepwater blocks awarded to BP and Shell, record time.
7. Frangipani exploration well is expected to be drilled in quarter four this year.
8. The joint development of Coconut with EOG, as announced.

Now Shell: Manatee FID taken in July 2024; Dragon licence acquired in December 2023; Aphrodite gas development: Commenced discussions with the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to fast track the developmental plan approval; EOG: drilling to commence on Mento project in early 2025.

We, the Government, managed to secure with EOG and we have secured it with Shell as well, that the TOFCO yard in La Brea is now getting work as they go on to fabricate platforms that we asked them to do. That is the Government working for you, that is what spurns GDP, it is what is providing employment in La Brea and environs.

Back to EOG: The recompletions are underway in the Sercan field; Osprey East, Osprey West developments completed and placed online. Woodside: We negotiated an extension of production from the shallow water areas 2(c) and 3(a), following negotiations with the Government through the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. We continue progress on Calypso, the deepwater discussions.

I heard the Member of Parliament for Siparia asking who will bring third-party gas to Atlantic LNG. The Government came up with that concept of access to Atlantic LNG for third-party gas to get projects like Calypso across the line. Woodside is not a shareholder, so that is the line of sight. EOG are not

shareholders, that is the line of sight. Any regional producer of gas can literally pull up to Atlantic LNG now, process their gas, pay fees and then get cargo at the end.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC: That is a PNM Government. It is not only policy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I put on record here today something I have been wanting to do for a while and today is the right day to do it. What this Government has done over the last nine years in the energy sector, which is the single most important revenue-generating sector of our economy, is we have taken it to the next level. The building of Point Lisas and that conceptualization was the first chapter for natural gas. Getting plants to be built there was the second. But what the population should understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what you have seen take place over the last nine years, and the culmination has begun in the past year or so as everything starts coming together, is securing the future of Trinidad and Tobago's energy sector for decades to come, and I do not say that lightly. I know that the population will understand it and I make a submission to the population today through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That could not have been done by any other Government, because I listened to those on the other side, I listened to those who are aspiring to even get into this Chamber, and not a single one of them has the ability to do what was achieved over the last nine years.

Furthermore—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC:—I heard the Member for Siparia when she was talking about energy, about what they are going to do, et cetera. I want to put a proposition if they came back into office.

Hon. Member: God forbid.

Hon. S. Young SC: I want to put a proposition—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, just before you continue—[*Inaudible*]—of your initial speaking time. You have an additional 10 minutes, care to avail?

Hon. S. Young SC: Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. S. Young SC: I will take the 10. What about the additional speaking time from the Member for Siparia? Can I get some of that?

Hon. Member: Three hours, three hours.

Mr. Imbert: You have about three hours.

Hon. S. Young SC: So we heard the Member for Siparia, Mr. Deputy Speaker, talking about how they will revamp the energy sector. The first point I want to make is I heard a frightening submission. We witnessed here today a frontal attack on the Energy Chamber of Trinidad and Tobago. I listened very carefully as the Leader of the Opposition— aspiring to an office, God forbid, should ever get close to it—say that they will set up a parallel body and they will basically decimate the Energy Chamber, the way they decimated the energy sector between 2010 and 2015. The population needs to take note of that. The population needs to ask itself, why would they attack that body? And then go on to say, it is because of who comprises the body. So the Member for Siparia has declared war, not only on the Energy Chamber today, has declared war on BP, has declared war on Shell, has declared war on EOG—

Mr. Imbert: Perenco.

Hon. S. Young SC:—Perenco—

Mr. Imbert: Woodside.

Hon. S. Young SC:—Woodside et al., has declared war on NGC.

Mr. Imbert: Touchstone.

Hon. S. Young SC:—has declared war on Touchstone, Heritage.

Mr. Imbert: And A&V.

Hon. S. Young SC: Well, A&V drilling is now producing over 1,200 barrels a day from the same field that they said could not produce. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if that is not a warning for us as a population that the most important sector in Trinidad and Tobago, they are now frontally attacking body that represents it—and I asked myself why.

2.30 p.m.

And you know what it is? It is because they are an independent body. They are certainly no friends of the Government when they are ready, who have been seeing what has happened in the energy sector and they are now seeing what is happening in the energy sector, independently it is a good thing. This proposition is an important one to the population, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We sat here for years, since 2016 all the way through to a few weeks ago, listening to those on the other side led by the Member for Oropouche East and the Member for Siparia attacking President Maduro, attacking Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez, at a certain point in time, calling for sanctions by the United States on the Member for Diego Martin West and myself, as we tried to secure a future for Trinidad and Tobago. Population, picture this: Every week we came here “Delcy, Delcy, Delcy, Delcy, Maduro, Maduro, Maduro” and they were supporting a President Guaidó who has disappeared from the face of the earth. A PNM Government stood firm and secured what I have just spoken about, a 30-year licence for Dragon, a 20-year licence for Manakin-Coquina.

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Population, ask yourself this: Should the Member for Siparia return to office and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago? Do you the population of Trinidad and Tobago think that Venezuela right now, who does not utilize the gas, so they are surviving without the sale of the gas, do you think that the same President Maduro or the same Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez ,who now also carries the portfolio of Minister of Energy, would do business with the UNC?

Hon. Member: No.

Hon. S. Young SC: So picture this: What would happen to that future that the PNM Government has secured for our children from 2027, because the Venezuelans do not need to continue with it. If they do not like those who attack them weekly and every time I went to negotiate it was a point of discussion, why is the Opposition attacking us? Why are they attacking President Maduro and myself, when I sat with Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez? Population consider that because that is your future. Should you take God out of your thoughts and put them to lead this country, it will evaporate in front your eyes—

Mr. Imbert: “Crapaud smoke we pipe”.

Hon. S. Young SC:—because that is worth a pause because it concerns me as a citizen. We heard one of the things that—oh, the VAT refunds, the VAT refunds. When we came into office in 2015, VAT refunds were owing, \$5 billion, almost close to \$6 billion. So to come here today and to take us the population, once again, for fools and to try and mislead us right in front our face is despicable behaviour by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So once again—so what if this is the third time that the Government is issuing VAT bonds. It is to repay the VAT that is owed, and you have a promise by the Minister of Finance, the Ministry of Finance, adopted by the Government that the SMEs and the smaller

businesses will get theirs in cash by December of this year.

So to pretend as though that there is something abnormal with VAT refunds building up, and that is not something that was going on in a period where you were flushed with cash, 4 bcf of gas flowing a day, high prices of oil of \$120 and over \$8 an MMBtu of gas, what will happen if you have to deal with oil at \$20 a barrel or on those days during COVID where it went into negative? What would have happened if we did not renegotiate gas prices where I can say here today with a sense of pride, that this Government's current gas prices are almost three times what you would receive from the Henry Hub price, and that was PNM policy, strategy implemented and achieved—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Young SC:—versus \$8.8 billion in claims that they ran up. Something hit me last night. There was a press conference yesterday, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, there is—not unfortunately. There was another, this is now the third time we have gone out as a responsible Government to try and get someone who can come and take over the refinery and restart the refinery. I am putting on record, eh. Any responsible government would want to restart the refinery, but the difference between us on this side and those on that side who want to hold government is, we are not going to put the taxpayers into a position where they are incurring billions of dollars in losses as a result of restarting the refinery. So the Government whilst it may participate, maybe in a minority position, is not going to put the taxpayers to carry that burden.

The first time we went out in 2018/2019, Patriotic Energies and Technologies OWTU conformed company was the preferred bidder. We gave them a period of exclusivity. They could not unfortunately get over the hurdle

even though we worked with them. There were two things, one it was that, one of their partners wanted exclusivity to the Paria tank farms, et cetera. We were not prepared to do that. The second is, they wanted the Government to issue bonds on their behalf as part of the financing. That is putting the taxpayers' right back where we had taken them out from.

There was another period. We granted another period of exclusivity, carried on conversations. It could not work. We continued to receive expressions of interest. This time we said, right, let us formalize expressions of interest. We got 10 of them. At the end of that period, we set up an evaluation committee. Yesterday, Patriotic was one. Yesterday we had, unfortunately, the President General of the OWTU made some very reckless statements about how it is a political football and about how Patriotic would have been the best to carry this forward.

One of the things you looked at, not us the Government, the evaluation committee and Scotia out of Houston, who are independent experts in this area, there are number of things that they look at. Any experience in refining, any experience in oil. Another one is, do you have the financial wherewithal. Do you have the financial wherewithal? And I watched on television and read in the newspaper, unfortunately the representative of Patriotic said that something untoward happened with them and that is why they did not get it because there was some level of vindictiveness, that is my word, by the Government and that is why they did not get it.

Lo and behold, you know, things arrive in your mailbox. Lo and behold, the question was asked: Did they pass the financials? I was told by the evaluation committee, the first time, no. They could not produce the financial wherewithal on

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this occasion as part of their EOI process. And the evaluation committee did something, credit to them, that they did not do for others. They told Patriotic, take some time and go and see if you get the financials because what you have produced as the initial pass cannot work, and they gave them more time and they gave them a second opportunity.

Lo and behold, as part of that second opportunity, is a document that I have in my hand here today that appears to be a swift message of a cash-wire transfer of US \$1.5 billion on behalf of Patriotic Energies and Technologies Company Limited, receiving US \$1½ billion at a local bank in Trinidad. So, of course, we asked the evaluation committee.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister, you have two more minutes.

Hon. S. Young SC: Thank you. So, we asked the evaluation committee, well if they had this, what happened? Fraudulent document.

Mr. Imbert: Fake.

Hon. Member: Wow.

Hon. Member: What?

Hon. S. Young SC: A fake document.

Mr. Imbert: Forged?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No display.

[Member displays a document]

Hon. S. Young SC: A fake document.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No display. The document.

Hon. S. Young SC: Sorry. A fake document was produced as part of that EOI process.

Mr. Imbert: Forged?

Hon. S. Young SC: Forged document. Because when the due diligence was done, of course, no US \$1.5 billion was received by Patriotic at any local bank. So unfortunately—

Mr. Imbert: They are crooks.

Hon. S. Young SC: And, yes, it is stamped by some unknown persons, certified true, but of course, it is easy to verify this because it is—

Hon. Member: It is a crime.

Hon. S. Young SC:—it is either that it exists or it does not exist, and I can stand here without fear of contradiction, here and outside as I might do later on, and say, it is not a real document. So therefore, unfortunately, they could not move forward because the document that was produced as proof of financials is not real.

Mr. Imbert: Fake.

Hon. S. Young SC: Fake, fraud, fraudulent.

2.40 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will end by saying this, that we should fear not. There is still a lot going on in the energy sector as well as on renewable side. And this Government, that will continue beyond 2025 to manage this country's affairs in a responsible manner, will always put country first and do what is best for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that our record will show for the last nine going onto 10 years. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre and for the records you have 45 minutes and an additional 10. So proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre): Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker,

for allowing me to join this debate again, coming after the—

Hon. Member: You have nothing to say.

Mr. D. Lee: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: [*Inaudible*] I going Belmont later.

Mr. D. Lee: “I know you going Piggott square later.” I hope when you go Piggott square you tell them about the incident at St. Francois Girls' College today, you know, that incident that took place this morning. Anyway you could discuss that at Piggott square.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me start off first by congratulating the Member for Siparia, the Opposition Leader, for a very holistic, people-centred response to the Minister of Finance budget that he presented.

Mr. Imbert: That rambling in the name of coherence?

Mr. D. Lee: Let me just say when I listened to the member for Siparia and her response, the people of this nation will be very heartened in a very short time that good governance will return to this country under the leadership of the Member for Siparia. I fully endorse her policies here today, when the Member spoke about stand-your-ground laws, when the Member spoke about home invasion laws, when the Member rolled out her policy on the health sector. These are all good policies. These are all good policies that we heard here this afternoon, starting from this morning. When you listen to her policies in the education sector that she has plans for this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the citizens of our country will feel heartened that you have a caring individual and a caring Government coming in place.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: When you heard about our anti-crime plans, Mr. Deputy Speaker,

and what we have to do to revolutionize and make people feel safer in our country under the Member for Siparia, we are in a good place.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: And I will say much more as, I continue, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let me start off by saying on Monday the 30th, we listened to the Minister of Finance's 10th budget presentation.

Mr. Indarsingh: Uninspiring.

Mr. D. Lee: It was like a migraine without relief. I could have taken in that five hours and 12 minutes—if I knew he was going to talk for five hours and 12 minutes, I would have gone to Palladium and do a double at 12.30, and then come back in the afternoon and do a 4.30 and he would be still talking.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: I would have gone and look at a *Tarzan* double—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. D. Lee:—and then come back do a *Pink Panther* because he would be still be talking, the Minister of Finance, after five hours and 12 minutes. The people of our country still today are confused by what they heard for five hours and 12 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: But I want to tell you today, they are not confused when they listen to the Member for Siparia today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: She was clear and concise in her delivery, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and my other colleagues will say much more as they roll out their debate. I listened to the gentlemen, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Hon. Member: He was not prepared at all.

Mr. D. Lee: He is so predictive. The gentleman—the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West said nothing new today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: Nothing after 10 years. After nine-plus years in this Chamber he has said nothing new, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thought he should have saved what he said there tonight for Piggott in Belmont, because they did not have one last year. Alright, I do not know if it was because they could not pull a crowd. The Member had nothing of substance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: He spent at least 20 to 30 minutes attacking the Member for Siparia. This gentleman is the Gary Sobers of this Government. So, I would have thought the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have had more substance. All the Member—and I will go into it in much more details—but in a generalized summary form, all the Member spoke about was coming attractions. Coming attractions in 2027/2028, and I really said I could have gone to Globe and look at coming attractions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: So we had two individuals on that side, the Minister of Finance, and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries who are responsible for our revenue growth in our country for the last nine years and both of them said nothing of substance here today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: And I will go through why this country is in decay, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I listened to the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, first

time, first time he quoted from an economist Dr. Vaalmikki Arjoon. First time I have heard him quote him, this gentleman, and you know he quote him wrong.

Hon. Members: Oh, no man.

Mr. D. Lee: Here is the heading that he quoted from and he failed to say it. On September 5th, Trinidad *Guardian*, the same article the Minister is quoting from:

“Arjoon: Energy revenue down 51% for 2024”

Our revenues have been down 51 per cent. This is the economist Dr. Valmikki Arjoon saying this, not David Lee or anybody here, but he failed to say that. He tried to paint—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hold on. One second.

Mr. D. Lee: I apologize.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No one sec, one sec. Okay, Members, again, the Standing Order is clear. No displaying of documentation while reading, right. So, again, Government and Opposition, again, it stands.

Mr. D. Lee: I apologize, Mr, Deputy Speaker, I was just trying to show you it that is all. I want to go to another one, and these are not our words, eh. The Prime Minister, the Member for Diego Martin West, when both himself and the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West last week was attending a function in Point Fortin the headline by the Prime Minister:

“Difficult years ahead”—for Trinidad and Tobago.

These are not our words, these are the Prime Minister’s words right. And then in an affidavit, in an article on Thursday, 06 June, 2024, a few months ago the Minister of Finance is saying the:

“Next three years ‘challenging’”—for Trinidad and Tobago.

But when the Minister of Finance presented his budget something happened

between June to now, when he presented his budget, and I will go into it. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries today, really was confused had nothing more to say.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: And if you look at the Central Bank report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on 13th July, 2024:

“Central Bank report: Energy sector continues downwards”

These are all articles and all stories, not made up by the Opposition, by them. That is the reality of our country underneath this Government. For the last nine years and counting, “doh matter how they try to come flip it”, everything is down in our country, and I will go into it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance on Monday, made points in his budget which we found—We were forced to figure out what the Minister, whether he was being sarcastic or simply removed from the true sense of reality when he made a statement in his budget, “cost of food is going down”.

Mr. Imbert: It is.

Mr. D. Lee: He made that in his budget presentation. “The cost of food is going down”. But yet you heard from the Member for Siparia today, when she was comparing 2015, food prices to present.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: Right, from fuel prices to supermarket prices, and so on everything is up, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The only thing that is down, is them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I go into this Ministry of Finance’s budget presentation—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk and*]

2.50 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members on both sides, please. Please. Go ahead.

Mr. D. Lee: From 2015, the Minister of Finance promised certain things in our country—certain things—and several of his promises have not borne fruit. In 2015 the Minister promised to fix forex. We had to go in the bank and we could only get \$50 to fly out. Right, \$50, Mr. Deputy Speaker. He promised to fix forex, and we understand our forex situation is horrendous over the last nine years and continuing. Businesses are suffering, a lot of small and medium businesses have closed because of the forex situation in our country that the Minister of Finance promised to fix, so he failed to deliver that.

In 2015 the Minister of Finance promised to do ship building for diversification—the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West talked about La Brea this afternoon—and they promised us in 2015 a La Brea dry dock. I do not even remember that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not want to pull you in. Again, the promises never materialized underneath them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: In 2018—I do not know if my gentle colleagues remember in 2018 the Minister of Finance in his budget presentation talked about a shark tank grant. Eh, shark tank, eh. I think the present candidate as one of the Presidents for the US Government, I think Shark Tank was underneath him. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that never happened. In 2018, the Minister promised a marina for the yachting association, the yachting industry. Again, that did not happen. These are diversification projects that the Minister talked about, and you wonder why our revenues are down. You wonder why, and why we have to place all our eggs in

cross-border gas, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In 2019 they came back again with the dry dock and the shipping facility in La Brea. In 2020 they promised a Live Music District Programme. You remember that?

Dr. Moonilal: I remember, I remember.

Mr. D. Lee: A live music. They said it will help the young men and women in the music industry and the fashion industry. Well, you know nothing has happened since then. They promised the San Fernando Waterfront Project since 2015 as one of their six game changers. The only thing they did was built a carpark in San Fernando, and then they say it is the waterfront development project.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: And my colleague, my friend from San Fernando West, up to now he cannot get a San Fernando project going. So now I hope you park in that carpark, Member.

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: Plug in San Fernando in Waze, you will find it.

Mr. D. Lee: All the matrices of this Government are down, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In 2015, under the PP Government we drilled 75 wells in our energy sector, underneath them today it is 45 wells. Our crude and condensate extraction, all down underneath them. The numbers are there in the book. When the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West talked about natural gas extraction, under the Member for Siparia our gas extractions to that 3.88 mmsfc. You know what it is today in 2024? Mr. Deputy Speaker, 2.49, and they are saying that is development that they are doing. Right? So every matrix under this present Government, under this Minister of Finance, has fallen drastically over the last nine years. There is nothing for them to boast about. Ammonia is down, LNG production is down, all our matrices are down. They are down.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to touch a “lil” something on this energy GDP. The Minister of Finance predicted the energy GDP would contract in 2024 to 0.6 percent—2024. The *Review of the Economy* shows it contracted by 5.6 percent. So last year when he did his book for the GDP for the energy he said it would only be contracting by 0.6 percent, when we got the book this year—and that book is an amazing book, eh. I do not know if you really take the—I “doh” even know if you really take the time to read that book, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would be amazed by what the Minister of Finance—it contradicts what he is saying. That book is like a *Bible*.

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Lee: So when you look at that book this year, last year he predicted 0.6. The GDP for the energy sector was contracted by 5.6 percent. Right! When you look at the book again this year for next year’s GDP on energy sector, he says it will only contract by 0.7 percent. I am sure when the book is produced next year the GDP on energy would contract by 10 percent underneath them. So there is nothing in this book, and he is watching me and he is smiling because he knows what I am talking about.

Hon. C. Imbert: I am not smiling with you.

Mr. D. Lee: No, he knows what I am talking about.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: He is incapable of smiling.

Mr. D. Lee: He knows that that book is a dangerous book if you read it properly, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: Dangerous book, it tells the facts and the truth of what is going on in our economy. The numbers are there. So the Minister might really hope that we

on the Opposition “doh read dat book, you know”. Let me tell you something, we read that book, brother. We read that book, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: We read the book. Let us look at oil production that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talks about. Our oil production presently for 10 consecutive years has been contracting in oil. It has been the lowest presently to date, it is 49,626 barrels of oil we produced in our country. It is the lowest since 1960. Since 1960. They talked about—that heritage is doing such a fantastic job, and you heard it from the Member for Siparia. Under Trinmar that was under Petrotrin it was a success story for Petrotrin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: It produced more oil than all that they did with Heritage, and all they did with Heritage is they got rid of the union and the workers, so they brought in scab labour, at cheaper costs. They do not want to say that. They do not want to say that, so their overhead cost in producing stuff, whether it is Paria, whether it is Heritage, whether it is the refinery under mothballs, they have brought in cheap labour so their overheads must be lower. But they still cannot produce what Trinmar was producing under Petrotrin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: Even with all the magic that they are trying to say they have done, they have not done what they did as Trinmar. When you look at gas production, and the Minister made reference to it in his Budget Statement on page 9, in 2023 we grappled—and I quote—with a 5 per cent, 5.6 per cent contraction in the energy sector. So he agrees with the book. He agrees with the book, because the year before when he was presenting in the budget statement he said energy GDP

will only contract by 0.6. So he agrees it really went down to 5.6. And when you look at our gas production, there nothing to rave about. It have been declining steadily on a yearly basis underneath them. So all the great things that the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West wants to come and tell us about coming attractions in 2027 and 2028, and "take care, the boom is coming"—the boom is coming, according to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and they alone can manage the boom in 2027/2028, but they cannot manage the economy for the last 10 years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: And they want to tell us that they could manage it in 2027 and 2028. Who you have to believe, their track record or the track record of the Member for Siparia?

Ms. Ameen: Performance!

Mr. D. Lee: Performance beat old talk. Five years, you look at what the PP Government produced in a short five years. Ten years, I will tell you why. I will tell you why, I will tell you why. In 10 years the entire matrix of this country has been declining year on year, and that is why the Member for Siparia could tell you the amount of borrowings that this Minister of Finance, over a \$120 billion, to prop up this economy—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee:—and also take from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to talk about bid rounds. I want to talk about bid rounds that the Member for Port of Spain North/S. Ann's West forgot. I do not know if it was calculated, but he forgot. Because when the Minister of Finance was taking about bid rounds in his budget statement, he talked about it was a great success. These

bid rounds that they had. I want to tell you, every bid round that they have had in the last nine years underneath them, has failed. It has failed. It has been abysmal.

3.00 p.m.

The only time you had successful bid rounds was under the PP Government, led by the Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: And I will give you a ball by ball, a history. In 2019, they had a shallow water bid round under the late Franklin Khan, who was then the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries. That failed, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It failed. There were six blocks offered and only three bids received. Six blocks, three received. That is 2019.

Then, in 2020, they had a deepwater bid round. This was launched on 03 December, 2021, and closed on June 2022. Seventeen blocks were offered, only four bids were received, and they are saying that it is a success. Right, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Four out of 17 bids.

In 2022, Onshore and Nearshore Bid Round opened in July 2022 and was closed on January 2023. Eleven blocks were up for bidding, Mr. Deputy Speaker, eight blocks were received. And then, in 2023, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries had launched a 2023 shallow water bid round in October 2023, closed in May 27, 2024, just a few months ago, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In that one, 13 blocks were offered and only four bids were received.

This present Minister of Energy and Energy Industries had one more bid than the last Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, God rest his soul, the late Franklin Khan, and they called it a success. All those bid rounds, four that they did in our country for the last nine years, have not been the success that they touted it

to be. And this present Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, when he was launching that last set of bid rounds, he went on a road trip. He said he went on a road trip, internationally, and when it was disappointing, the bids were received, you know what he said? “Well, I expected that.” But he went on a road trip, but he expected when the bids were in and only four out of 16—let me just get that figure—four out of 13 were received, he said, he expected that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that takes care of the bids. I want to talk about the Atlantic LNG restructuring. There is a lot I have to go through here. Mr. Deputy Speaker, on page 61 of the budget statement, the Minister of Finance talked about the Atlantic LNG restructuring, and I quote:

“...the Government has successfully negotiated the restructuring of Atlantic LNG, a ground-breaking initiative in the global energy sector.”

And I want to give you a timeline on that restructuring, Mr. Deputy Speaker. January 25, 2022, the Government announces execution of a Heads of Agreement for the restructuring of the Atlantic LNG; the 12th of September, 2022, Prime Minister Dr. Rowley confirms Train 1 was shut down because we had no gas for that Train; the 6th of December, 2023, the Government announced a new unitized commercial structure for Atlantic LNG, which allows NGC—the National Gas Company—to obtain a greater share in the revenue derived from the sale of the LNG.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when the Minister of Finance announced in his budget statement—he made a statement, he said, on October 1st that restructuring is in place and the mission is accomplished. You know in his bravado, “Mission accomplished.” So the normal person listening to the Minister on Monday would have felt that this restructuring from October 1st, this week, money starts to flow

from the coffers for Trinidad and Tobago. I would have thought so. When I listened to that I said, “Wow, maybe I missed something.” So I went back to a statement on December 05, 2023, a media release put out by the National Gas Company, right?—December 05, 2023, where the release talks about the restructuring, and let me just tell you what are the terms of this restructuring:

“The restructure positions Trinidad and Tobago to profit more from the LNG business, as NGC will have increased equity in the facility.”

That is true.

“The company’s stake in the unitised facility will be 5.7% from 2024-2027, and 10% from 2027 onward.”

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in reality, this restructuring really does not come into play until 2027, when the 10 per cent is spread out throughout the entire company called Atlantic LNG. But when you heard the Minister in his budget statement on Monday, said, “Mission accomplished and money will be flowing in from Tuesday,” that is not so, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Now, that whole restructuring, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to ask some questions: What did this Government give up for that restructuring? Because a few months ago, right here in this Chamber, I think I asked the Government in one of the question sessions: What did it cost us for that restructuring? Because energy companies do not just give up a stake in something just so, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They do not do it. They are not here to play “Mr. Nice Guy” with the Government or any government. So I have asked the question: What did we give up? What did we pay for that restructuring, Mr. Deputy Speaker? And I think the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries answered and said, “Nothing.” Because they are so great, they said, “Nothing, we did not have to pay anything.”

Now, it is interesting when you go back to some Ministers' statements in this Chamber, in these Chambers, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the late Franklin Khan came here and made a Minister's Statement back then before he passed on to a greater beyond, and if you read that statement, you might have to understand that we might have given up something for something. Because as I have said, Shell and BP are not going to give up something just so. And when you go back and you read that statement on 06 October, 2019, by the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the late Sen. Khan, he gave a statement, as I said, inside of here and he talked about that whole restructuring and then he also went on to say there were two phases in that statement, Phase 1 and Phase 2, and then he talked about, in that statement, claims being settled to Shell and the Government would settle without liability, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when they negotiate that restructuring. So we are asking: What really did the Government give up for that restructuring?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: Was it that claims that Shell had against this country, that they agreed to settle without giving and saying they are liable in exchange for this restructuring? Because I always said, energy companies are not going to give up something for nothing. They are not. They have an infrastructure, they have a vested interest. Was it also that they would also, with the Government—because they need gas for Atlantic LNG, either the Government and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries was so in bed with the Venezuelan Government that there was some deal that was taking place, that the Shell and the energy companies felt that they were going to benefit by that restructuring, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: So we ask the question: What did this Government give up in return

for that re-instructing, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to turn to NGC. The Minister never touched NGC this morning—today. NGC—he failed to mention that NGC, underneath them, for the first time made over a \$2.0 billion loss. He did not come and remind the population.

Hon. Members: “Oooh good”.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: A loss, a loss, a loss.

Mr. D. Lee: A loss. He made a loss.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: A loss.

Mr. D. Lee: He failed to mention that. He failed to mention that. Now, he is throwing across the floor, “contract”, and I know he is talking about the Mitsubishi plant. He is talking about the thing. But he failed to say also, in 2016, he went to Japan and he said, he renegotiated the contract to the benefit of the country. But we still lost, underneath them, \$2.0 billion. Was it a bad negotiation that he did?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: And that is the question we keep asking this year. We keep asking that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

3.10 p.m.

Deputy Speaker, Point Lisas. I want to turn to a little bit about Point Lisas. I heard the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries talk about Point Lisas being the bedrock in the energy sector that underneath them, and under the late Prime Minister Dr. Eric Williams, it was his brainchild and so forth. And it might have been under Eric Williams, the late past Prime Minister, but underneath them they designating Point Lisas on a yearly basis for the last nine years. Deputy Speaker, because of bad negotiation in Houston—got bad negotiations in Houston that the

price of gas is unattractive for the downstreamers in Point Lisas. Underneath them, Deputy Speaker, for the last nine years, they had the greatest amount of plant closures—the greatest amount of plant closures. You heard it from the Member for Siparia. The first one that the Member talked about was the Mittal plant, the iron and steel plant.

Now I want to ask you something about that Mittal plant, Deputy Speaker, through you, to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and even the Minister of Finance. A few months ago, he said that there was a new purchaser—

Mr. Imbert: I never said that.

Mr. D. Lee: No, I did not say you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members please. Minister of Finance, you will have the opportunity to respond at the end of the debate. All right? And again, Member, address the Chair to ensure that we do not get the crosstalk please.

Mr. D. Lee: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. You know it is the second time the Minister of Finance get jumpy when I raise this Mittal plant right?

Mr. Imbert: No.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Once you address the Chair.

Mr. D. Lee: In the mid-year review I raised it. Let me explain. This Mittal plant that was sold, that I read in the newspapers, to a Canadian company. The chairman of that company is one Mr. Monty Pemberton. This gentleman Pemberton is like, you know, he always seems to recreate in some form or fashion. It was a Canadian company that purchased this Mittal plant, the iron and steel plant, and said they will make it operational in one year's time. I want to ask the question: Where are they getting the gas from? Were they promised gas to reopen this plant and what were the terms and conditions of this gas? It reminds me, it is very similar to the

NiQuan plant, Deputy Speaker, that one of the conditions of the NiQuan plant, the old WGTL that was sold for peppercorn by this Government to NiQuan, they were promised a certain amount of gas, I think, 31 scfs. Right, Deputy Speaker? And I will come to NiQuan in a few minutes, Deputy Speaker.

So let me remind this country—and if this Government forgot the amount of plant closures we have had under them in Point Lisas. In 2016, we had the ArcelorMittal shutdown; 2019 we had the Yara shutdown and do not come here and fool the population and tell us that the Yara plant was old and—

Mr. Imbert: It was new.

Mr. D. Lee: Right—2020, in Point Lisas plant shutdown, Proman, Nutrien, Methanex; April 2023, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries admits gas supply difficulties in Point Lisas. That is a *Trinidad Express* article, 23 April, 2023; in July 2023, gas price crisis shuts down Point Lisas plants. *Express* article 28 July; in September 2024, one week ago, and I think the Member of Siparia spoke about in her contribution that they were only able to bring up the Atlas Plant. One of the largest plants in the methanol was the Atlas. That was shut down. They were only able to bring up last week the Titan Plant. It is a much smaller plant in producing for this country, Deputy Speaker.

So the problem therein lies, Deputy Speaker, over the nine years this Government, under the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, has not increase our gas production year-on-year since 2015—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee:—and that is why the Minister of Finance is suffering for revenues. He is suffering for revenues. But in his budget presentation, the Minister of Finance praised the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries twice. Not once,

twice in his budget presentation. Three times, twice. I read twice. He praised the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the Prime Minister about revenues in our country. Yet, the Minister of Finance has borrowed over \$120 billion in the last nine years, Deputy Speaker, but he praised the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the Prime Minister for increasing revenues. That is why this whole country after five hours and 12 minutes, we are still confused. We are walking around like zombies after listening to the Minister of Finance—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee:—because we do not know what really transpired after five hours and 12 minutes, Deputy Speaker.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Minister of Finance is the scapegoat.

Mr. D. Lee: I will not say that. So under Point Lisas, Deputy Speaker, we had the most plant closures because of bad negotiations under this Government for price of gas that they are charging the downstreamers. And I want to put out a myth that the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries likes to carry around, that they had claims and we never renegotiated any contract when we were in Government, meaning the PP Government.

I have a FOIA—I would not read it out, but if he wants me at another time—that under that, we renegotiated before 2015 six contracts under Point Lisas. But the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries likes to go around saying that we never negotiated. False narrative all the time, Deputy Speaker. Another false narrative that we had in a JSC back in 2016/'17, under the past president, Maria Thorne, when a question was asked under the PP Government, they never had any claims, Deputy Speaker. The PP Government never had any claims under Point Lisas for contracts, but yet the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries goes

around for last nine years saying—I am surprised you did not come here this morning, today and repeat it.

Deputy Speaker, the cross-border. That is the big thing for this Government, cross-border, Dragon, the Manakin-Cocuina and also the Loran-Manatee. I want to ask the question and I want to say it today because I listened to the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries in his 55-minute contribution or 50 minutes, up to now he cannot say when gas is coming to this country, under any one of those projects, Deputy Speaker. So I heard now that a survey vessel going into the Dragon gas field. Now Dragon gas field—he did not say Manatee you know, which is on Trinidad's side. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries did not even say it was in Manakin you know. He say he going in Dragon, and you know Dragon gas field 100 per cent belongs to the Venezuelan Government—100 per cent. “But he going in de Dragon.”

So I do not know if—you know, the other day I read in an article, Deputy Speaker, that some private jet was seized by the American Government because it is owned by the Venezuelan Government. I want to ask a question if that jet ever arrived in Trinidad and Tobago. I wonder if that was the jet that came through in COVID when our borders were locked down and our people were locked away from our country, but a group of Venezuelans could enter our country. Up to now, we cannot get a confirmed answer on that and what they came here for, Deputy Speaker.

So this morning, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries spent most of his time on this cross-border, talking about Dragon gas and not Manatee, and not Manakin which is part of our Trinidad waters. Now the Loran-Manatee, Deputy Speaker, goes back way before I think even before the Minister of Energy and

Energy Industries was born. Interesting in 2012—they like to talk about we being unpatriotic and we like to attack, so forth and so forth. There is an article, Deputy Speaker, when the Leader of the Opposition was the present Prime Minister, Diego Martin West, he talked about the Loran-Manatee, and in that article started to call out the present Minister of Energy, Kevin Ramnarine, to come clean on that Loran-Manatee deal. He called out that, to come clean on that Loran-Manatee deal. Now we are saying it today, come clean on all of those cross-border deals that are taking place with the Venezuelan Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: Come all. Because you see when you talk about cross-border, you have the Loran on one side, you have the Manatee, you do not have a wall dividing them you know. You do not have a wall that insulates Manatee from Loran, you know. And that is the question we keep asking.

3.20 p.m.

When they supposedly start to do Manakin-Cocuina, which is on the Trinidad side, what is the deal that they really have with the Venezuelan Government for Cocuina gas that the thing could flow and also the Loran-Manatee?

Mr. Young SC: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Lee: So both Manatee and the Manakin is on the Trinidad side but you do not have a wall separating it. So, cross-border gas deals and contracts are very, very highly geopolitical Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is a fact. That is a fact, but they are trying to make it seem that it is very simple that we would just put up this wall—

Mr. Young SC: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a running commentary from the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, please.

Dr. Moonilal: Who wasted his time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right, again Members, Remember Standing Order 53, the only person being recognised at this time is the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. Proceed.

Mr. D. Lee: Thank you Mr. Deputy. Thank you for saving me Member for Siparia.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Deputy Speaker saved you.

Mr. D. Lee: So Mr. Deputy Speaker, again the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, when he spoke about the cross border fields it is really three that they have been dabbling in. He has not really given us any comfort other than to say to this country a boom is coming in 2027/'28, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: It is a bomb. It is a bomb.

Mr. D. Lee: And you know they are to the best people or the best administration to handle that boom, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But I want to remind this country, and I will say it again, for the last 10 years they have destroyed our energy sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: Every matrix has been down, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I want to go to Petrotrin, my favourite topic.

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

Mr. D. Lee: Yes Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed with your 10 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I may have to rush through this for 10 minutes here because I have a big wind-up.

Hon Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. D. Lee: Mr. Deputy Speaker, under Petrotrin, they like to say a story that Petrotrin was unprofitable. They love that story. I want to say in 2015, under the PP Government, Petrotrin was profitable and the figures, the financials, are there. When they took control of Petrotrin and the last chairman Mr. Espinet, it is there documented his words. He never gave advice to shut down Petrotrin. The Lashley Report never talked about shouting down Petrotrin. It talked about restructuring, reorganizing Petrotrin, but in 2018 in Marabella in my constituency, the Prime Minister came into the community centre and said “if yuh doh”—you remember the famous statement? I do not want to pull you in Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: The fridge door.

Mr. D. Lee: “If yuh was going into yuh refrigerator, and you was taking out the milk or the water and yuh did not hear when I tell yuh we not closing down Petrotrin.” They closed it down in 2017 and sent home over 5,000 people on the breadline. Five thousand families were on the breadline, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Up to now, they cannot give comfort to the pensioners of Petrotrin. That pension plan that is in deficit, that is controlled by Republic Bank. Up to now we have asked questions and we cannot get a positive response to what is happening in that pension plan for the retirees of Petrotrin. So now that they are getting flack about shutting down Petrotrin you know what they say now? Reorganize.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Again.

Mr. D. Lee: Reorganize. But we have always said—the Opposition has always said, if he wanted to restructure Petrotrin, restructure it, but keep it open as a going

concern and it would have more value when it is time to sell it. But they do not want to do that. They shut it down for God alone knows why and we have filed— A good friend of mine had filled a FOIA to get that Cabinet Note. What was the reason why they shut down Petrotrin? That individual has been getting a dance around to get a response from the Cabinet secretary. So we are hoping it will come one of these days because if we do not get it now, we will get it when we go into Government under the Member of Siparia and we will get the truth why they really shut down Petrotrin.

Mr Deputy Speaker, my time is—could you just tell me how much more time?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You will finish just around 3.34.

Mr. D. Lee: 3.34. I want to talk about renewable energy, which the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries never spoke about because, in this budget statement, the Minister of Finance started off on page 63 and I quote:

“Madam Speaker, the Government has set a target to achieve by 2030, 30 percent of our energy needs via Renewable Energy power generation.”

So, Monday he comes and he tells the audience—the country—in 2030—well if people take God out of their thoughts and put them back in, which I hope not, they will do 30 per cent in renewable energy power. Madam Speaker, 2016, his first budget statement, the Minister’s first budget statement, I want to quote it. The hon. Colm Imbert mentioned:

“Our target is that by the year 2021...”—his first Budget statement—“at least 10.0 percent of the energy generated in this country should be from the renewable sources.”

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Not true.

Mr. D. Lee: Madam Speaker, 2016, which he presented in October 2015, he said 2021, 10 per cent. Now in five years you want to tell us 30 per cent. You know what is the only renewable energy they have done? A few months ago the Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs went to Queen's Hall and activated a charging station. In Queen's Hall they put an electric charging station to charge cars. That was the biggest renewable project they have done in the last nine years.

Now I heard the Ministry of Finance talk about the solar voltaic farm that is being built right now and they call it the solar voltaic Brechin Castle farm. He says it is in Couva.

Dr. Moonilal: "Why he doh fix the potholes first?"

Mr. D. Lee: I want to tell the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, BP, Shell, that solar voltaic farm that is being built is being built in Claxton Bay/Pointe-a-Pierre Mr. Deputy Speaker. Not Couva, not Couva, right.

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Depart.

Mr. Imbert: He is making trouble when I am leaving.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. D. Lee: So Mr. Deputy Speaker, they do not have a clue, they do not care about renewable energy in this country. Under their PSIP you know where they put a big Vote, you know what they do with it? Dredging the Sealot basin and they call it renewable. I will say much more in the Standing Finance Committee.

Fuel subsidy: Quickly, just tell me when I have five more minutes Mr. Deputy Speaker. Fuel subsidy—what time am I ending?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: [*Inaudible*] finish just—3.39 and change.

Mr. D. Lee: 3.39. sorry. Fuel subsidy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: 3.35.

Mr. D. Lee: 3.35. Fuel subsidy. Mr. Deputy Speaker, Mid-Year Review, June 4th, 2024 we came right here in Parliament, Standing Finance Committee, for a Mid-Year Review.

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Mr. D. Lee: I remembered that well because that was my birthday.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: We came here to ask for an additional \$2.3 billion. Out of those Heads, was Head 40. It is for the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, and under Head 40, they came and asked for an additional \$570, 900,000. Madam Speaker, \$570 million—an additional—in the Mid-Year Review.

Madam Speaker, when I was going through our books, in the yellow books, we approved that \$2.3 billion additional. We also approved that additional fuel subsidy of \$570 million and that was to pay arrears for NP and Unipet; that we came here in the Mid-Year Review.

3.30 p.m.

So I would have thought when I was looking through Head 40, Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, I would have seen that figure, that the subsidy, the fuel subsidy that the Minister talked about in his budget presentation would have seen a figure of over \$1 billion that the country would have asked and paid for fuel subsidy. Do you know what the revised figure for 2024 is, Madam Speaker? The revised figure means that the correct figure for the fuel subsidy in our country, do you know what that figure is? That figure is \$470 million.

So I am asking, we came here on June 4th for an additional \$570 million for

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fuel subsidy and it is nowhere to be found in the books. It is like the \$3 billion missing by the Auditor General. So we ask the question: How much did we really spend in fuel subsidy for 2024? Because we came here for approval for that additional \$570 million that is not showing up in the yellow books. So I ask the Minister of Finance to investigate where that fuel subsidy money went that we approved here for fuel subsidy because it is not to be found in the yellow books, Madam Speaker, and that is a grave situation.

Madam Speaker, diversification. Under diversification, under this budget statement, again, there is nothing much to talk about because there is nothing—I thought I would have heard about dry docking, I thought I would have heard about ship building, I thought I would have heard about ship repair because they took over a company from the Clico estate called CL Marine. The only thing they did with that company is “they sink the dry dock” and that dry dock is not really working to generate the kinda money.

Madam Speaker, “ah down to three minutes”. I really want to talk about my constituency in a bit before I end. I want to find out, Madam Speaker, through you, when the Minister of Education is talking, that she can come and give me comfort again for the last five years. Every year that the Minister of Education talks, she said she will be building the Anglican Primary School at Claxton Bay. Five years. I want to ask on behalf of the constituents of Pointe-a-Pierre, what happened to that Marabella ECC centre that when were demitted office in 2015, it was 95 per cent complete. Nine years, that centre had not been opened for the people of Pointe-a-Pierre.

Madam Speaker, I want to ask to the Minister of Housing something called the Housing and Village Improvement Programme. In the Minister of Finance’s

budget statement, he talked about 800 structures being built. I want to found out how the constituents of Pointe-a-Pierre could “geh one” because we do not know how to get it.

I want to ask the Minister of Sport and Community Development when the Mannie Ramjohn Stadium for the people of this country is going to be reopened, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: I want to also ask the Minister of Public Utilities, in the budget statement, there was a statement made about national water transformation plan and Claxton Bay is getting better water. Well, I spoke to the people of Claxton Bay and up to now, they are still suffering for water. So my good friend, the Minister of Public Utilities, help me, help me.

I want to find out from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, when they are going to upgrade the Claxton Bay fishing depot. I ask and I have been asking for the last four years on behalf of the people.

I want to ask the Minister of Works and Transport, not “when he gonna fix the road eh no, when he gonna fix the potholes”, because it is horrendous in our roads in Pointe-a-Pierre.

So, Madam Speaker, on behalf of the constituents of Pointe-a-Pierre, while concluding and I come to an end, his first very budget in 2015, the Minister of Finance said the Government’s style of budgets represents a radical change in the way our national budgets are presented. For the last 10 years, there has been a radical change. No longer does the national budget in October show the actual expenditure or deficit because this Minister continues to underbudget each year and give the impression that his deficit is low, only to return each mid-year to

supplement millions of dollars. No longer is the national budget showing the predicted oil and gas production as seen on Monday because this Government has broken that sector. I thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Port of Spain South.

The Minister in the Ministry of National Security (Hon. Keith Scotland SC): Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre had promised the hon. Minister of Finance to tell him a solemn promise to tell us why they lost the 2015 election.

Hon. Member: He will never tell us.

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Whilst doing that, tell us why you will lose the 2025 elections, one time? Give us one answer.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Please, please. All right.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Please. No, please.

Mr. Imbert: Lost all the elections—[*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance, Minister of Finance, I am on my legs.

Mr. Imbert: Did she not say that? Those words?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance, I am on my legs.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, Madam.

Madam Speaker: It so happened those words caught my ear, so just retract them and let us get on with it.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]—I will take a walk.

Madam Speaker: You took it back?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: I could take it back.

Madam Speaker: Excuse me. Yes?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes. I will take a walk.

Madam Speaker: No, I asked you to retract the words.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Oh, I retract whatever the word is.

Madam Speaker: Yes, great.

Hon. Members: “Nooo”, no, no.

Madam Speaker: No, no.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Well, that is the word—because we do not say the word—

Madam Speaker: Yes, I agree you do not say the word but you retract the word.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: I retract whatever obnoxious word it was.

Madam Speaker: Yes, thank you very much. And remember it has to be unreserved but I realize “ah lil hubris” is going on so we will entertain that. Minister of Finance, please, also recognize when I am on my legs. Yes. Member for Port of Spain South.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The only project that the hon. Members whilst in power ever executed as it relates to energy was the CGCL project, and that project almost crippled NGC. And on the 24th of February, 2015 on behalf of NGC, the then Minister of Finance and the Minister of Energy were written to and they were warned and Madam Speaker, in that missive, this is the

warning that they received:

An external legal opinion which was sought with respect to this matter revealed that NGC could potentially be in breach of all existing gas sales contract if it implements the priority contemplated by the Green Field Priority of Gas Supply Policy. This is due to the fact that there are currently no provisions in such GSCs which allow NGC to give a priority gas supply to any other entity or curtail supply. If implemented, there is a potential for NGC to incur significant liabilities and costs.

Those liabilities and costs ran into the billions. So this is what the policy related to energy is, from the hon. Members of the other side.

Madam Speaker, as I heard the hon. Member for Siparia roll out the intention of the hon. Members to deal with crime, the first policy that was announced was the stand-your-ground policy. That policy has been proven to be unworkable in the United States of America. It creates a scenario where violence only breeds violence and if you see what is going on in the schools in America due to this stand-your-ground policy, you will understand why it cannot work in Trinidad and Tobago.

The right to bear arms is another suggestion. That cannot be “wholesalely” adopted from a system that is alien to ours. We have a system in Trinidad and Tobago where a person desirous of a firearm will apply for an FUL and there is a process.

Additionally, that philosophy is misguided by a de facto policy from recent years gone by and all it has led to, Madam Speaker, is a proliferation of the use of legal and illegal firearms to perpetrate demonic crimes such as murder, on this country, and I reject that policy outright.

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3.40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Siparia then, as part of her initiative to curb crime, said that they will increase the courthouses in Trinidad and Tobago. Let me put the facts before you. Under a PNM Government, for the first time in this country, there is a court dedicated to civil matters, that is at Tower D, and there is a court, the Hall of Justice, dedicated wholly to criminal matters. That is the provision of courthouses. There is the O'Meara Judicial Centre; the San Fernando Supreme Court, which will be shortly fixed; the Princes Town judicial centre; the Scarborough Supreme Court, which has both the Court of Appeal and the lower courts; and, of course, the Court of Appeal in San Fernando and Trinidad. There are 17 criminal jury rooms, 12 civil hearing rooms, 18 case management conference rooms, and 45 Magistrates' Courts throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

The next proposal—and this one was stunning—it was the supply of more people to the public defenders' office. What the hon. Member for Siparia failed to tell the public is that the public defenders' office was an idea spawned by the PNM. And in March 2020, for the first time, under the rubric of Legal Aid, there was the public defenders' office created in Trinidad and Tobago. So what is the hon. Member really trying to tell you? That she is just parroting the PNM policies and trying to make it their own.

But more telling, Madam Speaker, was the boast that, if elected, they would increase judicial officers. I ask the hon. Members on the other side, during 2010 to 2015, how many judicial officers were appointed during your tenure? Let me tell you under the PNM, for the last four years, how many were appointed. Madam Speaker, 21 High Court judges and 13 masters of the High Court were appointed in a four-year period. That is a Government working in the judicial system to provide

the administration of justice with judges and masters. I have not gone to the magistrates who have been appointed, but that is what we do as a PNM Government.

Finally, Madam Speaker, I heard in this hallowed hall the concept of “lighting them up”. Madam Speaker, for a moment, I thought I was transported and beamed up to some institution on George Street where they imbibe liquor, where they imbibe spirits. “Light them up”, that does not belong in this place. And for the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre to say he supports that policy, all it tells you, Madam Speaker, is that the blind is leading the blind across there.

I will now try to address and deal soberly with what is going on in this country and the mandate that we have. Madam Speaker, in preparing for this debate, I internalize paragraph 3 of page 92 of the budget presentation by the hon. Minister of Finance. This is what we said at paragraph 3:

“Madam Speaker, notwithstanding all the good things we have to report and feel good about, it goes without saying that one of the areas of greatest intransigent difficulty which remains and continues to resist our best efforts...violent behaviour, crime and criminality, largely highlighted by violent murder involving the use of...firearms.”

I would now want to soberly and hopefully, objectively, address this issue. The Government will not turn a blind eye to the increasing reality, as outlined in that paragraph, and the scourge of criminality in Trinidad and Tobago. As a citizen, and every citizen of this country, we live in this society and we are entitled to have a reasonably peaceful and safe existence, and enjoy our rights. As a responsible Government, Madam Speaker, we will not stand idly by and allow crime to erode

the quality of our lives and to destroy the values that we hold dear and which represent the characteristics of us as a nation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: We strive towards a developed nation's status and, Madam Speaker, we are determined to repel the attempts by the minority criminal elements to destabilize this country and damage our image, both here and abroad. The only way we can do this, Madam Speaker, is by an all-country approach. Each Member of this society has to partner with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in order to eradicate and eliminate this spectrum. And I call upon the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago to partner with us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: The Government acknowledges the cost associated with criminal activities and we, therefore, have put the resources into the Ministry of National Security to the tune of \$6.113 billion. The gravest concern that we have, Madam Speaker, is that it seems that they are hell-bent on eroding our core structures.

This Government understands some of the root causes of crime, and that is why, apart from the hard approach, we have taken a parallel approach because we are balanced as a Government. Simple minds may not understand that but as a Government, we understand that crime is multifaceted and therefore, requires a multifaceted approach. Therefore, I would like, Madam Speaker, to address what we have done as it relates to enhanced social policies, community development initiatives and education economic opportunities, and it is hoped that this will alleviate some of the underlining causes of crime.

I would like to put on record, Madam Speaker, that the social sector has born no significant decrease, even during the years of COVID, because the Government recognizes its social responsibility and underpinnings that exist for crime to blossom.

Let me deal with the measures moving forward for fiscal 2025. The Ministry of National Security has been allocated \$6.113 billion and therefore, we will utilize, Mr. Hinds, myself—the hon. Member for Laventille West—will utilize these resources to implement proactive and effective policing methods and improve resource-sharing, including that in technology. We will do that in terms of actual policing. Madam Speaker, the Ministry will attempt to increase the number of police officers, strengthen the criminal justice system, expand the use of technology and implement various social programmes throughout fiscal 2025.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Before we move, Madam Speaker, we must look at infrastructure, and there is an aggressive plan to improve the police stations and buildings in Trinidad and Tobago. To that end, over 13 police stations, between now and 2025, will receive refurbishing works. These stations include: Brasso Seco; San Rafael; Arouca; Chaguanas; Morvant; St. James; South Oropouche; Santa Cruz; Fyzabad; Penal; Hot Point facility, Chaguaramas; La Horquetta; and Four Roads Police Station, to name a few.

3.50 p.m.

Madam Speaker, apart from that there will be an upgrade of the Police Administration Building in San Fernando, that is in progress and it will continue in fiscal 2025. The establishment of a divisional property room in the constituency of Siparia will also help those officers to properly deal with case management and the

storage of their property. There will be a construction of new dormitories at the Police Training Academy, phase one is in place, and phase two will be the frame and foundation work. There will be refurbishment works at the Mounted Branch and Canine Unit, and that is in progress.

In addition to the ongoing works at these police stations mentioned, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service will invest in the further upgrade of some infrastructural work, and these programmes will include works on the Maloney, Fyzabad, Maracas, and Rio Claro police stations. In other words, Madam Speaker, we are trying to create a healthful environment for the police officers, so that when they go to work they can feel more comfortable and thereby perform to the best of their abilities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: The Police Administration Building in Port of Spain will receive an upgrade both physically and in the electrical works. There will be an upgrade—Madam Speaker, I heard the hon. Member for Siparia speak about more cells, more cells is not the answer. We would like to create a situation where there is a need for less cells, and that is what we are trying to do with the social programme.

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Madam Speaker, some people will go to the cell in Double Palm—

Hon. Members: “Aaahhh”!

Hon. K. Scotland SC:—I ask them to leave me alone.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Upgrade of the detention cells at the police station—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Where Fitzgerald? Madam, the upgrade—

Madam Speaker: One minute, one minute. So, if we could have some order and return to the debate now, please. Member for Port of Spain South.

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker, for your protection. The upgrade of the detention cells at police stations, in keeping with Trinidad and Tobago's commitment to human rights and equity, part of our *Vision 2030* and our *National Development Strategy*, the Ministry of National Security will upgrade detention cells at 20 locations throughout Trinidad and Tobago in fiscal 2025. The refurbishment works will continue at the Mounted Branch and Canine Unit. And, Madam Speaker, a more delicate project, during fiscal 2025 there will be construction and installation of aeration treatment units at all major police stations in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: And not that Tobago will be left out, in Tobago, improvements will be undertaken at the police stations and buildings in Tobago that will accommodate more officers, and that will be deployed throughout. Madam Speaker, there is a station at the top of the hill going into Castara. Although, Madam Speaker, it is wooden floors and that station, all it needs is a little upgrade and it will be a world-class facility, although coming from the 20th Century into the 21st Century.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: The Old Grange Police Station, which was vacated following the construction of a new station, will be upgraded and re-purposed to facilitate additional police quarters for officers on the island of Tobago. Madam

Speaker, apart from the stations, because we do not want the police officers to remain in the stations, we want them to be out there. But to be out there, apart from foot patrols, we will have mobile patrols, and therefore, we understand that vehicles and the maintenance of police vehicles is critical to the police's ability to respond to criminal activity in Trinidad and Tobago.

To that end, the Ministry will introduce a state-of-the-art vehicle maintenance facility to improve vehicle maintenance and reliability of its fleet of over 2,112 vehicles. This ought to maximize the return on our investment, and this will be in conjunction with VMCOTT. Madam Speaker, this initiative is expected to be more cost-effective and increase the availability of vehicles for the police to undertake public service in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: We propose in 2025, to move to phase two of the police station construction programme which will see facilities, albeit the creation of the new Manzanilla and Matura Police Station. We have not forgotten the coastal areas in Trinidad and Tobago, and the first phase of this project will be initiated through UDeCOTT. Madam Speaker, the relocation of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service Administration Support Centre, Trinidad House, is to be hopefully completed in 2025, the first quarter. The Santa Cruz police complex is supposed to be implemented on a 1.6-acre of land site, and that, Madam Speaker, is in its embryonic stages.

There will be a new SRP headquarters that will cater for young SRPs and this initiative will provide an efficient management of the administrative matters as it relate to Special Reserve Police Officers. It will also provide recreational and sports facilities for these officers. There will be the establishment of a police

training academy in Cumuto and, Madam Speaker, this will help to expand the training facilities for police officers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Madam Speaker, we also wish to have infrastructural upgrades at the Canine Unit as it expands into Tobago. And there will be infrastructural work at the St. Madeleine Police Station and this work will—well it started in 2024 but we hope that it will be completed in 2025. I now move to the area of technology.

Madam Speaker, the criminal element is becoming more tech-savvy, the police service must keep up with that. And at the Ministry of National Security, we recognize that. The criminals, they live in a technological world, and in crime fighting, the Government is aware, keenly aware, that it must ensure that all crime-fighting agencies are equipped and have access to new technology and stay abreast of what is going on. In addition to the technological upgrade, the information and technological plan for fiscal 2025 is as follows:

- The acquisition of document scanners;
- the purchase of multi-functioning photocopiers for various divisions;
- the purchase of equipment for direct data entry;
- the purchase of fit-for-purpose computer systems;
- the purchase of network switches and routers;
- the acquisition of APC power supply and PDUs;
- the acquisition of more speed guns;
- acquisition of e-ticketing machines and accessories; and
- the purchase of liners and Red Hat software for the AFIS fingerprint system.

4.00 p.m.

- Madam Speaker, what this will do, it will take and it will provide the police service with modern technology that will enable them to do their work in a more timeous fashion. When we have e-ticketing, when we have fingerprinting, when people go to get their certificate of character, they can get it in a day, instead of having to wait. If it is we need information on someone who is a suspect, the police will be able, on the spot, to tap into a database and see who is who in Trinidad and Tobago.
- Then, we will look at the purchase of body-worn cameras, and we say that body-worn cameras is something that will redound to the benefit of all. It will affirm proper police behaviour whilst protecting police officers from unwarranted complaints, including the use of excessive force, and we are adamant and resolute that the body-worn cameras will become part of the normal wear for police officers, particularly on exercises that engage the public. The Government fully understands that the future of police and law enforcement lies in its ability to adapt and adjust to new technologies, and that is why we have this investment.
- Madam Speaker, there will be the establishment of a special anti-crime operation unit, and the focus of this unit will be intelligence-gathering and strategies aimed at extinguishing new and emerging crimes. This unit will assume the responsibility for eliminating and disrupting home and business place invasions.
- Madam Speaker, moreover, and I am told that this unit, particularly the one relative to responding to home and business place invasion, is up and running, and we would like to have a time within which they will respond

- throughout the country to reports of home invasion and business place invasion. What that will do; it will eliminate or it will eradicate and it will reduce home invasions. It will also, Madam Speaker, deal with the phenomenon, it has morphed now into extortion, but we know it as taxing. But when we have that rapid response, Madam Speaker, it can also help reduce that phenomenon of taxing, so when people come out and work hard and sell their fish and chips or their wings and chips, they do not have to pay people a percentage of their hard-earned money.
- There is also the issue of training and development, and—Madam Speaker, I am just watching my time—that is integral to building capacity for the police service. Madam Speaker, we are now in the process of acquiring 2,000 new police vehicles to increase and augment the fleet. Madam Speaker, what this will mean is it will facilitate an increased presence of the police officers on the road mobile, and it will also facilitate faster responses to the citizens' request for service in Trinidad and Tobago. All we ask is that the officers to whom those vehicles are assigned and will be using, to treat them in a husband-like manner.
 - The purchase of equipment for the police service, that will continue, Madam Speaker, and it will include now much-needed upgrades to service firearms, bulletproof vests, state-of-the-art tools for intelligence, investigations, operations and administration.
 - The development of a modern computer system for the police service is also in train, Madam Speaker, and the police will continue the modernization of its ICT systems and infrastructure, with investments in

the installation of power and cooling systems, network and cybersecurity upgrades and the purchase of equipment and other related devices. But Madam Speaker, here is the nub. We will train persons to use these upgraded items, so that it can be approved, because it makes no sense that you have modern equipment and you cannot utilize them properly.

- Madam Speaker, the upgrade of the new police surveillance and training support system and the upgrade of the CCTV system will also be part and parcel of the plan. What this will do, it will be part of an increased reliance on CCTV coverage as an integral item of realtime policing, and what it will do with this simultaneous expansion of the CCTV network nationwide and the increase in police vehicles on the road and police officers on the road, we intend to make a dent in crime.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: For fiscal 2025, Madam Speaker, two interceptor vessels for the TTPS Coastal and Riverine Unit is expected, and that will assist in our porous borders being guarded. And we look forward to that, because now more than ever we recognize that our borders need supervision and the only way we can do it is by putting bodies on the road, putting vessels in the water and trying our best to curtail illegal needed activities relative to our porous borders.

I have already spoken of the upgrade in the canine fleet. There is now in train the establishment of a vetted unit. In May, the Ministry of National Security, under the hon. Fitzgerald Hinds, signed an agreement with the drug—

Madam Speaker: Member, remember you refer either by portfolio—

Hon. K. Scotland SC: The Minister of National Security.

Madam Speaker: Yes, sure.

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Thank you Madam Speaker, signed an MOU with the United States Government to establish a vetted unit in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. This unit will assist, and is dedicated to counter-narcotic investigations and operations. There will be a sharp focus on intelligence gathering to disrupt and dismantle and prosecute local and international drug trafficking organizations. Traffickers, beware.

Madam Speaker, that being said, that being said, for all these plans that we have outlined, as have been discussed with the hon. Minister of National Security, ad nauseam, all these resources and plans will come to naught if the police officers do not go out on the field and do their work.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: So we can buy all—we could have all the plans, buy all the vehicles, have all the new plans, all the new CCTV and all the technology, if the police officers do not go out on the field day and night, what will come of the plans?

So, to this end I want to announce that in all 10 divisions in Trinidad and Tobago, all 10 divisions, we have established a joint task force between the police and the defence force. Go outside now and see them. They will be there.

4.10 p.m.

And, Madam Speaker, this task force will operate until Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: You will see them in Fyzabad, you will see them in Naparima—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC:—you will see them in Couva. Well, if they go Couva North.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Madam Speaker, I want to say something. The officers in Couva North are bilingual—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: They “habla espanol”. So, we will be able to understand what is going on in Couva North, and they will act accordingly. Madam Speaker, and they will also deal with traffic matters in Couva North, and traffic—traffic matters in Couva North. Madam Speaker, we are resolute that this will work, because we are dealing with the spectra—Madam Speaker, I do seek your—I am hearing a Venezuelan intake that is really affecting me.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: I thought you were doing so far so good, rising above all the humdrum that you yourself were creating. I think you are capable of rising above it. Continue.

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker. *Muchas gracias*. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Just remember the language of this Parliament is English.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Madam Speaker, we are resolute that this type of joint patrol becomes the norm. It will be sustained until. The police and the army cannot be everywhere all the time, but we will try to have them out there every single day, every single night trying to make our citizens safe, our streets safe and the country safe. And this is our commitment to Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Apart from this, the Government again recognizes that crime is multifaceted, and we have introduced social programmes that are aimed at reducing criminal, and gang violence in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, in that regard, the Ministry of National Security has applied the science and statistics to its plans and operation. We have noticed with concern the increasing involvement of young people in criminal activity, both as perpetrators and as victims. And this holds through particularly in homicides. The experts called it the juvenilization of homicide. One study revealed in 2000 or from 2000-2006, that the victims of homicidal crimes were predominantly men between the ages of 15 and 24, whilst another highlighted the age group between 15 and 34 accounted for 64.8 per cent of murders in the country.

Madam Speaker, that must be of concern to all right-thinking citizens in Trinidad and Tobago. Based on the data, 61 per cent of detected offenders fall within the range of ages of 15 to 29 years old, with 41 per cent of them being 20 and 24 years old. This Townsend study of 2009, shows us that there is an urgent need to penetrate the hearts and souls of our young people in Trinidad and Tobago. We understand that this Townsend study revealed, that it is generated, this phenomenon was generated by gang related activity and homicide. That is unacceptable. And here is the plan that I will roll out to deal with it. The establishment of the Police Youth Club facilities throughout Trinidad and Tobago. St. James, Bagatelle, Carenage, Patna, Windy Hill, Indian Walk, Charlotteville, Pleasantville, among others. This will help to channel the young people and set good examples of discipline for them.

The establishment of the community outreach programme is another key

strategy where the police officers in tandem with the community police, will go into the community and gain the confidence and trust of the community, and solve community issues on a community level. That could only redound to the benefit of the society, because the community will therefore have more faith in the police, and that will build confidence in the police.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Madam Speaker, I therefore say to the police officers, protect and serve. Honour your oath, as the vast majority of you do. Protect and serve, and I implore them, do not do anything that will bring the service into disrepute.

In continuing this approach, Madam Speaker, the Government in its task, in its quest to lure young people from falling prey to criminal activities, has other educational plans. But I pause here, to remind this country that since its inception, this Government, as far as I know, from the beginning of its life to republican status, to now, has always made available to young people from primary to secondary to tertiary, an education option and it is free. But we understand that there are challenges which are dynamic and we have to go outside the norm, and we have done so, and that is the Project Building Blocks schematic that is introduced as a crime management strategy, and it will entail farming projects, basic computer literacy, financial management and training, life skills training and community mediation that will be important. Madam Speaker, the Prison Youth Club is also a very critical—

Madam Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes of ordinary time left. You are entitled to 10 more minutes of additional time, if you wish.

Hon. K. Scotland SC: I wish, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Please proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker, very kindly. Madam Speaker, apart from what I have just enunciated, this Government has come to this Parliament every, every week with a legislative plan aimed at improving the criminal justice system. I would only mention some of the legislative agenda that was done by, and prosecuted by this Government: the Trespass (Amdt.) Act, 2019, although trespass may seem trivial, it may lead to home invasions and praedial larceny; the Bail (Amdt.) Bill that denied bail to repeat offenders; the Firearms (Amdt.) Act, 2019, that created the offence of trafficking in firearms; the Sexual Offences (Amdt.) Act, which dealt with the register, that you will have sex predators registered once they are convicted; the Miscellaneous Provisions (Law Enforcement Officers) Act, which increased the penalties related to certain crimes and convictions; the Miscellaneous Provisions (Proceeds of Crime and Central Bank) Act, 2019; AJIPA; the Administration of Justice (Electronic Monitoring) (Amdt.) Act, which, Madam Speaker, was mentioned by the hon. Member for Siparia, that is a PNM policy, obviously.

4.20 p.m.

And more importantly, this particular legislation keeps track of persons on bail and particularly, it can be used in cases where persons are charged with domestic violence.

Madam Speaker, I just want to touch on the last one, which I think is the most important one, Act 11 of 2024, the Bail (Amdt.) Act. In relation to those persons specifically charged with murder, this new amendment shifts the burden of proof onto the person to show that in exceptional circumstances they ought to be

granted bail. And more importantly, we want to advise the citizens, Madam Speaker, that as it relates to persons charged with serious firearm offences, it also shifts the burden.

We intend, Madam Speaker, to do a training with the police officers that will alert them and sensitize them to these legislative changes that will allow the police prosecutors and the police informants in cases to make representation to the prosecutor as it relates to bail and objecting to bail, and more importantly, as it relates to sentencing. We understand the five principles of sentencing as enunciated with *R v Benjamin* but at this time, in the life of this country, we want to concentrate on three principles: That of deterring the actual offender, deterring like-minded offenders and also, the punitive or the penal aspect. We have not forgotten the rehabilitative but we think that the time has come in Trinidad and Tobago where we must be more robust in our approach to sentencing in Trinidad and Tobago for serious offences, particularly offences related to firearms. Madam Speaker, in my last 10 minutes, I want to deal with constituency issues.

Firstly, I want to thank the wonderful and unmatched people of Port of Spain South for giving me this opportunity, and we understand that the reduction of crime, I want to say to them, cannot be done by the Government alone, but we need your participation. And the plan in Port of Spain South is to intervene from the cradle to adolescence to adulthood, and how do we do that? Madam Speaker, in the next coming months, we will outfit four homework centres with smart boards, laptops, headphones. They would have their Wi-Fi. These centres are located in Straker Village, Mango Rose. We will also go Desperlie Crescent and at the end, Power Stars.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: If you know Port of Spain South, it touches the four cardinal points of the constituency.

And, Madam Speaker, we also—it is with mountainous, astronomic pride that I want to announce the building of the Piccadilly Primary School that has commenced as of last week. It will be completed within the next four months and it will house 250 students, touching the constituency from Foster Quevedo to Block 8, Africa and St. Paul Street.

Madam Speaker, as I touch Port of Spain South, the Government recognizes that—and the young people, the Government recognizes that this generation, they are simply different, in a good way, but they are different. They think differently. They act differently. They learn differently. They socialize differently. Madam Speaker, they are with themselves, together, and they are still texting each other whilst they are next to each other. That is the way this generation socializes, and the Government is committed to harnessing the talents of the young people. That is why the hon. Prime Minister, in his wisdom, created, in 2000, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service.

And, Madam Speaker, I am pleased to announce that last week, the Minister in that Ministry and I, we went and we commissioned the new Basilon Street Youth Facility.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: “Ah doh” want to be boastful and call figures—\$18 million—but it is costing us 8,000 square feet, and we are getting with that, Madam Speaker, an agricultural shade house.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: That centre will create training in technology, vocation,

welding, carpentry, barbering, literacy and numeracy. That centre, Madam Speaker, is for the young people of the entire constituency of Port of Spain South to come. And I want everyone in Port of Spain South to know that we would have the entire constituency use that facility. So I set a challenge now. I set a challenge. No more borderline.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Give the youths a chance. Let them be able to benefit from this facility. I say to those adults, give your children the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: No more borderline. Let their success story be your success story. Where you have failed, they will succeed and go beyond. And I want to issue a cautionary tale. For those who are hell-bent on coming into the constituency of Port of Spain South and trying to stir up unsavoury activities, I know who you are and “ah set like ah mapipire”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Do not mess with our young people. Give them a chance. Do not think I do not know what is going on. Give the young people in Port of Spain South a chance to blossom and fulfil their potential.

Madam Speaker, apart from that, we have a tourist attraction. Minister of Public Utilities, we went up to the hills outside of Dan Kelly up in John John. We changed the name of the tanks from the Picton tanks to the Morris Marshall tanks.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: But more importantly, Madam Speaker, the view from up there is simply breathtaking. We want to create a facility that people can come and

have picnics and enjoy the view and enjoy the culinary delights up at John John. And I want to invite the Minister—Minister, I will be approaching you shortly, so that we can have the swings and the parks developed so that that can happen.

In terms of generating economic activity, the fish market in Sea Lots, Madam Speaker, that will be coming on board. We are now going out for RFPs and that project, Madam Speaker, will benefit—it is the Port of Spain Wholesale Market in Sea Lots, in Production Avenue. But for the whole of Sea Lots, no more borderline, Madam Speaker. We want Pioneer Drive—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC:—we want Katanga, we want Production Avenue to benefit from that. So for those who are trying to give us a plan, we say, “Sit in Opposition and learn. Learn from us.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: We are here to teach you. As we approach the second day in the celebration of Navaratri, Madam Speaker, it is a very holy time in Trinidad and Tobago—Navaratri, it is a holy time in Trinidad and Tobago, and it is, Madam Speaker, it is an acknowledgement of light over darkness.

We call upon the protection, Madam Speaker, of Mother Lakshmi in this country that will stamp out the scourge of darkness that tries to envelop us. We say that if we all come together and put our hands together to the wheel, we are conquerors, Madam Speaker. We are conquerors from V.S. Naipaul’s unmatched wit; from Eric Williams, Madam Speaker, it was a brain that was unmatched in his time and beyond. We are led by some—by a leader who has been honoured by the most prestigious universities in the world. So that if you put proper title in his name, when you call him doctor, you have to call it twice. We are from a line of

world conquerors and we intend to continue that line, and we will conquer this challenge that is facing us in Trinidad and Tobago today.

So as we approach Navaratri at this time, I say to Trinidad and Tobago, in the way that I have learned, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: “Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Scotland SC: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Chaguanas West.

Hon. Member: This is a real lawyer now.

Mr. Dinesh Rambally (*Chaguanas West*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to join this crucial debate, which impacts the lives and livelihoods of every citizen of our nation. Madam Speaker, it has been probably some—maybe more than a year that I have last spoken in this Parliament—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Welcome.

Mr. D. Rambally:—and it is good to be back.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

4.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, let me start off first of all with one of the concluding points or contemporary topics that the last speaker spoke of, the Member for Port of Spain South, and we are indeed in a very holy period, the Hindu community observing Navratri. So I too would want to join in, of course, sending greetings to the Hindu community. It is a very auspicious period of time, today being the second of this

period that has started, the second day of a nine-day worship. And this is what commences, essentially, the Divali season. So technically, Madam Speaker, Divali has really started with this Navratri festival, and will conclude with two days after what is formally celebrated as Divali in Trinidad and Tobago. So I join with my friend, and I appreciate that that has been raised in this House.

Madam Speaker, I also want to take this opportunity—I start off, you know, on a positive note that it is also a matter—I know my learned friend and my colleague on the other side, Member for Port of Spain South and Minister in the Ministry of National Security, he would have spoken about giving the youths a chance. As I speak, Madam Speaker, I would like to extend heartiest congratulations to the Trinidad and Tobago robotics team, which participated in the first global competition in Athens, Greece.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: And as I am addressing the Chamber now, this House, and by extension, the population, they are actually arriving at Piarco International Airport at this point in time. Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, along with its alliance countries, placed third overall in a competition, which included 193 countries.

The competition stressed the importance of collaboration and mutual support in the face of obvious differences in approach and strategy. Madam Speaker, cooperation was a key element of the competition. The students on this team, while representing Trinidad and Tobago, they happened to be all students of Presentation College, Chaguanas—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally:—my alma mater, and of course, a school, which is in my constituency, Chaguanas West. And I see the Minister of Energy and Energy

Industries seems to be somehow irked by that, but Madam Speaker, the point is, our boys have done tremendously well over the last few months. They engaged in intense preparation, and I want to recognize their diligence, the professionalism and the endurance they demonstrated throughout the competition and whilst they have made representations, and I am glad that it did catch the national media, I also want to support their call to make robotics a sport in Trinidad and Tobago, as it has already been so recognized in some countries across the world. That is the significance of the competition being held in Athens, Greece, the birthplace of the Olympics.

So Madam Speaker, I thought I would start with that, simply because these youths, these young gentlemen, they have shown that they are able to partner at an international level with alliance countries, and they have placed third out of 193 on the international stage.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: I think the next generation, they are leading the way in showing us what we need to do to be able to compete globally. So Madam Speaker, as I start and get into the budget, first allow me to thank my constituents of Chaguanas West, whom I will continue to serve with respect and humility. The people of Chaguanas West have placed their trust in me, and they continue to do so. I am their voice in this Chamber, and I will not allow that trust, Madam Speaker, to be betrayed by inaction or complacency. Madam Speaker, when I became a parliamentarian, I took an oath to faithfully serve all the peoples of the country with honesty and integrity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, that is an oath I take very seriously. And I

want to make it abundantly clear that no man or no woman—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally:—Madam Speaker, will ever get me to compromise on my principles and my sense of duty to my community and my country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, our nation deserves sober leadership—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally:—from all the Members of this hon. House.

Mr. Gonzales: Agree.

Mr. D. Rambally: Leadership that puts the people of Trinidad and Tobago—

Mr. Gonzales: First.

Mr. D. Rambally:—before their own partisan political interests—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally:—that listens to the cries of those who are marginalized, and that takes decisive action to bring about meaningful solutions to the unprecedented problems our country presently faces.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, the people of this country are fed up with the bickering—

Mr. Gonzales: Oh yes.

Mr. D. Rambally:—the cheap political pandering and the failure of the political class to listen to their concerns. It is with this commitment to put our country first, Madam Speaker, that I now turn my attention to the matter at hand that we are dealing with here today.

Madam Speaker, by every metric—and I want to be fair to the speaker

before me, Member for Port of Spain South, Minister in the Ministry of National Security, that I heard him talk about, you know, a joint task force, and whilst it is something that is welcomed, because we have been asking for greater police presence, and we have been asking for greater resources to be disseminated, to trickle down in all of the avenues and all of the rural areas, likewise throughout Trinidad and Tobago, I want to ask him, given his contribution, I was wondering if he was speaking about Trinidad and Tobago. And I also wanted to tease him a little bit and ask him if any JTF that he was speaking about, whether he himself will be accompanying them and taking some of them to “Pene/Debal”. Because “Pene/Debal”, you know, riding down there in a “cocoa Benz” and, you know, with coal pot and breadfruit and whatever, it all sounds nice and we could say things, and if talk and exhortations could have really solved crime—

Hon. Member: Yes, yes.

Mr. D. Rambally:—yes, I give a thumbs up to the Member for Port of Spain South, but that is not what it takes, Madam Speaker. And by every metric, Trinidad and Tobago is currently facing a national security crisis. That is what the people of Trinidad and Tobago are facing. And like all of my constituents of Chaguanas West, and I am sure all citizens of our nation, I was hoping that the Minister of Finance in his budget, and also the Member for Port of Spain South when he spoke, that they would have had a clear and strategic blueprint for tackling the rampant scourge of violent crime affecting Trinidad and Tobago. Sadly, Madam Speaker, that was not the case. So very respectfully, with the greatest respect to my friends, we have not seen and we certainly have not heard that in the budget.

Madam Speaker, the depressing cycle of violence continues to spin out of

control across our nation. But what is even more depressing is the now nine-year cycle of banal budget statements of this Government, which have all failed to improve the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Unfortunately, Madam Speaker, Budget 2025 is a continuation of the same failed policies from this Government, coupled with a deficit—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally:—and coupled with a deficit, not in the economic sense, but coupled with the deficit of vision and solutions to deal with the root causes of our escalating security concerns.

Sadly, Madam Speaker, Budget 2025 will not make any of our citizens feel any safer and any more secure. Budget 2025 should instead make this Government feel deeply ashamed and embarrassed. And why do I say that, Madam Speaker? I am talking really about a nation in crisis. Madam Speaker, there is a saying that what can be measured, can be improved. So when we hear a lot of the talk and the fluff coming from the other side, what measurables—? Member for Naparima is here, he always asks, “What are you citing?” Your figures, your statistics, where are they? What are your measurable by which you are saying that you are progressing, whether it be fighting crime, or any other issue that we have to tackle in this country?

4.40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, before we can make our citizens feel safe, we need to understand the full extent of the problem facing us. Let me just provide some context on the gravity of the situation as of October 2024.

Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has witnessed a disturbing trend of high murder rates over the past five years. The overall number of homicides has

consistently exceeded 400 annually, with 2023 recording the highest murder toll in our history, with 600-plus murders. Let us contrast that, Madam Speaker, that sky-high homicide rate, with the expenditure of the Ministry of National Security for the past five years.

The Ministry of National Security has spent on average \$5.941 billion each year for the past five years. That is almost \$25 billion in the last five years alone. Yet, Madam Speaker, despite this excessive spending, never before have there been more bloodshed in our nation. Madam Speaker, the reliable website World Population Review, which measures data across the world, says, and I quote:

“Trinidad and Tobago has the seventh-highest crime rate in the world... Trinidad and Tobago’s government faces several challenges in its effect to reduce crime, such as bureaucratic resistance to change, the destructive influence of gangs, drugs, economic recession, and an overburdened legal system.”

Madam Speaker, that is the World Population Review. In case, Madam Speaker, anyone was wondering, some of the other countries on that list include Venezuela, Papua New Guinea, Afghanistan, Haiti, Syria and Honduras. Madam Speaker, murders are only part of the story and according to the official TTPS data, figures for all crimes are appallingly high. Robberies, sexual offenses, larceny of motor vehicles, possession of illegal firearms, home invasions are all on the increase and clearly, Madam Speaker, simply throwing money at the Ministry of National Security has done very little to make our nation secure. A management issue, Madam Speaker, not a resource issue, and that is something that I want to get into. The fundamental question we must all ask ourselves, Madam Speaker, is: Are these moneys being spent wisely?

The problem, Madam Speaker, with the Government, is not an absence of money, it is an absence of proper management, the absence of proper management of resources. Poor management is what is taking place, Madam Speaker. Associations representing police officers, prison officers and fire officers have consistently raised alarm over the inefficiencies in their funding.

So, Madam Speaker, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, the first line of defence in our fight against crime, continues to face critical shortages in basic equipment. Officers have reported the lack of bulletproof vests, and in some instances, where they have access to the bulletproof vests, they are now complaining about it having expired because they also carry an expiry date. They are even, you know, having recycled bulletproof vests from retired officers due to the unavailability of new body armour. Fire Officers are also complaining of shortages of basic firefighting equipment, safety equipment.

So, Madam Speaker, it is a matter of life and death, and how can we ask—I say, ask this question now? I make the statement in direct contrast to that of Member for Port of Spain South. How can we ask these officers to put their lives on the line every day when they do not even have the basic protective gear required to perform their duties safely, Madam Speaker.

Further, Madam Speaker, there are widespread shortages in stationery. Up till now, we still have that problem; office supplies, uniforms and even toiletries. These basic operational necessities are lacking across various units. So I trust when we hear that there is a roll out of the joint task force that they are given what they need to go throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, as acting ASP Gideon Dixon, head of the TTPS Social Welfare Association, pointed out, the safety of our frontline officers is being compromised, Madam Speaker. How can we expect to confront a crime pandemic when our officers are severely under-resourced? So, Madam Speaker, we are facing a crisis not only on the front lines, but also within our prison and fire services.

The deteriorating infrastructure of our prison system hampers the ability of officers to perform their duties effectively, undermining efforts at both rehabilitation and security. And today, let me remind this House, Madam Speaker, that we are not just failing in crime prevention but also in handling crime on the back end. If we cannot provide our prison officers with the tools and infrastructure needed, how can we expect them to deal with the growing population of offenders, much less the rehabilitation necessary to reduce recidivism? So Madam Speaker, that is in relation to prison officers.

The fire officers and the Fire Services Association led by Mr. Guy has expressed similar concerns, and he has effectively said that our fire stations continue to operate with ageing appliances, and officers are being forced to work with inadequate personal protective equipment, the PPEs. So, Madam Speaker, the protective services cannot be treated like the general public service. We are asking these officers to face rising criminality with one hand tied behind their backs. We are experiencing an epidemic of violence, yet when we look at this budget, the Government is clearly showing that it intends to continue to manage these critical agencies in a manner, which is not prioritizing the resources and not giving the sufficient resources in the instances with the equipment and the infrastructure that these essential services need the most.

Madam Speaker, the need for criminal justice reform. We cannot come to the House and engage in this debate, Madam Speaker, year after year for the sake of it, and not really address what needs to be done to reduce crime in our country. So over the last, Madam Speaker, nine years, what we have all been seeing—the country—is that, this Government is engaging in a recurring exercise in treating with providing short-term reactive measures and clearly, that is not enough.

Mr. Charles: Short man problems.

Mr. D. Rambally: Right. Somebody told me short man problems, right. That is why we probably had a budget of five hours 12 minutes trying to compensate for something that is missing.

Mr. Charles: Efficiency.

Mr. D. Rambally: But, Madam Speaker, the old people, the common parlance is that you cannot expect to repeat the same thing over and over, do the same thing over and over, and expect different results, and that is what we are seeing. So I say, Madam Speaker, to truly make our country safer, we need comprehensive criminal justice reform and focus on long-term solutions that address the root causes of crime. I am not saying that there has not been any measures implemented whatsoever. I am saying that if the pendulum has swung in one direction to the extreme, we have to treat with it in a manner which is also going to counter when that swing reverses on us, and that is where we are in this country. If the levels of criminality has gone in a direction, which is totally runaway, we have to counter that with immediate measures, medium-term measures, long-term measures, and your budget must show that the immediate measures, and that is the infrastructure that I have spoken about, they are available for the officers, the frontline officers, to fight crime.

We must see the medium-term measures being funded, and we have to have a proper discussion, hence, in the last budget debate we had here, Madam Speaker, I was clear in my call that we, as Members in this House, we have to put our heads together, and we have to come together—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally:—and we have to do our job in the interest of the nation, in the interest of the people and that is where we can start talking about what we can talk about, medium and long-term measures, what are the necessary things we should start implementing through our schools and other institutions, our churches, our temples, our masjids.

4.50 p.m.

So, Madam Speaker, our criminal justice reform is in urgent need of modernization. The current backlog in the courts is staggering, with cases often taking years to resolve. I want to say that to the credit of Member for San Fernando West, that we would have heard of instances of the roll outs, of where you would see some increase in the number of courts, you would have seen the increase—giving the necessary resources—it is not a perfect cut, but giving some of the necessary resources to the Judiciary, so that they were able—you know, to have the increase in the number of judicial officers, judges, masters, et cetera. But that is not all.

We have to see year after year—we hear the Chief Justice at the beginning of the opening of the law term, when he says that—you know, they still have constraints, which they are hampered with, and they have to manage in system—we hear different personnel—the DPP in some instances also talking about the inadequacy of staffing and what is happening in the DPP's office. So all of these

things, Madam Speaker, we have to take into account as to what would lead to the backlog in the cases that are before the courts, why they are taking years to resolve.

Somebody—I think I saw an article, if not earlier this week, Madam Speaker, it would have been late last week, and there were concerns being raised with respect to the Forensic Science Center, and why the autopsy, in a particular instance, somebody having been unfortunately murdered and the autopsy had to take place—why is it, it was not being done at the same time? Well, I would appreciate, Madam Speaker, from where I stand, that it may not be, that as soon as somebody is shot that you would have an autopsy done. That the pathologists are there waiting to perform that autopsy. But what I would expect is that you would have resources channeled in such a way, that you would have this coincidence of the police officers who are required to escort this body to the Forensic Science Centre, meeting with that of the pathologist being present. Also the coincidence of the documents that are required. So you have the paper work, you have the resources, ensuring that the body gets there on time, and when the body gets there on time, you actually have the pathologist present to do the actual autopsy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: And, Madam Speaker, that is the biggest problem that they are facing. The biggest problem is that we are spending money, but we are not really developing the systems. So you will see that—yes you have pathologists waiting in the lab, but the bodies are not getting there on time, or some of them are not getting there on time. These are things really should be yesteryear scenarios, not something in 2024. And that is where we have to look at it. I certainly appreciate, Madam Speaker, being involved in another place that, if these reports are not done properly, these autopsy reports, what happens? Then you will find that the trials—

you know, you take—you prosecute offenders for those who are accused of committing the crime and halfway through the trial falls through, because the reports—you know, somehow cannot stand up to the scrutiny of cross-examination by defence attorneys, for one reason or the other.

So, Madam Speaker, as of April 2023, there were almost 2,000 criminal indictment spending, and this comes from a Joint Select Committee on National Security. The case clearance in our courts remains abysmally low, leading to overcrowded prisons and a justice system that fails to deliver timely outcomes. And Madam Speaker, we all know justice delayed is justice denied. And this failure to process the cases, only serves to swiftly erode public trust in the system and embolden the criminals.

We need, Madam Speaker, to invest in judicial efficiency by expanding the number of courts, even further, appointing even more judges to deal with the backlog, because that is what we have, given the present cadre that we have, it is not sufficient. So we have to see, Madam Speaker, how we deal with some of these things. Cases are moving along far too slowly, and this is where the Government needs to demonstrate a greater level of urgency in giving the necessary resources to the institution that has to deal with treating with these matters. As I said, in the case of the courts, the criminal trials it is the Judiciary.

We need a greater use of the alternative dispute resolution. It exists, but we need to enhance it, Madam Speaker. So ADR mechanisms such as mediation and the plea bargaining, which can help to speed up non-violent cases and ensure that the most serious offenders are prioritized. What exists needs to be harmonized and it needs to be upgraded. Our prison system is equally in need of desperate reform, Madam Speaker. A strong argument could be made that our prison system far

from being about punishing offenders, is actually serving as a quasi-university. But what are they teaching in this quasi-university? They are teaching first time offenders how to continue with a life of crime. And the reason I say that, Madam Speaker—

Mr. Young SC: Oropouche East.

Mr. D. Rambally:—the reason why I say that—I know that Member for— Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, I know what he is trying to do, to get me to deviate off course, and of course, you know, deal with other items on the agenda, but not in this debate—

Hon. Member: Not today.

Mr. D. Rambally:—not today. And maybe in another place, but not here. So, Madam Speaker, getting back to, I was saying that you have FIRST-TIME offenders, who you know, this is what we would be promoting, in the prison system, is that they, as first time offenders will learn how to get more engaged and active in a criminal life. Why I say that is that in Trinidad and Tobago, we have a recidivism rate of 54 per cent—

Hon. Member: Fifty-four.

Mr. D. Rambally:—which means that more than half of those persons who are incarcerated return to prison after being released. This, Madam Speaker is a clear sign that our prison system, is not rehabilitating offenders, but instead, creating a revolving door for crime. So, I say this respectfully, and this is to all stakeholders. We need, Madam Speaker, to shift our focus from punishment to rehabilitation, by investing in the vocational training. What is already there, it is there, but we need to spend more resources, Madam Speaker, and this is why I say, the budget has to

give a blueprint of how you are enhancing what is existing. What are going to be the new education programmes? What about the mental health services for inmates? All of these things have to be there. Maybe throughout the budget, we will hear other things, but certainly what we have heard so far and based on the figures, I do not see anything going to enhance these initiatives.

These reforms, Madam Speaker, can help reduce recidivism and give former offenders a real chance to reintegrate into society, contributing positively rather than returning to crime. In addition to prison reform, we must address the root causes of criminal behavior, particularly among young people. Madam Speaker, the statistics show that youth unemployment in Trinidad and Tobago hovers at around 12 per cent, which has fueled the rise of gang activity, and as long as some young people in our society do not feel as though they have a stake in this country, that they do not have a future in this country, they will seek crime as their only viable option for economic survival. And we will continue to struggle with violent criminality.

Madam Speaker, budget 2025, should have prioritized long-term investments in education, skills training and community development programmes that offer enhanced programmes that offer young people an alternative to gang life. Clearly what we have, and that exists, is not sufficient, hence the reason why we are dealing with the statistics that we are competing with. Prevention not just punishment, Madam Speaker, must be at the heart of our approach to dealing with crime. We need to adopt, Madam Speaker, a holistic approach to national security. One that does not rely simply or solely on increasing the size of the police force, or purchasing more weapons, or more police cars, but one that tackles the socio-economic factors that contribute to criminal behaviour.

5.00 p.m.

Poverty, Madam Speaker, lack of education and unemployment are the key drivers of crime and until we address these issues frontally and properly, we will continue to pour billions of dollars of taxpayers' money down the drain.

Madam Speaker, furthermore, we must make use of restorative justice, restorative justice practices which focus on repairing the harm caused by crime, rather than simply punishing the offender. I will go no further into that because in the last budget contribution that I gave in this Chamber, I spoke about it. This approach, Madam Speaker, can help reduce reoffending persons by fostering accountability and offering a path for victims and offenders to come together to address the underlying issues.

Madam Speaker, I am not suggesting, when I proceed now to use an example, that we must be exactly like Jamaica. I do not want, as has been done in this House to my colleague for Naparima, that he is told that he could go to Barbados if he wants. Right? Yes, he could go, but I do not want that. I am saying that we are looking at a comparator. It happens in all fields, in all disciplines, and we are no different here that we look to other countries to see what they are doing right and how we can incorporate or import what they are doing as some of the strategies here. So I turn to Jamaica as an example of reform, Madam Speaker. So we do not have to look far. I am not talking about a European country. I am not talking about North America. I am not talking about Scandinavia. I am talking about right here in the Caribbean community, that they have somehow—they seem to be paving the way on this very issue of rampant crime.

Madam Speaker, in recent years, Jamaica has undertaken several reforms to

enhance their justice system and address crime, focusing on judicial efficiency—the same thing that I mentioned earlier, it is the alternative dispute resolution, the anti-corruption measures, and if I may just quickly look at an overview of some of their efforts. They had what was called the justice reform programme, and that was 2012 to 2020. That is where they launched a comprehensive justice reform programme with support from international partners, like the World Bank and the EU, the European Union. This programme sought to modernize the criminal justice system by doing certain things, increasing the number of courtrooms, appointing more judges, reducing the backlog of cases.

We have gone in that direction but we have not reduced the backlog of cases just yet. Introducing technology, like the Judicial Information System, we have gone in that direction. The Judiciary has brought in specific—and again, Member for San Fernando West always reminds us of these things, where they have now gone and the virtual platform has overtaken the system in a very positive way, meaning in a more efficient court process.

Expanding the use of the ADR mechanism, such as mediation and plea bargaining to speed up cases and reduce pressure of the courts: These—as I mentioned before, we should spend some more resources on this to ensure that this becomes pervasive in our system.

They have established specialist courts. Special courts introduced in Jamaica include the gun courts, the traffic courts and they handle specific types of cases more efficiently. This is something that people have been saying here in Trinidad for a long time. It has allowed for faster processing of serious criminal cases and improved overall judicial efficiency.

Strengthening anti-corruption agencies: Madam Speaker, recognizing the

link between corruption and crime, Jamaica strengthened institutions like the Integrity Commission and the Major Organised Crime and Anti-Corruption Agency. This agency is a high-level—it focuses on high-level organized crime and this is where money laundering, corruption, which have been significant drivers of the criminal activity in the country—that is something that we need to up our game on. We need to go there.

Madam Speaker, the Restorative Justice Programme: Jamaica has increasingly embraced restorative justice, particularly in the communities prone to violence, and this approach involves mediation between offenders and victims, encouraging accountability and offering alternatives to incarceration. The use, Madam Speaker, of the restorative justice centres has been expanded across several countries, and several—I should say communities, rather, within Jamaica, with positive outcomes in reducing reoffending persons and improving community relations.

Madam Speaker, they have also looked at police reform, and their efforts to treat with police reform included establishing the Independent Commission of Investigations. We have something here, we need to ensure that they are properly well resourced to investigate police misconduct and reduce the instance of extrajudicial killings, which we also have a lot of reports when we listen to the PCA and the Director of the PCA telling us here what are—the increase in numbers of complaints being made to them. So we have to do this, Madam Speaker, because this now goes into public trust in law enforcement.

Madam Speaker, the community-based policing, which focus on creating stronger ties between the police and the local communities, has also been implemented to improve crime prevention efforts and reduce gang violence. These

are not new matters that I am raising here, Madam Speaker. I accept that this has been bandied about in one form or fashion throughout, whether it be this forum or other forums in the country, and this is where I had hoped that by now, going in the fiscal 2025, that we would have been able to see a blueprint as to how we would finally roll out all of these things.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, I use Jamaica just by way of example because they have reported a reduction in court backlog cases. Court case backlogs and trials are now being processed more efficiently due to the judicial reforms.

The focus on the restorative justice and ADR has decreased the number of minor cases that clog the court system, and these are matters—allowing the Judiciary to focus on more serious criminal matters. Increased transparency and accountability in the police force and anti-corruption efforts have helped to restore some public confidence in law enforcement and the justice system. Madam Speaker, of course, Jamaica continues to face challenges. I never said they are utopian. I never said that they are perfect. Particularly with high levels of violent crime, they continue to face challenges, but the reforms have seen critical improvement in efficiency and accountability of their criminal justice system.

So, Madam Speaker, I am saying that the combination of judicial reform, police reform, ADR—the alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, it would offer a useful model for us trying, as a country, to grapple with the rising crime levels we are presently facing. Madam Speaker, we do not need the criminologists to come out. I mean, it is their job to do what they are doing, but we certainly do not need them to come out to make pronouncements to know that if we do not curb this now, what we saw in 2023, which was 600-plus murders, we are going to see it

rising phenomenally. I think as of today, we have already reached 500?

Hon. Member: Yeah, crossed 500.

Mr. D. Rambally: And what does this spell? I hope and pray that we do not go as high as 2023, and that we could start bringing it down, but we have to do our part.

Madam Speaker, I want to make it abundantly clear that in as much as I raise these matters here today, I love my country of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, I have two young children, most of them are known to most of the Members on either side, and they are persons who I want to have full access to all that Trinidad and Tobago has to offer, whether it be education, whether it be sports, whatever it may be. I want them, along with all the other children of Trinidad and Tobago, to grow up in a safe country, a country in which they have trust in the institutions meant to keep them safe, Madam Speaker, and meant to give them justice. And, Madam Speaker, if we as Trinidadians, if we as Members here are to truly secure a safer future for these children for Trinidad and Tobago, we must stop thinking in terms of quick fixes. We need long-term solutions that invest in reforming the criminal justice system, improving social services and providing opportunities for at-risk communities. What we have, we need to revisit. We have to review, and it is always going to be a perpetual review to ensure that we are meeting these communities.

Madam Speaker, I would like to now discuss a topic that is rather close to my heart and it is linked to crime. It is also an issue which affects some of my constituents in Chaguanas West, and that is the repatriation of children who are presently in conflict zones, and I refer particularly to mainly those being detained in camps in Syria. I know this is a serious issue, Madam Speaker. I know that it is

a multifaceted issue, which affects national security of our nation. I am aware of that. In fact, I have been consistently on record as making representation that I am treating with the children.

I have never gone out of the ambit or that zone of persons that I have been seeking to lobby the Government that we need to bring some of them back home and in a safe—in a manner that balances national security interests on behalf of the wider population, but also bearing in mind that if you do not pass the legislation early enough, Madam Speaker, we do not invest in the resources early enough, we are dealing with a potential ISIS camp out there and at any time, they will be free to return to Trinidad and Tobago. They may be deported. You do not know what circumstances may change for them, for the camp in which they are in, for the country, for that conflict zone, and even us, that will facilitate to allow them to return home.

5.10 p.m.

But by the time they return home, Madam Speaker, I maintain, if we do not have systems in place, we are dealing with potential persons who have been hardened, not criminally, but hardened by the circumstances that are facing them—that we now have problems in our system and that is where I say that we should treat with this matter in a very proactive manner. Madam Speaker, I want to be clear, I am not calling for the repatriation of anyone who left our shores to commit crimes and in this case, the acts of terrorism in another country. As I said, I never said that. The return of children has been my focus and those who have families, some of them through no fault of their own, they are being held in some of these camps. This has been debated from time to time, by way of passing questions from this side to the Government.

I know a committee has been established, but I am saying given the inhumane conditions in these camps and when you see the reports that are coming out—and, Madam Speaker, almost every three weeks to a month, you have these podcasts being produced, published by none other than the BBC. I myself, was questioned, you know, interviewed on the BBC as to the role that I was taking in trying to facilitate some room, some mechanism by which we could safely return Trinidadian children, those, you know, being born to Trinidadians but are out in these conflict zones. According to the United Nations counter-terrorism experts, there are at least 21 women and 56 children from Trinidad and Tobago being detained in northeast Syria as I speak.

So, Madam Speaker, I know that it is a matter which cannot be solved overnight. I appreciate that, but we would have had a committee, which would have been established since 2018, and we are now in 2024, and that is something that I would like on behalf of those who have family, children out there, I make this appeal that we should start looking at it. And why do I make this within a budget context? It is not the first time I am doing it in a budget and also in recent times, I think it was December 2023, or probably even earlier this year, in 2024, a former Speaker of the House, Mr. Nizam Mohammed, who was appointed to lead a committee to look into this repatriation issue. He publicly spoke about the lack of resources being extended and lack of responses from the Government. So, Madam Speaker, we are now in October 2024 and I am saying when will these children, who again, I remind the Government, they are nationals of Trinidad and Tobago. When are they going to get some kind of reprieve?

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two minutes. Hon. Member? You have two minutes left of original speaking time; you are entitled to 10 more

minutes to complete your contribution, if you wish.

Mr. D. Rambally: Thank you, Madam Speaker. May I avail myself of the extra time? Thank you. So, Madam Speaker, the longer the Government drags their feet on the matter, the more time these vulnerable children will be exposed to abuse and other crimes and other indignities.

Madam Speaker, I also want to talk about a matter, I know that we have heard discussions on, you know, moving to a cashless society and it is against that backdrop. I myself have made public pronouncements as to whether I think it is feasible, so I do not want to, because of limited time, go back into what I have said publicly about whether we should—the Government—is it a pie in the sky thing or whether or not we should go there? Eventually, we should all aim towards being more digitized and embrace that culture. But really, we are in a fool's paradise if we think that we could implement that anywhere in the next year or the next three years, to say that we are going cashless. I want to say that, why I say that I would not rehash, and what I want to move on to, is the simple fact that we need to have cybercrime legislation, something that has been echoed on this side already.

We have, since 2021, been given observer status to the Budapest Convention and Madam Speaker, that has been acknowledged over and above. That Budapest Treaty has been acknowledged over and above, even some of the other proposals being made by the United Nations as being the forerunner for the establishing infrastructure to deal with cybercrime. And Madam Speaker, being given observer status since 2021, we have five years in which we have to promote ourselves so that we can be taken off there and we can actually be as a frontrunner now, that we can be one that will be able to adopt the Treaty.

So, Madam Speaker, I say this because this has been raised in another place

and by an Independent Senator and also it was raised even by Members on this side. In fact, in 2023, when there was the European Union Conference on the Budapest Convention, I know Members on this side—Member for Tabaquite, my friend Member for Mayaro, and other Members on this side—had attended that conference. We were trying to see whether or not we could get off the observer status and promote ourselves, that we could eventually be permitted to ratify this and adopt the Convention. So, Madam Speaker, I say that because we have had, earlier in, I think it was April 2023, when we had entire school systems shut down due to cybercriminals sending bomb threats to all schools causing mass panic and chaos.

Madam Speaker, in October of 2023 we learnt, through the criminals themselves, that they had stolen data from TSTT. That is what we had last year. The Minister of National Security has said that there have been over 205 cyber-attacks in five years between 2019 and 2023. So in this budget statement, the Minister spoke about intending or he intends to keep raising the bar for cybersecurity preparedness, but, Madam Speaker, speaking to the rest of the country, I want to say that we are not really confident that the Government has gotten the bar off the ground and we need to look at that.

Madam Speaker, cybersecurity policies, it cannot be vague and we must know that there are deliverables that the Government intends to implement. The Minister spoke about a partnership with the United States in the realm of cybersecurity, but what exactly is going to be the outcome of this partnership? And when will it be delivered? Maybe when the hon. Attorney General addresses the House, should he chose to do so in the debate—I would hope so—that he can talk about where we are going because 2026 is going to be right around the corner.

Madam Speaker, how is it that cybercriminals could be attacking Office of the Attorney General as well, as well as our Judiciary and our schools and there is absolutely no urgency by the Government to both develop systems to prevent these attacks, as well as bring the perpetrators to justice? I know that is Government is planning on bringing legislation to deal with the matter and I, again, would urge that they move faster on this critical issue.

I quickly turn to a statement made by Mark Lynder say in his column in the newspapers. He said that the—I quote Madam Speaker:

“[The 2017 bill] wasn’t very well thought out at all. I’m really hoping that some serious thinking gets put into it and that they actually invite people who know what this stuff is about and how can it benefit cybersecurity researchers, particularly what’s required with dark web and penetration testing, vulnerability scanning and assessments and ethical hacking. It should really be guided by a subject matter expert.”

So this is what we want to see, Madam Speaker. I hope that the legislation that is being drafted by the Government has indeed taken the advice of cybersecurity experts.

Madam Speaker, also, one citizen as well, former MATT President, Sheila Rampersad also said of the 2017 Bill:

“A public interest exemption to protect all individuals and organisations working towards greater transparency in public affairs.”

Madam Speaker, we also know that, you know, for example, you would have competing interests, as with any piece of legislation but we need to get this going and we need to get it fast. Madam Speaker, there has been a lot of discussion, as I said in the public domain, about the cashless society but we need to treat with the

cybercriminals if we intend to successfully go in that direction.

Madam Speaker, in closing—Madam Speaker, how many minutes do I have again, please?

Madam Speaker: You end at 5:24:30, so you have roughly five minutes left.

Mr. D. Rambally: So, Madam Speaker the 2025 National Budget should have been a transformative moment for our country. A chance to address our challenges, Madam Speaker, and provide real solutions for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

5.20 p.m.

Instead, Madam Speaker, what we have seen is a continuation of the same failed policies that have stifled growth, ignored the needs of the vulnerable communities and will allow crime and economic hardship to flourish. As representatives of the people, Madam Speaker, it is our duty on this side to hold the Government accountable, to demand better, and to push for policies that uplift every citizen. We cannot, Madam Speaker, continue down this road of lost opportunities. The time for change, Madam Speaker, and I urge all of my colleagues on the other side, the time for change is now.

Madam Speaker, I end with a quote from the book that I find great inspiration from and especially so in the last few months, Madam Speaker, and I speak of none other than the *Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta*. It is the same scriptural book that I would have taken my oath of office upon when I entered this august Chamber, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I know that the language permissible in this Chamber is the English language so I will not repeat or recite the Sanskrit. And I will just say it is chapter 2, we say *shlok* but it is verse 47, the English translation if I may attempt one, Madam Speaker, is:

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You have a right to perform your prescribed duties but you are not entailed to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities nor be attached to inaction.

Madam Speaker, this verse advocates for a life lived with purpose and ethical action, free from the bonds of ego and attachment to outcomes. It is a call to serve a higher purpose, Madam Speaker, remaining undisturbed by success or failure while continuing to strive with integrity. Madam Speaker, I ask all of my colleagues in this House to put aside whatever egos we may have and act in the best interest of these who have placed us here, and the people of Trinidad and Tobago as a whole.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, as I started off, I want to say that it has been quite some time, I repeat, that I have addressed this House in a debate and I intend certainly to do so more often, in the future.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally: And, Madam Speaker, you know when I say I am grateful for you, Madam Speaker, recognizing me and allowing me to speak in this House—

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Rambally:—that it is coming, Madam Speaker, from a place deep down within. It has value to me and it has meaning. And so, I want to thank you, Madam Speaker, for this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this debate 2024/2025 Financial Appropriation. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of Finance's presentation is to be commended and indeed has been praised by several notable voices in the national community. I heard the Member for Chaguanas West speak about no transformational agenda, I guess he wants to come over here, but at the end of my contribution you will hear about this transformational agenda where the budget is concerned. Many notable persons have expressed appreciation about the Government's ability to balance its care for the national community with prudence. It was nothing short of a comprehensive presentation of the plans of the Government that the Government has for the continued development of the country.

The current budget and the proposed plans outlined in the budget ensures that no one deserving of Government's assistance is left behind. Madam Speaker, the budget emphasizes the Government's commitment to sustainable growth and diversification. It also highlights its resilience in the face of global challenges. Additionally, this Government continues to invest substantial resources to support poor and vulnerable persons throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago. According to the Minister of Finance and I quote:

“...Government has been recalibrating our economic framework to satisfy the needs of the national community especially the poor and vulnerable, while never losing sight of our overarching objective of economic sustainability.”

So the Government's developmental agenda focuses on every person in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, because of the extensive collaboration that took

place between the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development, I just want to congratulate the staff, and the public servants of both Ministries for the work that they have done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Just as it was the tenth budget presentation of the hon. Minister of Finance, so too it was the tenth response of the Members of Opposition, and Madam Speaker, when you compare the contributions on this side with what has been emanating from the other side, they could not be more starkly contrasted. On this side, we have stamina and depth, while on the other side there is shallowness and a demonstration—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—of vacuity that not even their constituents are impressed. On this side, you hear the comprehensive plans that actually saved and resuscitate the economy. While on the other, you had a regurgitation that had this country careening perilously close to the precipice of IMF intervention. On the one hand, you saw the fruits of fiscal prudence, while on the other, we heard of a call for a return to the wastefulness that ran rampant throughout the 2010 to 2015 era. We on this side are confident that in the same way the national community rejected that cleverly contrived coalition of the desperate in 2015, in 2020, and in every election in between, so too, they will be rejected in 2025.

I am appreciative of this initiative, programme or service that has been articulated in the budget to help empower and to transform the lives of persons. I understand that the Member for Chaguanas West mentioned the needs of the vulnerable are ignored. Member for Chaguanas West, you will hear about all that we have been doing for the vulnerable. Some of the examples of the fiscal

measures in this year's budget I must highlight because, of course, the vulnerable are affected.

One is the online numeracy programme for adults. Through this programme, poor and vulnerable persons who pursued literacy training through the Adult Literacy Tutors Association can increase their ability to use basic maths and increase their chances of being employed in a job where they are required to manage money and provide numerical reports. So some of these adults may not be comfortable working with numbers or formulas and they often may seek explanation from family members or friends and so on, or they may even go to neighbours, but the decision to provide this opportunity for adults will empower them with the knowledge and confidence to make decisions in matters of income and expenditure and I see that this cost would be \$3.2 million.

Another programme that also affects the poor and vulnerable would be the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate. This is a remedial Mathematics programme, which will also be implemented for students to pass the subject. So some persons who may be poor and vulnerable, their parents may not be able to afford to do remedial classes or go to extra lessons and this is indeed is a programme which will assist them so they will be able to pass Math. Once this is implemented, it is expect to cost \$3.5 million. This has been allocated for this programme.

There is a national digital literacy programme. This is for vulnerable persons, young persons, adults and senior citizens, and this is the part that I am happy about because of the fact that we are now trying to implement very soon where persons have digital wallets where you would not have to have cheques and so on. Therefore, we want to be able to educate our elderly and also to get them in

tune with the digital divide and we are happy for this programme. The Ministry is having the discussions and this will provide the opportunity for our clients to be able to access their grants easily. So the need to develop digital skills in communities where there is a digital divide is the action of a responsible Government dedicated to ensuring that the global digitalization evolution reaches every home and validates our position to help empower and transform lives. This programme will cost \$5 million and will be available to all, including the vulnerable.

5.30 p.m.

The digital literacy certification for students, this is another programme. Numerous poor and vulnerable children who would not have acquired digital literacy skills due to the digital divide, they now have the opportunity to not only acquire the knowledge and skills, but they will get certified, and this Government is committed to equipping the next generation to succeed in this increasingly competitive digital global landscape, and this is expected to cost \$2.9 million. I applaud the Government's continued commitment to provide a \$1,000 book grant to support 20,000 poor and vulnerable primary and secondary school students and, of course, this will help defray the cost of school books.

Madam Speaker, we at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services feel a sense of gratitude to see that two of the qualifying criteria for the book grant includes, parents of students with disabilities, and parents and guardians of students in receipt of grants from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. A total of \$20 million has been allocated for the school book grant, and these are all clients of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. So again, Member for Chaguanas West, I “doh” know which budget

presentation you listened to, but all this is for the persons who are poor and vulnerable in our society today. So, I also publicly support the exemption of taxes on all sporting equipment—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—with the exception of clothing in an effort to encourage healthy lifestyles. The estimated cost of this is \$20 million. The infectious power of sports which has transformed lives and promotes a collective ability to socialize through responsible behaviour is a welcomed approach by the Government to address community issues where vulnerable families reside. There is no one right approach when dealing with complex matters that require various levels of family intervention.

Madam Speaker, another noteworthy initiative is the Building Blocks project. This crime management strategy adopts a multi-stakeholder public health approach to crime and violence. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is involved in this and we provide psychosocial support to families in communities. The increase in the minimum wage from \$20.50 to \$22.50 for government workers will result in an improved standard of living for 5,100 workers at MTS, 10,000 in CEPEP and 6,200 in URP, plus other minimum wage earners in the public sector. Increasing the minimum wage for public servants will certainly benefit low-income families across Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox:—and this will cause an improved level of financial support and, of course, stability. It is therefore really appalling to hear Members on the other side describe as insulting the proposed increase in the minimum wage for public sector workers without indicating how they will fund larger increases.

They have instead heaped scorn on this Government's decision to enhance the lives of CEPEP, URP, MTS employees who stand to benefit from the increased minimum wages. It begs the question, Madam Speaker, what does the other side have against the poor and vulnerable in our society?

The Housing and Village Improvement Programme provides low-income families with the opportunity to get free-starter homes. To date, over 800 starter homes have been constructed by the Land Settlement Agency, and this programme has taken poor and vulnerable families from inadequate houses to an improved standard of living of which they can be proud.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services salutes the prudent actions of the Government to improve the housing conditions and community facilities of residents in rural and peri-urban areas across the country. As an upward journey of social equality continues having a necessity of home security is of paramount importance for the building of a stable and well-natured family life, and this project is the manifestation of Goal 3 of *Vision 2030* which states that and I quote:

All—"Citizens will have access to adequate and affordable housing."

So, Madam Speaker, these are just a few of the initiatives that will be implemented in 2025 that came out of our budget, and these initiatives demonstrate the Government's commitment to enhancing the well-being of all citizens of this country particularly those who are poor and vulnerable, and I must say including the elderly.

I can tell you that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services remains committed to its mandate to help, empower and transform the lives of all of our citizens. Our commitment to the citizens of this country is without parallel,

and every day of the year we set out to further develop their resilience to the extent where they can wean themselves also out of dependency as they require less interventions from the Ministry. It is in this context that I am deeply appreciative of the measures that have been articulated in this year's budget under the theme, Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity.

The Ministry plays a critical role in Trinidad and Tobago's efforts to support its vulnerable populations allocating substantial resources to social services. The major initiatives for the fiscal year 2024 focus on providing financial, social and psychosocial support to senior citizens, adults and persons with disabilities and, of course, low-income families.

During fiscal 2024, the Ministry expended over \$5.1 billion to provide a suite of grants designed to support the poor and vulnerable, and I am confident that there are not many countries in this region or across the developed nations of the world that can truly compare the levels and diversity of social assistance afforded to their citizens. Our stellar reputation for serving the poor and vulnerable extends beyond our shores. The World Bank in a recent social expenditure draft report stated, that social protection expenditure in Trinidad and Tobago surpasses that of the rest of the Caribbean and Latin America by 17 per cent, and this excludes two more, larger countries, Brazil and Argentina. So, Madam Speaker, through the work of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services improvements in the standard of living have been facilitated for a wide cross-section of the most vulnerable persons in our society as follows.

For fiscal 2024, the Ministry provided Public Assistance Grants to 15,654 persons at a total expenditure of \$291,227,678. Of that figure, Madam Speaker, 1,587 persons were new beneficiaries to this programme.

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Food support: as at September 2024, there were 14,979 households benefiting from food support grants to the value of \$116,388,820. With regard to our General Assistance Grant, for fiscal 2024 there were 602 applications approved under the General Assistance Grants Programme at a cost of \$8,285,943. These grants benefited vulnerable persons who needed temporary assistance in the areas of household items, clothing, dietary, funeral assistance, medical equipment, pharmaceutical, prosthetics, rental assistance and school supplies.

Our National Social Development Programme is a social intervention that seeks to improve the standard of living conditions of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago through the provision of various grants such as, minor house repairs. This grant is intended to provide up to \$15,000 in materials only for the repair, upgrade of dwelling houses, and up to \$20,000 in materials only, to effect repairs or upgrades in the event of a disaster.

5.40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, 479 persons benefited from this grant and this cost \$2,273,465.56.

We also have the Sanitary Plumbing Assistance Grant, which is intend to provide up to \$15,000 in materials only under normal circumstances and in the event of a disaster for the repair, upgrade of toilets and bathroom facilities for a dwelling house. This grant allows for the upgrade of outdoor latrines to indoor toilet facilities where space permits, and this would have positively impacted 169 beneficiaries to the cost of \$568,903.55.

We also have the House Wiring Assistance Grant. Madam Speaker, 138 persons benefited from this grant, and this grant is intended to provide assistance for the wiring or the rewiring of dwelling houses under normal circumstances and

in the event of a disaster, which has impacted the electrical wiring of the home, and we have spent for fiscal 2024, \$496,053.21.

The Ministry also continues to provide mechanisms to empower citizens through the Sowing Empowerment through Entrepreneurial Development Programme, and this truly gives life to this year's budget theme: Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity. So to date, 179 persons benefited from this grant at a cost of \$758,554.95, and these grants target persons who have an interest in starting or improving their own businesses, but are unable to gain access to funding through regular financial institutions. We will be asking for collateral and so on, which they may not have. This Government provided these budding entrepreneurs with the opportunity they need to become self-sufficient. We assist them because we believe, ultimately, in the innate goodness of our people and their desire to improve their own lives without having to depend on anyone, giving them the opportunity to forge a pathway to prosperity.

We also have our disaster relief grant and for this period, 260 households also benefited from disaster relief grants. A total of \$1,562,740.41 was expended. Temporary food cards were also provided to 105 households affect by natural disasters. This is not the normal food card. This is the food card given to persons with natural disasters to tide them over, such as flooding. The expenditure for this temporary food card totalled \$58,850.

I move to support for older persons. As at September 2024, they were 114,242 citizens in receipt of our Senior Citizens' Pension. We disbursed \$4,059,431,287. Our last fiscal, 9,647 persons were new beneficiaries added to our list of Senior Citizens' Pension this year, Madam Speaker. So the number of persons receiving the Senior Citizens' Pension increased significantly over the past

year.

Senior citizens have continued to use the ttconnect to access services from the Ministry. The pension recipients are encouraged to submit their life and residential declaration through forms from ttconnect or any of our local public assistance board offices, as well as to utilize the ttconnect 800-TTCN toll-free number and eAppointment system to submit their completed declaration forms. So, therefore, besides using ttconnect, one can also come into the office or one can go online.

We have a Community Care Programme, which caters for level one to three patients who 60 years and over, who have been discharged by the hospital because they are no longer in need of their care, but are essentially in need of accommodation and social support. So, Madam Speaker, you know, it baffles me how children could leave their parents in the hospital and abandoned them. And we have that happening, where persons abandon their families in the hospital, and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services now has to step in to move them out of the hospital so that we can free up some beds. So, you know, I urge person at this time to look out for each other, look out for your families and take care of your parents. You know, I want to quote the Bible on this because Exodus 20:12 tell us about honouring our parents, which is the first commandment, with promise that you may live long in this life and blessings will come upon you if you take good care of your parents.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Madam Speaker, currently, there 14 community care programme homes across the country and we have a total 87 persons benefiting from this programme at a total annual cost to the taxpayer of \$3,664,582. Between

October 2023 and September, we added 12 new clients to this system. I just want to reiterate how important it is that we should be taking care of each other, and if this how we treat our own relatives and our own family—I want you to know that Ministry of Social Development and Family Services takes up this cost. So when we talk about the Government and the Ministry do not care about the vulnerable and so on, and do not care about persons, and there is no talk about elderly—somebody mentioned about no talk about the elderly in the budget. Look the money we are spending here. This is part of the money that we are spending with regard to the elderly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: Because we are paying \$3,664,582 for persons abandoned in the hospital, and no one, you know—the family members are not taking up the cost nor care.

So, Madam Speaker, I move now to focus on our super seniors. Over the past fiscal year, a total of 60 centenarians have been recognized and celebrated for 2024. We have a total of 213 persons registered in our system. It does not mean that we only have 213 persons over the age of 100. This is not what we have registered. Okay? This programme recognizes, honours and celebrates older persons who obtained the age of 100 years and over. And I encourage all Members of this House, relatives, friends, neighbours, NGOs, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations to identify our seniors 100 and over, and register them on our Centenarian Programme.

Again, we move to more for our seniors—oh, yes, I remembered who said it. I think it was the Member of Parliament for Siparia who spoke about, “Mentioned nothing in the budget for seniors.” This could never be. I am going down the road

with seniors again. Free Bus Pass facility for older persons as well as those receiving social service support: This is provided by the Ministry in collaboration with Public Transport Service Corporation. This has continued unabated. A total of \$5,948,589 was paid to PTSC for this facility for the past fiscal year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: I will tell what it was paid for. For persons 60 years and older, this sum was paid: Elderly persons used the service 1,229,536 times for that fiscal; for persons who received our Public Assistance Grant and the Disability Assistance Grant, a total of \$415,677 was expended to cover the cost, and they used the system 92,451 times. And I want to make this clear, because this is something that a lot of people do not know. All the persons who are travelling on the buses for free, from 60 and over, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is the person taking up that cost and paying PTSC for this. This, of course, is for seniors.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: The Ministry's Older Persons Information Centre: Our help desk provides information on activities, initiatives, programmes, services and products for older persons in Trinidad and Tobago. This is called OPIC. This is currently accessed by seniors and members of the public through email, or telephone, or the phone, 800-6742, and walk-ins. For fiscal 2024, the Ministry received 186 requests for information on the senior citizens' grant.

Homes for older persons placement, referrals for geriatric services and questions about aging: Sadly, Madam Speaker, provisional data for fiscal 2024 reveals that there were 171 reported cases of elder abuse in private residences, and 19 in homes for older persons, and these are investigated by officers our Division

of Ageing and the required interventions are made.

We move to support for disabilities. A total of 21,639 persons benefited from our Disability Assistance Grant in fiscal 2024, in the sum \$552,118,256. Over the past year, 1,031 new beneficiaries were added to this programme.

5.50 p.m.

We also have a Disability Assistance Grant for minors, which are persons, children, 18 and under. A total of 3,897 persons benefited from the Disability Assistance Grant for minors at a total expenditure of \$73,426,295; of this number, 561 children were added as new clients to our programme. There was a 16 percent increase in the number of children receiving the Disability Assistance Grant for minors over the past fiscal year.

Madam Speaker, on May 1st, 2024 the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services introduced new guidelines for the administration of the Disability Assistance Grant for minors, and new criteria was designed to target families who are facing financial hardship, therefore insuring that assistance is directed to those who require it most. And these updated guidelines are a crucial step towards ensuring that those eligible and most in need families receive the support to assist their children with disabilities, and this is in keeping with our mandate to improve the efficacy for social safety net programmes. I am pleased to advise that we have completed the revision of the Trinidad and Tobago Disability Bill after receiving feedback from several Ministries, agencies, NGOs and persons with disabilities themselves. We are awaiting feedback from only two key stakeholders before moving on to the Legislative Review Committee.

I move to our National Therapeutic Resource Centre which is also for persons with disabilities. During fiscal 2024, the Ministry focused on the

refurbishment and outfitting of this centre, and the facility will serve as a multidisciplinary resource centre for persons with disabilities, providing free assessment, free therapy, free training for persons with disabilities who cannot afford to pay. Outfitting of the facility is also being undertaken and include a daily living suite, the innovative technology NGO resource room, and this is room is outfitted for NGOs, parents, children with disabilities, and the community of persons with disabilities. It is equipped with computers featuring assisted software such as screen readers and other vital tools that make technology accessible to persons with disabilities.

Additionally, we have incorporated cutting edge virtual reality headsets, allowing users to be engaged in virtual immersive experiences. And this NGO resource room is a space for training and capacity building resources that will foster independence and promote a more inclusive society, as NGOs and families are equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to help and empower individuals with disabilities. This centre also contains a swimming pool to aid in aqua-therapy, a paediatric assessment room, adult gym and therapy rooms. So, Madam Speaker, the Ministry is working assiduously towards operationalization, this first of its kind state-of-the-art centre in fiscal 2025.

Recognizing the needs of the vulnerable community of women with disabilities, our Disability Affairs Unit hosted its inaugural Sexual and Reproductive Health Seminar for Women with Disabilities in May of this year, approximately 50 women with disabilities, including their caregivers, advocates and NGOs serving the community of persons with disabilities, benefited from this seminar. The World Health Organization estimates that poor reproductive health accounts for a significant burden of disease globally with women of the

reproductive age bearing a substantial part of this burden. Women with disabilities face unique challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health services, including attitudinal barriers and limited physical access. Persons with disabilities are more vulnerable to infections if they do not have access to information, education and services to ensure prevention of infections and to lead healthy sexual lives.

The Ministry also partnered with the Ministry of Health to provide services such as breast examinations, HPV vaccinations, nutritional and mental health advice to the attendants, and participants were also provided with the requisite knowledge to make informed decision as it pertains to their sexual and reproductive health, and family planning. To improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities, the Ministry, through the Disability Affairs Unit, continues to collaborate with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago and the Ministry verified 529 applications for the provision of subsidized mobile devices for persons with disabilities submitted to the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago.

So, Madam Speaker, while the Ministry continues to work towards meeting the needs of the vulnerable in our society, efforts to ensure that this is backed by concrete findings are also being undertaken. In fiscal 2024, our unit, again—and our Disability Affairs Unit and the Social Investigations Unit—collaborated to conduct a study to assess the grants and services available to persons with disabilities, so as to ensure that their needs are being satisfied and met. The study's findings will be utilized as a standard guide to guide future initiatives as the Ministry works to fulfil its mandate regarding persons with disabilities. It would also be useful in identifying gaps in the quality of service and delivery to persons

with disabilities, and of course to highlight areas where there may be need for improvement.

Madam Speaker, we recognized that families are the bedrock of society and as such we are advancing our mandate to promote healthy functioning families through the work of our National Family Services Division. So may I remind this honourable House, and by extension the national community, I want to pause here to say that the Ministry does much more than grants. I heard someone on the radio talking about this, that the Ministry is only involved in grants. I think the person needs to do his homework. For fiscal 2024, the National Family Services Division provided, through preventive, developmental and remedial programmes and services to members of the public. Information on healthy family life was disseminated through community workshops; the radio programme, “It’s Family Time Let’s Talk”; outreaches; lectures upon request by various organizations, and during the period October 2023 to August 2024 the family services provides psychosocial support to individuals and families through the delivery of the following services:

- Counselling 6,112 persons benefited from this;
- parenting support and counselling, 225 persons;
- advocacy, 226 beneficiaries;
- referrals and other forms of support, 373 beneficiaries,
- crisis interventions, 38 beneficiaries.

Madam Speaker, having observed trends in its thrust to cater for the needs of the society the Ministry was honour to launch the National Suicide Prevention and Crisis Hotline, 800-COPE. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic it was observed that there was no mental health first aid available to the public 24 hours,

seven days a week. So in light of this and considering the statistics of persons attempting and committing suicide the Ministry collaborated with many stakeholders in a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach to put measures in place to address this issue head on. We then took a decision to launch the Suicide Prevention and Crisis Hotline.

An analysis of the data collected revealed that 65 percent of the persons in need of this type of support were outpatients of mental health clinics and these persons were not compliant with their medication. Through this facility, we were able to reroute them back to their treatment plan. Additionally, 35 percent of the persons who called the hotline experienced some form of situational crisis, including family, spousal and financial issues. So for the period October 2023 to August 2024, the hotline received 3,459 calls. Under the remit of the National Family Services Division, this 24-hour crisis hotline continues to be operated by specially trained personnel who efficiently and confidentially address crisis issues related to suicidal ideations and other critical issues faced by citizens. I want to repeat at this juncture again, we are much more than just grants.

6.00 p.m.

Transformational agenda: Madam Speaker, the Government continues to prioritize digital transformation with a view to improve productivity, and of course, to enhance service delivery through its ongoing collaborative project between the Ministry of Digital Transformation and also the United Nations Development Programme. The Ministry remains committed to transforming social service delivery through the development of a comprehensive automative information system that will be used to administer various grants, programmes and services, coupled with a one stop shop approach.

To this end, we have partnered with the Ministry of Digital Transformation, Digital Delivery Unit, for guidance and support in fulfilling this initiative. And the key areas of our partnership includes technical advice and support for the solution implementation which would enable the integrated service delivery model to better meet the needs of our clients. We are looking for guidance and we have been seeking guidance on the implementation support for the Ministry's transformation team towards a streamlined service and therefore that is what we have partnered with them and we have been doing that.

They have been assisting us with the review, mapping and reengineering of the Ministry's processes to enable the transformation of our service centres. We have been receiving advice on change management activities, and of course, knowledge transfer and capacity development. During fiscal 2024, the following ICT initiatives continue to improve the Ministry's social service delivery through our electronic ID project. This project will facilitate the realization of real time access to relevant records with a view to improving the time it takes to process applications.

Our digital archiving project focuses on the digitization of client records resulting in real time accessibility and optimize processing, as well as ready access to client documents required for processing grants. Our benefits wallet, that I mentioned earlier on, focuses on real time service delivery update to victim of disasters who opt in to this application and notification process. So the Ministry is collaborating with the Ministry of Digital Transformation and the UNDP to develop and operationalize this electronic app designed to provide clients with a seamless step by step process up date and access to their benefits.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry will continue to develop this integrated

approach to service delivery focused on improved productivity and optimizing the time it takes to receive approved benefits through the use of digital technology. Many would be pleased to learn that the Local Public Assistance Board of St. George East was divided in order to create a local public assistance board in Arima. The Ministry recognized the need to align social welfare boards with regional corporations and boroughs and this will ensure that poor and vulnerable clients in the local public assistance districts of Tunapuna and Arima will be more effectively serviced and there will be a more equitable distribution of the work load for the social welfare staffs. Clients in the Borough of Arima and environs will no longer be required to travel to the Board in Tunapuna, but will be able to access social welfare and other services in their own district. The tender already went out for the outfitting of the Arima office which will be opened in fiscal 2025.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: In conclusion, Madam Speaker, I must convey my thanks for the opportunity to have shared just a few, of the achievements of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and our focus, which I have the distinct honour and privilege to lead, fiscal 2024. I must also convey my gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister for his continued faith and confidence in me to lead this Ministry, the Permanent Secretary, executive and staff of the Ministry for their dedication and commitment over the period under review.

Madam Speaker, as so well-articulated by the Minister of Finance on Monday last, Trinidad and Tobago has had to grapple with the almost relentless technological, human resource, fiscal, climates and other changes over the last fiscal year. And yet by God's grace we have persevered. As we confront the new and continuing challenges that await us in fiscal 2025, through you, Madam

Speaker, I wish to share with the national community the commitment—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Minister, you have two more minutes of original speaking time left, you are entitled to a further 10 minutes if you wish to wrap up your contribution.

Sen. The Hon. D. Cox: As we confront the new and continuing challenges that await us in the fiscal 2025, through you, Madam Speaker, I wish to share with the national community the commitment that we in the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services will remain steadfast and resolute in our drive to serve the most vulnerable of our citizens as we all forged pathways to our country's continued prosperity. I thank you and may God bless you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Chaguanas East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Vandana Mohit (Chaguanas East): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to contribute to this debate. And, Madam Speaker, as I enter this debate on the Appropriation Bill, 2024 for the financial year, 2025, under the hollow and lofty theme of: “Steadfast and Resolute Forging — Pathways to Prosperity”, which is nothing more than a regurgitation of failed promises wrapped in the same tired rhetoric. Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: What this Government dares to call pathways are in fact dead ends, are in fact traps paved with stagnation, are in fact broken systems and disillusionment, Madam Speak.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, instead of prosperity we are left with mounting

debt, social decay and widening inequality. Madam Speaker, this Government resolute seem to only serve the few while abandoning the many.

Madam Speaker, we ask, how much longer must the citizens endure this mismanagement disguised as progress year after year.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we on this side, having thoroughly perused this mismatched, hodgepodge, benign mass of paper have aptly referred to it as a decade of destruction and misfortune.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, and with that being said the Opposition Leader would have said it right from the very first day this budget was read, that we in this country, citizens of this country have faced a decade of destruction. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and with that being said, I wish to commend the Opposition Leader once again for echoing the voices of the people who depend on us in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to commend the Opposition Leader and the Member for Siparia for outlining a comprehensive plan on how a UNC Government will handle your affairs, the people affairs. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Opposition Leader had Members of the Government spinning after she outlined that comprehensive plan to deal with the affairs affecting our population.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: She had the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West confused, that when he started his contribution he had to ask the question of, one would have to wonder how the UNC will accomplish these plans. Mr. Deputy

Speaker, I say to them today, we have done it before and we will do it again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we will do it again and we will do it better this time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, my constituents are very involved in their representation. They are very involved, from Enterprise, Longdenville, Lange Park, Warrenville, Cunupia, Jerningham, every community they are well involved in their representation.

Some of them have even contacted me, labelling this budget and the governance of this Government as a decade of disaster, hardship and tragedy, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

6.10 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, I was very surprised that the Minister focussed a lot on the theme of this budget, Steadfast and Resolute. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in listening to the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, I really felt sorry for her this year. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services in this fiscal year should be the last one to praise the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: I felt sorry for her because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, she was left with no choice but to come here today and report on the Government system established grants, what has been there, what is still there. And when I say established grants, she reported on established grants which people are struggling to even apply for,

much less to get an approval and become a recipient of these established grants.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, she reported on established grants for which citizens of this country have to face a stressful means test, bad attitudes at regional offices. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you look at the recurrent expenditure and development expenditure under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services you would see that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services struggled to expend in the fiscal year 2024. They struggled. So, to listen to the Minister today, it was really depressing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services could not speak to any new programme roll outs to really impact the social issues affecting the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—which is a sad day for the poor and vulnerable in this country. The Minister resorted to reporting on matters in the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, and even the Ministry of Labour, because the Minister was struggling to report on her own Ministry here today, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister spoke about digital wallet. Mr. Deputy Speaker, what was the Minister really speaking about when she spoke about digital wallet when the Ministry is struggling to get persons onto direct deposit, which is to move away from the cheque system and have their moneys from grants deposited in banking accounts? But you are coming here today to tell us about digital wallet. Mr. Deputy Speaker, promises, promises, promises which have not been materializing in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister spoke to literacy, promises again. Adult literacy mentioned over and over, and over, and you cannot seem to hear any success level figures given to us here in the Minister's contribution.

We are yet to hear, Mr. Deputy Speaker, about this citizens' engagement unit which is supposed to help with people's issues when it comes to each Member of Parliament having a liaison with their local boards. The Minister spoke about nothing like that here today. Tunapuna and Arima making public assistant grants easier for persons to access. This has been a promise year after year to have these two offices opened. So today you hear the words, "we will implement, we are looking at this, we are looking at that", but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, no real success.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister went on to ask: What do we on this side have against the poor and vulnerable? Mr. Deputy Speaker, who advocates more for the poor and vulnerable than Members of the Opposition?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I will answer the Minister here today and let the Minister and the Government know that we on this side have the poor and vulnerable at heart—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—and we will take care of them. It is not long again before you demit office and we take office—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—and we get that opportunity to take care of the poor and vulnerable.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, they come here and they boast about the poor and

vulnerable, helping the poor and vulnerable, and every one of them on this side they struggle to help the poor and vulnerable in their very own constituency.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: So they know we are speaking the truth when we speak about the “sufferation” of the poor and vulnerable in this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister even went on to attack the Member for Siparia for speaking about senior citizens and what they have access to, based on this budget presentation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I spoke before to the Estimates. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you look at “senior citizens” in this budget presentation and the Estimates presented to us, you would see that the sums allocated to senior citizens’ homes are insignificant and inconsequential and do not in any way improve the lives of our senior citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: When you want to speak, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to senior citizens and helping senior citizens, I did not hear the Minister of Social Development and Family Services speak about how many senior citizens have applied for senior citizens’ pension. They have been waiting; they have qualified. They have been waiting for over a year for a visit from caseworkers and caseworkers are facing overload. And you speak about protecting and taking care of senior citizens in this country, when they cannot even get an established grant of the senior citizens’ grant which they applied and qualified for and they have met all requirements.

To this day, they cannot receive their grant. They have to wait for a new fiscal year because it is either they did not receive enough money, it is either they are facing casework overload that they cannot go and visit these people, or it is either when they go to the regional offices, they have to now give their documents

to a security and they are not even sure if it is reaching the liaison officers or the caseworkers, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So do not come here to tell us about this Government is taking care of the senior citizens of this country when we know it is not so, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Social Development and Family Services kept praising the theme of this budget of Steadfast and Resolute. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we on this side think about “steadfast and resolute”, we can think about a PNM decade of this steadfastly and resolutely destroyed state institutions—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—steadfastly and resolutely presided over spiralling and rampant crime, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Steadfastly and resolutely destroyed the business environment, several businesses closing down and unemployment escalating in this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, steadfastly and resolutely starved the poor and vulnerable where they cannot even afford rent in this country, and the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West will come here today to describe this budget as one that is responsible. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know you could be responsible, but you could be responsible with a level of care and understanding, you know. And you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you could also be responsible by being responsible or pretending to be responsible.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, steadfastly and resolutely. What we can think about is steadfastly and resolutely destroy the infrastructure by failing to widen the road

network or rehabilitate the pothole-ridden roadways, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, every facet of people's daily lives, they have steadfastly and resolutely destroyed or fail to address.

6.20 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member even stressed—the Minister, sorry, even stressed on “Forging Pathways to Prosperity”, part of the theme of this budget. Today, I want to ask this Government: How can we forge pathways to prosperity when there were insufficient social safety nets during COVID-19? Numerous people have repeatedly visited my office and other MPs' offices complaining about the non-receipt of financial assistance to date, COVID relief grants—

Mr. Indarsingh: All 19 of them.

Ms. V. Mohit:—Salary Relief Grants, et cetera. All 19 of us, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I know they on that side faced the same problem. How can we forge pathways to prosperity when you have a neglect of housing needs, incomplete housing projects and lengthy waiting periods to even get to call for an interview? You have a reference number on a card and you are awaiting that call for 20-plus years. How can we forge pathways to prosperity when we have cuts in education programmes, reduction and challenges in accessing GATE?

Deputy Speaker, a constituent of mine messaged me this morning and I want to read this message just as he sent it:

Good evening, my dear MP,

Just take note or pass it on. In this budget speech, the Minister of Finance mentioned that a lot of people benefited from GATE. I depend on the taxi to maintain my home. I was paying \$2,200 a semester. They raised it to \$6,000 a semester in the midst of COVID, when two passengers could not

have paid for a full tank of fuel for the car.

That is a constituent, and I am speaking here to cuts in education programmes, challenges with GATE. So how can we forge pathways to prosperity, Mr. Deputy Speaker? How can we forge pathways to prosperity with rising food insecurity when you have inadequate food support? They promised us the food box programme to assist with the food card programme. Nothing to date Mr. Deputy Speaker. Nothing to date.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, how can we forge pathways to prosperity with poor management of public utilities, where the poor and vulnerable have issues with reliable access to clean water? Water supply remains a big issue in this entire country. You know, every day as I wake up in the morning, I see several messages for truck borne supply in this day and age; truck borne supply two and three times for the week with vulnerable families. And if you owe a dollar on your WASA bill, “is pressure for yuh”, no truck borne water. These are the serious issues, social issues facing the poor and vulnerable in this country.

How can we forge pathways to prosperity with limited access to health care, where many citizens are waiting—you heard it from the Opposition Leader, all MPs you will hear lamenting this—with persons being on the waiting lists, et cetera? Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know the ear of the leader must ring with the voices of the people, and that goes for the Prime Minister. Because I want to reiterate from a JSC—and we must not fall for the Minister of Health’s pronouncement that the public health care system is free and the citizens are receiving the best health care.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Thursday, 30 November, 2023, these JSC meetings,

which went into 2024, you would see a series of meetings, “Public healthcare system slammed at JSC town hall meeting” at the JCS for Social Services and Public Administration. So the poor and vulnerable face so much because they have no choice but to go to these health facilities and sometimes you are wondering—the Minister of Health is sound asleep—who is really listening when it comes to these issues facing our vulnerable population who have no choice but to depend on these institutions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this budget has really failed the poor and vulnerable. An analysis of the Government’s policies, implementation strategies and outcomes reveal a pattern of inefficiencies, neglect and mismanagement. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to reflect a little on—you know, I was sitting here earlier and I said, let me reflect a little bit, really and truly, on PNM’s governance. Let us reflect on what the poor and vulnerable are really facing in this country. And I was telling my colleagues from Moruga/Tableland, you know, under this Government, people died awaiting pension—

Ms. Benjamin: True.

Ms. V. Mohit:—and we say we are taking care of the senior citizens. People died awaiting hospital beds. Mr. Deputy Speaker, under this Government, people died awaiting surgery. People died awaiting a caretaker from the GAP programme. Mr. Deputy Speaker, people died awaiting a firearm. It is either naturally or by crime. Families have mashed up arising out of the COVID pandemic.

[Device goes off]

Hon. Members: *[Laughter]*

Ms. V. Mohit: And you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, domestic violence is on the rise under this Government. Suicide is on the rise—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, one second. Again, Members, please, by now we know the rule of the House. All mobile phones are on silent or switched off, please.

Ms. V. Mohit: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Suicide is on the rise, as I was saying. So this country is really going downhill when it comes to PNM's governance and their fiscal measures.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, the media reached out to me in terms of the social sector and you know, this budget presentation makes it clear that this Government has once again failed to prioritize the needs of social sector recipients. Mr. Deputy Speaker, despite their grand declarations, the most vulnerable, our elderly, single mothers, persons with disabilities and the unemployed continue to be marginalized.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to dissect a little bit in terms of the presentation by the Minister himself and I want to comment a bit on, you know, the impact of what the Minister has presented as it relates to the social sector. What we saw was an insufficient increase in social welfare grants. Mr. Deputy Speaker, no marginal increases for senior citizens, in terms of the senior citizens' pension. No more marginal increases for persons with public assistance—who receive the public assistance and mind you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, senior citizens now have to pay for their own medication because they have challenges with CDAP. Senior citizens have to pay property tax. During my walkabouts, many senior citizens would have said to me, “We have to pay property tax now with just a pension.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now move to this burning issue, no increase in anything for the disabled community.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: This budget failed to expand disability support. This presentation falls woefully short in its provisions for persons with disabilities.

6.30 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, despite the growing number of people in need, there has been no significant expansion of the Disability Assistance Grant. You know if it is one group of people I really wished, we on this side really wished, could have gotten some form of increase, was the members of the disabled community who received the disability grant.

There are no new programmes to ensure meaningful inclusion in the workforce for them either. Just imagine today, the Minister spoke about senior citizens and the bus service. Madam Minister may need to revisit the operations of the bus service provided by the Ministry of—paid for, not provided by, paid for by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, just imagine to date, the ELDAMO bus service catering to the specific needs of the differently-abled remains inoperative. My colleague is correct. The ELDAMO service has collapsed in this country.

Mr. Ram: Just like the Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Over and over, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Sometimes I wonder if I come here and I just speak, and you know, if the Government really listens to the plight of the people and those who are suffering. Time and time again, I have asked about this ELDAMO service and was told that it is working and the disabled community is receiving this service. It is fully operational. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I refer to a *Trinidad Express* article, May 12, 2024:

“Only one ELDAMO PTSC driver for 6 buses”

How much worse can it get? And you are saying that you support this theme of “Steadfast and Resolute: ...Pathways to Prosperity”. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister definitely needs to revisit this transportation service for the poor and vulnerable.

The Minister spoke to the disability Bill—

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Interruption*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Of course. And I echo the sentiments of the Member for Siparia. We provided an efficient ELDAMO service during our tenure.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: The disabled community had no complaints. They felt protected, they felt taken care of—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—they could have called on us at any time, but under this Government, the services for them, it has collapsed.

Mr. Ram: Just like the Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: They cannot see any pathway to prosperity. So what “steadfast and resolute” are we speaking to? For years, each and every year, you would see in the *Social Sector Investment Programme* disabled Bill revised, almost ready, almost ready. Today, again, the Minister is saying almost ready. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when?

The Ministry has adopted their own policy—which is not a policy—that you cannot get more than one grant. No policy guiding that. So if you are getting disability, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you cannot get a food card. Do you know that? I am sure you face that issue in your constituency. So when will these legislations

be brought before the House, time and time again we ask, to protect the disabled community. Again, I say their time is short but we will do it, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Because if we are to wait on the Government, we will keep waiting. Our disabled community expected much more in this budget. They expected much more.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister spoke about the national therapeutic centre in Carlsen Field. Again nothing for the disabled community by this Government. Since 2021, the Member for Arouca/Maloney would have responded to a question to say by September 2021, works will be completed at this national therapeutic centre in Carlsen Field. The Minister today is reporting it will be the first of its kind. The UNC built that facility. We must remind them of that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: It was fully operational under the United National Congress. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know what this Government did? They evicted the CKFTO and the Cerebral Palsy Society of Trinidad and Tobago from that facility which provided therapeutic services to the children. When we asked, they put them in some facility down in Couva, then they could not make again and they just left them stranded.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, through the instruction of the Member for Siparia and the goodness of this side, because we have the disabled at heart, we would have worked with the business community. And today, I say thank you to Price Club Supermarket, the Cerebral Palsy Society of Trinidad and Tobago, and the CKFTO have started their therapeutic services at a building located on Ramsaran Street provided by Price Club. This is UNC working for you. This is what you call

strong, public-private partnership.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are in Opposition and we are already doing it right.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, can you imagine when we go into Government? Not if, when we go into Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: So they will come here and boast but we have the facts, we have the figures, we speak to the NGOs, we speak to the people, we carry out meaningful discussions. We have carried out discussions with the disabled community through our budget consultations, which we held during our recess period as instructed by the Member for Siparia and the disabled community would have voiced their concerns with us and we know exactly what they are suffering from, the neglect they are facing under this Government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this budget lacked focus on mental health services and I want to look a little bit at street dwelling. Homelessness is growing in Trinidad and Tobago. Whether we like it or not, we must face the facts and I must say homelessness is growing under this Government. You know why, Mr. Deputy Speaker? They are focused on buildings versus issues.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: So we will await a socially-displaced centre to be constructed, then to deal with the issue.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, according to the Social Sector Investment Programme, a total of 376 street dwellers were counted at the end of fiscal 2023. But what is

notable is according to the Social Sector Investment Programme 2025, as at November, which is just a few months later, the total number of street dwellers jumped from 376 to 624; from 376 in a matter of months to 624. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is sad to know that homelessness continues to rise in this country.

Recently, I would have had an issue in the community of Chaguanas East and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. I wrote to the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, and the Minister responded and the Minister had me liaise with a team and the team visited the community of Chaguanas East with my staff. But you know what was depressing? You know what was amazing? The staff had no way on how to really deal with this situation. The staff was telling the street dwellers “go down the road, take ah PTSC bus, go to San Fernando General Hospital to be assessed”. Mr. Deputy Speaker, are you hearing that? You are telling street dwellers “go down the road by Courts in Chaguanas, take ah PTSC bus, head to San Fernando General Hospital to get yourself assessed”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us face the facts. These persons are on the streets. You really think they are going down the road by Courts, “take ah PTSC bus and go to San Fernando General Hospital to be assessed”? No. And on top of that, they have to get their own bus ticket. That is PNM governance for you and you are already seeing in ELDAMO, one driver for six buses.

6.40 p.m.

So how do we really deal with the issue of street dwelling if this is the Government’s approach to it? That you are leaving these people socially displaced to fend for themselves. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I even offered to get someone with a bus to assist because I—

Mr. Indarsingh: Care.

Ms. V. Mohit: Care, correct.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I speak, it is not I, because we care, and we have the poor and vulnerable at heart. Under the UNC, hundreds of persons were removed from the streets, and they ascended to better lives, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We had a progressive street dwelling unit, and I make no apologies. I know this is accurate. I know for a fact, under the Member for Siparia—this is accurate—the Member for Siparia was the Minister of the People and Social Development at that time. But now you have 600-plus street dwellers on the street, and they do not know what is next for them. Mr. Deputy Speaker, so really and truly, we are on a pathway to nowhere. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are on a pathway to nowhere with this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, this budget presentation is nothing short of an act of disloyalty and an act of betrayal of the people's trust, particularly Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the social sector. Mr. Deputy Speaker, under the PNM, the social services sector over the past five years has faced inadequate social safety nets where we have had failure to protect the most vulnerable. Make no joke about that, and there is no doubt about that either, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The PNM has only had poorly targeted programmes where you see a lot of wastage and inefficiencies, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The PNM's five years in the social sector, you heard it just now, would have displayed neglect of the differently abled community. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the PNM's five years of the social sector would have displayed a disheartening neglect of the youth, the vulnerable youth,

at-risk youth, and the elderly of this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and why I say at-risk youth, time and time again, you will hear in certain areas that you have programmes for at-risk youths. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this problem is throughout the country, and it needs to be dealt with in a holistic approach throughout the country, not in specific areas each and every year, and you have other at-risk communities awaiting assistance.

You have a Youth Caravan going about the country. It has been completed with big budgeted amounts for that. What has been the success story out of that thus far? Just to say you did a Youth Caravan here there and everywhere, but you have no success out of that. How many youths got jobs out of that? We cannot say. How many persons would have had access to social services out of that? We cannot say. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the PNM's five years in the social sector represent a lack of vision and innovation in the social services sector.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, just yesterday I had the privilege of being a part of Youth Budget Talks, and it was amazing to see and listen to the contribution of the young people of our beloved nation. I just want to commend these young people, and let them know to continue to fight for your place in this society. I want to let these young people know that their voice is most important in taking our country forward. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when the discussion of AI arose yesterday, I was amazed to see the line-up of these young people and how excited they were to contribute to AI and how excited they were to see AI implemented in our country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the social sector, while other nations are embracing digital solutions and innovative strategies to improve service delivery, the PNM has largely relied on the outdated methods that are no longer fit for purpose, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If you walk into any government office, any social services

office, you have problems of lost files and lost documents, and this Government comes time and time again, and states that they are spending money on digitization, Mr. Deputy Speaker, yet we cannot see it happening. Each and every time you hear about social services delivery, you hear about lost files, come back with your documents, six months have passed, and “woo,” we did not find that file, the officer was on vacation, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The failure to innovate not only leaves us lagging behind other nations but also deprives our citizens of the benefits that come with modernization, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the PNM’s management of the social services sector during their current term has really been, based on what I just listed out to you, marked by inefficiency, neglect, and most of all, lack of vision, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

But you have heard it from the Member for Siparia, and I would reiterate it here again. I will reiterate it here again. Mr. Deputy Speaker, a UNC Government will not see our people starve and suffer. A UNC Government will revitalize the direct cash transfer programmes, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: We would not deprive our citizens and give them a means test to pressure them that they cannot even qualify using the means test, or they have to be scared to talk and say what their real situations are when they have gone through the means test process, Mr. Deputy Speaker. A UNC Government will strengthen and expand GATE to deal with our vulnerable, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, a UNC Government will promote small and microenterprise development, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Increasing loans to give the poor and vulnerable a chance in society, increasing entrepreneurship training for our young people, and supporting cooperative societies, Mr. Deputy Speaker. A UNC Government will enhance social housing initiatives. I want to remind you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, our UNC Government, through the URP programme, it was not just a \$2 increase, we built houses.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You have two more minutes of your original speaking time, and you have an additional 10. Do you care to avail yourself.

Ms. V. Mohit: Of course, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Mr. Deputy Speaker, our UNC Government built houses for people throughout Trinidad and Tobago who were living below the poverty line and who were facing issues, in other words, the poor and vulnerable, under the URP programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Under the Member for Siparia, we have done our best, and we will do it again, in terms of securing housing for our people so that they do not only have to await a lottery system.

6.50 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a UNC Government will implement community-based agricultural programmes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: If we speak about reducing our food import bill and allowing our agricultural sector to grow, we must implement community-based agricultural programmes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a UNC Government will expand universal early

childhood education—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—which the poor and vulnerable depend on in this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know how depressing it is to pass ECCE centres and see vines growing on it? Taxpayers' dollars, you will hear many MPs speaking to that. Whilst you have people who cannot pay for a preschool for their child and they are depending on the ECCE centres, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Of course, a UNC Government will strengthen our social protection systems.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair.*

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, of course, a UNC Government will continue to foster private-public partnerships in an effort to reduce poverty reduction. When we speak poverty reduction, we mean poverty reduction, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Of course, Mr. Deputy Speaker—Madam Speaker, of course, we will provide jobs, we will deal with unemployment so our poor and vulnerable have a chance, Mr. Deputy Speaker—Madam Speaker, to gain an income honestly, Mr. Deputy Speaker—Madam Speaker—sorry, I am just having a little issue transitioning there. Yes? [*Laughter*] Madam Speaker, of course, a UNC Government will do all of these to ensure that our social safety net is secured. Madam Speaker, I want to move a little bit quickly to my very own constituency, socially, and in terms of representation. And let us speak crime. Madam Speaker, this Government has of itself, if we are to look at page 92 of the budget statement, this Government has confessed that it has failed to address crime and criminality in our country. They have confessed, Madam Speaker, that they have failed to deal

with our criminal situation in this country.

The Member for Port of Spain South was gallivanting today, I cannot describe it any better, speaking about social programmes to deal with crime. But, Madam Speaker, you know what was sad? What was sad—not that he could not even pronounce *Navratri*. He loves to make TikTok apparently, “Pene Debal”, on and on, Madam Speaker. But he spoke about social programmes and, Madam Speaker, he was fishing. What was surprising, the Minister could not outline one social programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Not one social programme that this Government has adopted under his Ministry to deal with the root causes of crime in this country. He could not outline one, Madam Speaker, not even the success of anything he could have spoken to here today, which was depressing to know that the Minister is, you know, responsible for part of National Security, the TTPS. Madam Speaker, the Minister of National Security spoke about police youth clubs. Time and time again I have been bullied when asked about the Cunupia Police Youth Club, whether it is operational or not, when they are operational. But time and time again I am asking for a facility. The Minister in the Ministry of National Security responsible for the TTPS, responsible for the police youth clubs, could not today mention the Cunupia Police Youth Club. Madam Speaker, I was heartbroken by that. Because if you are speaking about at-risk communities, if you are speaking dealing with criminal situations, dealing with our youth, dealing with the root causes of crime, then the Cunupia Police Youth Club which we have been lobbying for, for years, should have been at least the top five in what the Minister listed here today. But, Cunupia is looking on. The Cunupia Police Youth Club takes care of different communities

in Chaguanas East, and I am sure they are looking on. And I am sure when it comes to 2025, they will definitely make the right choice for the right party to get their long-awaited facility which the UNC has always assisted with, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, Property taxation: What was depressing in this budget presentation by the Minister of Finance is he failed to really provide some figures as to what each corporation will get, and each corporation impacts each MP. Madam Speaker, the Minister could not provide any figures as to what the corporations will get out of property tax. In fact, nobody knows, and what I can say today, not even the Minister knows.

Madam Speaker, Agriculture: The constituency of Chaguanas East is plagued with that Giant African Snail issue. I would have spoken about the bounty programme some years ago in this very Chamber. The Government tried to adopt it, but, Madam Speaker, they adopted it in the wrong way. And it failed in no time. My constituency is really grappling with this issue of the Giant African Snail, and the Government must not only mention, as they did on page 70 of the budget, that they are dealing with invasive species but they must deal with the issue of the Giant African Snail which continues to affect households, continues to affect farmers, continues to affect pets, continues to affect everything as it relates to my constituents.

Madam Speaker, this Finance Minister failed to speak about infrastructure for the constituency of Chaguanas East. The Minister spoke about roads and so on, out of my constituency, one probably he spoke about in the central region.

Madam Speaker: Four minutes.

Ms. V. Mohit: Yes. But I wanted to hear about Endeavour Road, and Warren Munroe Road, I heard nothing about that. Madam Speaker, I want to speak quickly about my constituents and what they would have asked me to raise in this budget presentation. Dyette Estate Residents Association looked forward to more infrastructural works in the constituency. The Trinidad and Tobago Disabled Peoples' International, they looked forward to a revision of the standard means test, they looked forward for an increase in the disability grant—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—which they did not get. They looked forward to the reinstatement of food cards—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—which this Government failed to do for those persons living with disabilities. The disabled community looked forward to special allowances for caregiving mothers who have to stay at home and take care of their children, which this Government did not speak to in this budget.

Madam Speaker, the Chin Chin Residential Development would have asked for the infrastructural works as well. The Cerebral Palsy Society of Trinidad and Tobago would have asked that, you know, the Government immediately release subventions to approved NGOs, and give more employment to the disabled community. The farmers would have asked for their incentives, the Jerningham Junction Farmers. Public transportation operators would have asked for designated transportation hubs and addressing the traffic issue. The Cunupia Police Youth Club would have asked for their facility, the Endeavour Sports Club would have asked for their upgrade which I wrote to the Minister of Sport and Community Development for, for the Avidesh Samaroo Park, and the Point Pleasant Park

community would have asked for spraying. Spraying to be done by the IVCD, Madam Speaker. And, of course, Kings Park as well, asking for spraying to be done within their communities.

Madam Speaker, as an Opposition MP, I am proud to say today that we would have initiated in the constituency of Chaguanas East homework centres, therapeutic centres, helped single mothers, helped families. Madam Speaker, I say to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the Government is not Trinidad and Tobago so do not get confused. The UNC shall be there once again—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—to take you out of this struggle under the Member for Siparia, we look forward to working with you the people of Trinidad and Tobago and addressing your needs as a society. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

7.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Member for Tobago East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy): Madam Speaker, I want to thank you for recognizing me and giving me the opportunity to join in, in this very important debate. Madam Speaker, I wish to start off my commending the Minister of Finance, as well as the Minister of Planning and Development and their respective teams for a very progressive, well-detailed budget presentation.

Madam Speaker, the theme was not chosen at random. It symbolizes a sacred covenant between the Government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity clearly signals our Government's continued unwavering commitment to ensuring a sustainable future

for every citizen. We wholeheartedly recommit to visionary leadership and effective governance dedicated to shaping the future of boundless opportunities for every Trinbagonian man, woman, boy and girl.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, it is very easy to sit on the sidelines and pontificate when one does not have the responsibility of approximately 1.5 million lives. When one is not directly accountable for the well-being of 1.5 million lives, it is simple to make grand promises and propose flawed policies. When one does not have ultimate responsibility for 1.5 million lives, one can easily say, as the Leader of the Opposition did, “Lie, cry and mamaguy,” in response to a national budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, there is an African proverb—

Madam Speaker: Member for Tobago East. There is a particular word that you used. Okay? I will ask you to withdraw it.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: I withdraw that word, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there is an African proverb, which says, the weight of the salt is felt by the one carrying it. Leading Trinbagonians is no easy task but with the unwavering support of his Cabinet, MPs and the wider public service, the hon. Prime Minister has skillfully steered Trinidad and Tobago through challenging times. Having had the opportunity to serve in the Office of the Prime Minister for two consecutive terms, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister for his exceptional leadership.

Madam Speaker, before I report to the Parliament on the portfolio that I am assigned, please permit me to clarify some of the misconceptions as it pertains to

Tobago, the central government's commitment to the people of Tobago, the Government's supports of Tobago's development agenda and the allocation to the Tobago House of Assembly.

Madam Speaker, if you approach any of my ministerial colleagues and ask them if they wanted a larger allocation, they will all say, yes. If you ask the hon. Minister of Finance if he wanted to have a larger allocation for his Ministry to execute his work, he would say, yes. It is safe to say, we all can call for more, but what we have to do is work within the parameters of what has been allocated and make the best of it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, in Tobago, there is a common belief that the funds allocated to the Ministries and central government agencies do not really benefit Tobago. But let me tell you, that is simply not true, Madam Speaker. The allocation to the Tobago House Assembly is specifically meant for the administration of services in Tobago, as well as the development of the people and the island of Tobago. Madam Speaker, \$2.599 billion, equivalent to 4.35 per cent of the national budget, has been earmarked for the Tobago House of Assembly in fiscal 2025. This allocation is specifically designated for the administration of Tobago's business, ensuring direct and tangible benefits for the people of Tobago. Madam Speaker, this sum does not include an additional \$678.5 million that has been allocated to various Ministries and state agencies to execute major projects in Tobago, in keeping with their obligations under the Sixth Schedule of the THA Act, No. 40 of 1996.

Madam Speaker, whenever national programmes are being discussed around the Cabinet table, my colleague, the Member of Parliament for Tobago West, and I

have always advocated for Tobagonians to be beneficiaries. We have always sought to ensure that our constituents benefit fully and equitably from the national programmes. The citizens of Trinidad may not see direct benefits from funds allocated to Tobago. On the other hand, Tobago has undergone significant development in both its social and physical infrastructure due to direct involvement of the central government. This progress has been achievable through the unwavering dedication of various Ministries and agencies making use of their allocated budgets and receiving support from the central government to drive Tobago's development agenda. The positive impact of these advancements is clearly evident through the enhanced quality of life and the emergence of new opportunities for Tobago's residents.

Madam Speaker, I just heard the Member for Chaguanas East complaining about water. Madam Speaker, I am very fortunate in Tobago and in Tobago East that the Ministry of Public Utilities and WASA have been ensuring that Tobagonians received water. Madam Speaker, "water tuh buss pipeline".

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: By way of illustration, Madam Speaker, of how Tobagonians benefit directly from allocations of central government and the Ministries and agencies, I want to use the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services as my first example. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services just spoke, but what she did not do is break out the numbers and the figures specific to Tobago.

Madam Speaker, under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, 6,471 Tobagonians benefit from approximately \$195,935,520 annually in welfare benefits. That sum represents, Madam Speaker, beneficiaries of the Senior

Hon. A. Webster-Roy (cont'd)

Citizens' Pension, 4,088, at a monthly expense of \$14,443,750; Public Assistance Grant, 364 beneficiaries in Tobago, at a monthly expense of \$503,550; Disability Assistance Grant, 387 beneficiaries in Tobago, at a monthly expense of \$780,100; Disability Assistance Grant (Minors), 131 beneficiaries in Tobago, a monthly expense of \$201,000; Food Support Programme, Madam Speaker, 701 beneficiaries in Tobago, at a monthly expense of \$399,560; 6,471 Tobagonians benefiting monthly from \$16,327,960 directly under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development: Home Improvement Subsidy and Home Construction Subsidy programme, \$3,690,000 was distributed to 120 beneficiaries in Tobago. The total number of disbursements for Tobago under the subsidy programme since 2021 is 232 beneficiaries, valued at \$7.85 million, Madam Speaker. That is an allocation under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development directly benefiting Tobagonians.

Within the last fiscal period, under the Ministry of Public Utilities, Madam Speaker, 1,640 Tobagonians benefited from the Community Water Improvement Programme, 14 households in Tobago benefited from the Utilities Assistance Programme and 11 persons benefited from the Residential Electrification Assistance Programme.

7.10 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, I heard the Member for Siparia mention earlier in her contribution, that the Children's Authority needed to be

decentralized, and when she gets back there she would decentralize the Children's Authority. But, Madam Speaker, despite her wishful thinking, despite the hon. Member's wishful thinking, Madam Speaker, I wish to assure the hon. Member, as well as the rest of Trinidad and Tobago, that Children's Authority is already using a decentralized model.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, in Tobago, personnel costs associated with operations of the Children's Authorities facilities in Tobago for the last fiscal period amounted to \$3,646,336.75. Additionally, last fiscal year the Children's Authority spent \$227,610.60 on care and maintenance of children under their supervision in Tobago. Madam Speaker, the Charlotteville Methodist Primary School, can boast of being one of the first schools nationally to fully powered by solar energy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, I want to big up my colleague, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West. The 15 kilowatts solar plant project in Charlotteville Methodist Primary School, represents a significant step towards sustainable energy practices and climate resilience in Tobago. This initiative was financed by the Ministry of Public Utilities via the *Public Sector Investment Programme* at cost of \$631,000.69, approximately. Madam Speaker, under the National Water Sector Transformation Programme, the Ministry of Public Utilities and WASA recently awarded a contract for the Goldsborough New Water Treatment Plant. On completion, this project will benefit approximately 6828 persons in windward communities. Madam Speaker, and I am proud to say that I will be one of the beneficiaries.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, I can continue to highlight various ways in which allocations from Ministries and state agencies directly benefit Tobago, but I think I have made my point.

Madam Speaker, Thomas Sowell once said, and I quote:

“There are few things more dishonourable than misleading the young.”

Hon. Member: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Excuse me. Is there more than one person on their legs making a contribution? Because I am hearing a lot of talk. And Member for Couva South, I do not know if you wanted to make an interruption, I was particularly hearing you. So, I do not know if it is you want to make an interruption, you are senior enough to know how to make it. Member for St. Augustine and Member for Princes Town, if you all need to carry on a lengthy conversation, I will invite you to go out, have it, and you can always welcome to come back. Member for Tobago East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, as I was saying before, Thomas Sowell once said, and I quote:

“There are few things more dishonourable than misleading the young.”

Madam Speaker, today I take the opportunity to caution the Chief Secretary and his Executive Council, that there are few things more dishonourable than misleading your electorate. Madam Speaker, Tobago’s decline under the PDP/TPT Administration is not primarily due to a lack of funds, but an abundance of corruption, mismanagement, and waste.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, the effective and efficient management of Tobago's affairs depends on the Executive Council dedicating more time, more effort, and more resources to the thoughtful and strategic administration of the island's business. This requires careful planning and execution of policies and initiatives aimed at fostering the social, economic and infrastructure development of Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Executive Council must prioritize collaborative and constructive engagements with central government, that serve the best interest of Tobagonians, by focusing on governance and development, and avoiding petty conflicts and victimization, the Executive Council can significantly enhance the well-being, prosperity, and overall prospects of the people and the communities of Tobago. And Madam Speaker, I am passionate about this, because I live in my constituency. I am raising three children in Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, one way the Executive Council can demonstrate its willingness to put the interest of Tobago above its own political ambitions, is by calling on their friends in the UNC to support the two Tobago Autonomy Bills.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, Tobago can count on the support of every PNM Member in this honourable House. Can Tobago, Madam Speaker, count on the PDP/TPT and their friends in the UNC? Madam Speaker, I doubt they can.

Madam Speaker, I live in Tobago East, I serve the people of Tobago East, and I am blessed to have had the opportunity to serve them with dignity and

integrity for two consecutive terms. Madam Speaker, I serve a prideful people, I serve a good people, and my constituents deserve a good, stable Government and governance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, Tobago East is ripe with potential. We have the right attitude, the right people, and the right desires for our island our and our constituency. Madam Speaker because we recognize that Tobago's full potential cannot be recognized unless we have greater autonomy, my constituency office, my team and I, we have working with our constituents preparing them to be in a better position. So that when the opportunities that greater autonomy would present, when it comes to Tobago, Tobago East would be ready, and willing, and prepared to fully reap the benefits.

Madam Speaker, during the last fiscal period the Tobago East constituency office partnered with Robley Baynes Tax and Accounting Services, and I want to thank that agency for rendering free services to constituents in Tobago East, by way of hosting a three-part business workshop series for our constituents to help build businesses in the constituency and drive commerce. I thank Robley Baynes again, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, recognizing the need to support women and prepare them for a new Tobago, my team would have continued our "Chai and Chat" initiative bringing women together, helping them to meet each other in a safe space to discuss issues, and to find workable solutions, building a network of resolute women in Tobago East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: And because Madam Speaker, we recognize that men are just as important in building this nation, and building a community and our constituency, and because we recognize that men face the same challenges as women, we would have commenced a programme called, “The Hang-Jack Initiative”, creating a safe space for men to meet to discuss issues challenging men, to discuss how they can resolve those issues, and to find meaningful and workable solutions.

Madam Speaker, because we recognize that period poverty is a real issue in our constituency, we would have partnered with an NGO called the Caribbean Women Honors and Empowerment(CWHE) in Trinidad, and they would have come to Tobago, partnered with the Tobago East constituency office for us to host what we called the PPEN initiative(Period Poverty Ends Now). Madam Speaker, we were able to partner with schools in Tobago East to ensure that the vulnerable girls at those schools would have their feminine hygiene products provided for them. And I thank CWHE, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, we also partnered with the Diabetes Association of Trinidad and Tobago. We recognize that the health of our constituents represents the wealth of our constituency, and to ensure that we have a constituency and constituents that are in their best possible health, we partnered with the Diabetes Association of Trinidad and Tobago, to host a proper health clinic at the Tobago East constituency office.

Madam Speaker, we will continue to support our constituents to help them, to prepare them, to become the ones who drive Tobago, this new Tobago, when we get that greater autonomy. And while we will continue to roll out in the

constituency level, we would continue to do so also at the Ministry level, at the Central Administrative Services Tobago.

7.20 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I have often heard those on the other side complaining about the allocations received. I have heard persons in Tobago complain about the allocations received. Madam Speaker, it is about managing your resources well and using it strategically. One of the things that we have consistently done at Central Administrative Services Tobago, without a line Item, is every July/August, we have continued to create opportunities through our School Internship Programme for young people in Tobago to have the opportunity to earn an income while getting on-the-job training, so that we help to build a workforce in Tobago that is resilient and ready and prepared to help Tobago's development agenda.

Madam Speaker, CAST has been able to do that year, on year, on year, by reprioritizing our allocation, moving our moneys around so that our young people would be able to benefit, Madam Speaker. And the same way CAST has been able to do that, other Ministries have been able to do that, Madam Speaker. And with the right attitude, I am positive that the THA would be able to reprioritize its allocation so that all of Tobago would benefit, Madam Speaker. It is a small pie, but we all can benefit from it equitably.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, I want to turn my attention to the Child Affairs Division and what we have been doing. Madam Speaker, from October 2015 to September 2024, the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs invested over \$1,107,000,000 in childcare and protection under Recurrent Expenditure alone.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, that is quite contrary to what we heard from the Opposition Leader this morning. Madam Speaker, more than half of this investment, approximately 55 per cent went to the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. Over \$494 million was invested in the care and protection of children in community residences. Again, Madam Speaker, this is only recurrent expenditure and it does not include investment made by other Ministries and agencies in the child care protection system.

Under the People's National Movement Administration, led by Dr. the hon. Keith Christopher Rowley, our Prime Minister, our country was able to develop the first ever National Child Policy, and we were able to further strengthen the child care protection system by ensuring the proclamation of Sections 3 (1) and (2) and 17 of the Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act, Chapter 46:04.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia spoke about wishful thinking, if they have the opportunity to get back there, about trying to create legislation, improve the child care and protection system. Madam Speaker, when I took the reins of childcare and protection in Trinidad and Tobago, I met a struggling child care and protection system. Madam Speaker, the Children's Authority was established without the supporting framework.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia's then AG, when he exited office, came back and sued the Government. The energies that I should have been putting into building all the childcare and protection system, we had to put that energy into fighting court matters, Madam Speaker, and they talk about caring for children, they talk about wanting a better childcare and protection system. Madam Speaker,

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the track record says otherwise.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, we have never hidden the facts and the realities of the situation from the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mrs. Cudjoe-Lewis: That is right.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: We have always been very honest and open.

Mrs. Cudjoe-Lewis: That is right.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: When we had the issue of the reports on child abuse in our homes, Madam Speaker, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago took decisive action. We launched an investigation. There was a report emanating from that investigation. Coming out from the action plan and the recommendations from the Justice Judith Jones Report, the Cabinet established a Standing Committee on Child Protection in 2022.

Madam Speaker, the Standing Committee on Child Protection had as one of its main tasks the implementation of the over 200 initiatives and activities under the work plan. Madam Speaker, I am proud to report that 82 per cent of the work plan activities were either completed or have commenced and are in progress. Madam Speaker, implementation of the Kinship Foster Care system, that has happened. Madam Speaker, the launch of the National Interagency Protocol for Child Abuse Prevention and Management, that has happened.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, child protection and safeguarding training for residential care workers, that was done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, proclamation of Sections 3 (1) and (2)

and 17 of the Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act, Chapter 46:04, that was done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, training of wards of the State, we did that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, enhancement of the complaint system in community residences, done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, implementation of a Transitioning Policy for Children at Community Residences, tick that box.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, foster care for migrant children, done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, onboarding of bilingual caseworkers, tick that off the box, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, and I can go on and on. I want to mention some of the other activities that we have been doing, but there are so much. But I want to mention a specific initiative, Madam Speaker. There has been a lot of criticism about not enough public education and sensitization. We have consistently gone out to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, raising awareness around issues around childcare, child protection, child abuse prevention, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, 2,411 members of the public were engaged on the streets

and other busy areas in discussions on child rights and child protection. Madam Speaker, 445 students were engaged on critical issues affecting them, and they shared their perspectives on child rights and child protection. Madam Speaker, 104 students in Tobago from two primary schools and two secondary schools were engaged, 881 students from 20 schools in Trinidad were engaged, 410 clients of 15 health centres participated in our pop-up workshop where we would have provided them information on child rights and child protection.

Madam Speaker, we increased awareness around issues pertaining to, again, child rights and child protection through our community outreaches. Madam Speaker, 87 per cent of the participants who we would have interacted with indicated that after their interactions with our various public education and sensitization initiatives, that they would have gained a greater insight on what to do in instances of child abuse, how to respond in terms of caring for their children, and where the resources are allocated in terms of finding solutions to issues affecting children.

Madam Speaker, in terms of enhancing skills, 97 participants were able to say that after engaging with us they saw an enhancement of their skills. Madam Speaker, we worked alongside the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, and I want to commend him. Madam Speaker, when you see you are dealing with the children, the future of your nation, sometimes you have to put aside the politics and look at the people and the service.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: The hon. Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, during last year's Standing Finance Committee, asked a question, and I said, "We are willing to partner and collaborate. If you have an initiative that you would want to

develop, come visit us. We will sit and we will talk.” I give him credit, he came. I give the Member for Tabaquite credit, she came. The Member for Moruga Tableland promised to come and “ain’t turn up”.

Mrs. Cudjoe-Lewis: “She on da side. She on dah side.”

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: But Madam Speaker, coming out of that engagement, an initiative was developed by the office, the constituency office for the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla. That initiative was adopted by the Office of the Prime Minister—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—and it is now being rolled out nationally, Madam Speaker. The Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla would have recognized that in his rural constituency, the issue of child abuse was prevalent, and he said to the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs, “I want us to work on finding a creative way to reach the people so they could understand the risks around child abuse, so that the children could understand.” And he put it simply, “Good touch and bad touch.” That is how simple he put it.

In The Know - On the Go has been going throughout communities and constituencies throughout Trinidad and Tobago. We recently worked with the constituencies in San Fernando, Port of Spain, we worked with Tobago and his constituency, and we have the intention of going to every single constituency office because we recognize that, Madam Speaker, the constituency office serves as a first responder.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Because we recognize that the constituency office serves as a first responder. If we train the staff, then they are better able to go out into the communities and provide the information, working alongside Government to bring

about meaningful change for our children. Again, I want to commend the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla. Madam Speaker, child protection stakeholder engagement—child protection is everybody's business. That has been our mantra going out throughout Trinidad and Tobago, reminding every single citizen that we all have a duty and a role to play in protecting our nation's children. Under our Child Rights Ambassadors Programme which caters for young people between the ages of 12 to 18 years. In fiscal 2024, we trained a further 26 child rights ambassadors, bringing our total number of child rights ambassadors in Trinidad and Tobago, over the last few years, to 389, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, those 389 child rights ambassadors, through their work, will have been able to reach over 400,000 persons in Trinidad and Tobago, directly impacting them and engaging them on the rights of children, and by teaching them about the rights of children, also reminding children about their responsibilities that accompany their rights, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I spoke about training awards for self sufficiency. Madam Speaker, we went into our community residences and we engaged some of our young persons who are getting ready to transition out. Following our training, 57 residents would have benefited, Madam Speaker, and out of the 57 residents who have benefited in 2023, we were able to provide scholarships for three of our young persons transitioning out of homes. Madam Speaker, that is commendable.

We would have provided support for civil society organizations under the payment per child system. They talk about needing to review and revamp the way we manage the childcare and protection sector, and we have been doing that. We have been systematically looking at the gaps and how we can close those gaps. We have been systematically reviewing the way we work with our stakeholders.

Madam Speaker, I am happy to know that 25 community residences that provided care for 376 children in fiscal 2024, would have benefited from \$8,366,720.23.

And Madam Speaker, I want to big up the Minister of Finance. There is a joke in the Cabinet that I like to beg. There is a joke I like to beg, but Madam Speaker, whenever it comes to matters pertaining to our children, the Minister of Finance has always been very generous.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: I want to say thank you on behalf of the children of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, as it pertains to subventions—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: No, this is true, true talk, eh. He has been very generous to us, very, very generous. Madam Speaker, as it pertains to subventions, the St. Jude's Home for Girls, the St. Mary's Children's Home, and the St. Dominic's Children's Home also cater for children in need of care and protection and in need of supervision. Under the support of central government, we have been able to continue providing subventions to these agencies, and we will continue to do so, even as we review the structure of the subvention system with the support of agencies, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, as we look towards fiscal 2025, some of the plans of the Child Affairs Division include an assessment of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. I heard the Member for Siparia mention in her budget contribution that we are going to review the Children's Authority. Madam Speaker, it is already on the work plan. We have—sorry, we have already started

the process to engage a consultant to help us review the Children's Authority to see if the existing model is the right model for Trinidad and Tobago, and if the existing model is deriving the best benefits for those vulnerable boys and girls. Member for Siparia, no need to worry, we are doing it already.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, in our work plan there is also the intention for us to review preventative programmes. This project aims to assess and improve the effectiveness of preventative social programs targeting young people in light of rising youth disorderly behaviour reported by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. And in doing this, we are also going to collaborate with the Judiciary. This is an initiative under the Standing Committee on Child Protection.

Madam Speaker, another activity that we would roll out in fiscal 2025, is specifically geared towards the East Port of Spain community. Madam Speaker, the East Port of Spain community intervention will provide vocational and life skills training to approximately 100 children in marginalized areas to help them achieve financial independence. Community stakeholders will deliver training sessions, focusing on entrepreneurship and life skills. Madam Speaker, again, we are very concerned about the outcomes of our children who pass through our childcare and protection system, especially those who would have either been in one of our residential facilities or who might have ended up in one of the rehabilitation centres.

So one of the things that we intend to do in fiscal 2025, as we have studied, is a trace to study to assess the level of care to past wards of the State. We want to gather data on the care and the lived experiences of former wards of the State, and

we will engage a consultant towards this end, Madam Speaker. We want to make sure that when they leave the care of the State, and they are out there on their own that they are thriving. We want to ensure that we can account for every boy or girl who would have passed through the system, so that they are not lost when they get out there on their own.

Madam Speaker, another activity that we are eagerly anticipating the roll out of, is the comprehensive midterm review of the implementation of the National Child Policy 2020 - 2030. After five years, Madam Speaker, it is imperative that we examine where we are as stakeholders and as a nation in achieving the developmental objectives for children.

And finally, Madam Speaker, one of the other activities I want to mention is the prevention and the-institutionalization efforts. The aim of the childcare and protection reform is to ensure children grow in loving, stable environments. So we want to look at ways that we can ensure that we promote more familial-type settings for the care of children, instead of institutions. And Madam Speaker, that is why the Kinship Foster Care policy is so important, and why I was extremely happy when we were able to roll out that policy. What it does, Madam Speaker, it gives families the opportunity to care for children who might not be able to stay with their immediate family. But more than that, Madam Speaker, it gives them the opportunity to access funding support of the State when they take in these children.

Madam Speaker, I want to give you an example. I was having a conversation with a lady who said that she had a child to take care of because the mother had died. She said, "I am willing. I am really willing to take care of this child". It was her niece. "I am willing to take care of my niece." But she said, "I

do not think I could make it financially”. “I already have three children that I am struggling to care for.” She said, “But if I get the support, I would take my niece so she would not have to be in a home”. Madam Speaker, the Kinship Foster Care policy would have allowed that aunt the opportunity to care for her child, and that child not having to go into a home. Madam Speaker, that is what we are doing, ensuring that our children get the best possible outcome.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: We have always been guided. Madam Speaker by the “best interest of the child” principle and we will continue to use that as the driving force as we continue to improve the childcare and protection system in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I would have mentioned the Children’s Authority briefly, but I want to mention one of the projects happening under the Children’s Authority that should be commissioned at the end of October. Madam Speaker, the National Care and Empowerment Centre, formerly the Establishment of a Consolidated Child Support Centre, that is what it was called in the books, but we are calling it the National Care and Empowerment Centre. This project seeks to outfit a child support center that can consolidate the authority’s current reception centres and provide suitable and secure accommodation for all children under its care.

Madam Speaker, the completion of phase one of this project amounted to a TT \$14,254,737.83 for infrastructure works. And at an additional cost of \$3.9 million for the other variations. Madam Speaker, I had the opportunity to visit the facility, and it is quite a state-of-the-art facility. My hope, my wish and my desire, is that the same care, love and attention to detail that went into creating the facility that the persons who are going to be working there would put that same care, love

and attention to detail when they are caring for our nation's most vulnerable children.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Because we recognize that the constituency office serves as a first responder. If we train the staff, then they are better able to go out into the communities and provide the information, working alongside Government to bring about meaningful change for our children. Again, I want to commend the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla. Madam Speaker, child protection stakeholder engagement—child protection is everybody's business. That has been our mantra going out throughout Trinidad and Tobago, reminding every single citizen that we all have a duty and a role to play in protecting our nation's children. Under our Child Rights Ambassadors Programme which caters for young people between the ages of 12 to 18 years. In fiscal 2024, we trained a further 26 child rights ambassadors, bringing our total number of child rights ambassadors in Trinidad and Tobago, over the last few years, to 389, Madam Speaker.

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Madam Speaker, another activity that we would roll out in fiscal 2025, is specifically geared towards the East Port of Spain community. Madam Speaker, the East Port of Spain community intervention will provide vocational and life skills training to approximately 100 children in marginalized areas to help them achieve financial independence. Community stakeholders will deliver training sessions, focusing on entrepreneurship and life skills. Madam Speaker, again, we are very concerned about the outcomes of our children who pass through our childcare and protection system, especially those who would have either been in

one of our residential facilities or who might have ended up in one of the rehabilitation centres.

So one of the things that we intend to do in fiscal 2025, as we have studied, is a trace to study to assess the level of care to past wards of the State. We want to gather data on the care and the lived experiences of former wards of the State, and we will engage a consultant towards this end, Madam Speaker. We want to make sure that when they leave the care of the State, and they are out there on their own that they are thriving. We want to ensure that we can account for every boy or girl who would have passed through the system, so that they are not lost when they get out there on their own.

Madam Speaker, another activity that we are eagerly anticipating the roll out of, is the comprehensive midterm review of the implementation of the National Child Policy 2020 - 2030. After five years, Madam Speaker, it is imperative that we examine where we are as stakeholders and as a nation in achieving the developmental objectives for children.

And finally, Madam Speaker, one of the other activities I want to mention is the prevention and the-institutionalization efforts. The aim of the childcare and protection reform is to ensure children grow in loving, stable environments. So we want to look at ways that we can ensure that we promote more familial-type settings for the care of children, instead of institutions. And Madam Speaker, that is why the Kinship Foster Care policy is so important, and why I was extremely happy when we were able to roll out that policy. What it does, Madam Speaker, it gives families the opportunity to care for children who might not be able to stay with their immediate family. But more than that, Madam Speaker, it gives them the opportunity to access funding support of the State when they take in these

children.

Madam Speaker, I want to give you an example. I was having a conversation with a lady who said that she had a child to take care of because the mother had died. She said, "I am willing. I am really willing to take care of this child". It was her niece. "I am willing to take care of my niece." But she said, "I do not think I could make it financially". "I already have three children that I am struggling to care for." She said, "But if I get the support, I would take my niece so she would not have to be in a home". Madam Speaker, the Kinship Foster Care policy would have allowed that aunt the opportunity to care for her child, and that child not having to go into a home. Madam Speaker, that is what we are doing, ensuring that our children get the best possible outcome.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: We have always been guided. Madam Speaker by the "best interest of the child" principle and we will continue to use that as the driving force as we continue to improve the childcare and protection system in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I would have mentioned the Children's Authority briefly, but I want to mention one of the projects happening under the Children's Authority that should be commissioned at the end of October. Madam Speaker, the National Care and Empowerment Centre, formerly the Establishment of a Consolidated Child Support Centre, that is what it was called in the books, but we are calling it the National Care and Empowerment Centre. This project seeks to outfit a child support center that can consolidate the authority's current reception centres and provide suitable and secure accommodation for all children under its care.

Madam Speaker, the completion of phase one of this project amounted to a

TT \$14,254,737.83 for infrastructure works. And at an additional cost of \$3.9 million for the other variations. Madam Speaker, I had the opportunity to visit the facility, and it is quite a state-of-the-art facility. My hope, my wish and my desire, is that the same care, love and attention to detail that went into creating the facility that the persons who are going to be working there would put that same care, love and attention to detail when they are caring for our nation's most vulnerable children.

7.40 p.m.

My hope, my wish, my desire is that the same care and love and attention to detail that went into creating the facility, that the persons who are going to be working there would put that same care and love and attention to detail when they are caring for our nation's most vulnerable children.

Madam Speaker, often times people ask for the opportunity to work, and then when you give them the opportunity to work, all they do is work. I want to send a signal to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. If you have any intentions of applying for a job at the Children's Authority or Gender and child affairs, if your interest is not about the best interest of the children of Trinidad and Tobago, "doh bother apply, ah doh want yuh".

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: "Doh bother apply". Madam Speaker, we need the right people, with the right attitude, the right skills but most of all, people with a love for children to enter into the childcare and protection system and to diligently work towards improving the circumstances of all our nation's children.

Madam Speaker, another activity out of the Children's Authority that I wish to mention is the outbound call centre. This project was a continuation of a

proactive and timely approach to intervention and case management of low and medium-risk cases by engaging tele-social work, in-person interviews, referrals to and follow-up with external agencies, and case closure or assignment to internal intervention teams. The teams successfully addressed 28 per cent of the cases brought to the Authority's attention in fiscal 2024, totalling 1,419 cases. The remaining 72 per cent were assigned to emergency response teams for investigation under the investigation and intervention unit.

Madam Speaker, the Children's Authority would have gotten some licks over the years, and rightly so at times. But, Madam Speaker, the Children's Authority has gone through a restructuring process. They have been fully resourced by the Ministry of Finance. They have started the recruitment process to ensure that we have the ground soldiers, we have the right people at the technical level but most importantly, Madam Speaker, the Children's Authority, they are working through their strategic plan to ensure that the Authority becomes the best version of itself. Even while the Authority is working towards becoming the best version of itself, we will continue, as I said before, through the engagement of a consultant, as we have already started, to review the model to see if it is the right model for Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I want to talk about some of the work that we have been doing under the Gender Affairs Division. And forgive me if I am going a bit quickly but, Madam Speaker, I am very proud to announce that the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago would have approved the National Strategic Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Sexual Violence 2023—2027. Madam Speaker, this is a first for Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, the NSAP represents the largest investment by government into matters pertaining to gender-based violence and sexual violence in Trinidad and Tobago. We were able, Madam Speaker, to launch this action plan. We have been going out to Ministries and communities, educating people on the action plan.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two minutes left of original speaking time. You are entitled 10 more minutes to wrap up your contribution as extended time, if you wish.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will take the 10 minutes and take the other two, and if you have extra, I will take it as well. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I want to let the public know that when we say the NSAP is for every citizen in Trinidad and Tobago, and we all have a part to play in ensuring the NSAP is successfully implemented, that is a fact. And to demonstrate that we would have received the support of the UN to create a braille version of the NSAP, so that visually impaired persons would be able to become partners in this process of ending gender-based violence in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we would have engaged 484 participants from various schools in our outreaches. We would have engaged 827 persons from the Civilian Conservation Corps in our public education and sensitization efforts around gender issues. Madam Speaker, a total of 265 youths, both male and female, were reached through our Spark initiative. We would have engaged police youth clubs. A total of 127 young persons from various police youth clubs across Trinidad and Tobago were trained so that they would become first responders in communities and agents of change, as we work towards ending gender-based violence in our society.

Madam Speaker, we would have partnered with the TTPost, putting our brochures and information in all the communities in Trinidad and Tobago, reaching persons at their homes by way of their mailbox, bringing information to them, over 400,000 pieces of information delivered to households in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I want to speak about our STEP programme, the Survivors Transformation and Empowerment Programme. This initiative was launched in this last fiscal year, Madam Speaker. I have been going out into communities, engaging persons, encouraging them to make use of STEP. Madam, STEP provides an opportunity for NGOs, faith-based organizations, any organization working with survivors and victims of gender-based violence or sexual violence, giving them the opportunity to access up to \$50,000 to provide training for a minimum of 10 persons.

Madam Speaker, under STEP, survivors, both male and female of gender-based violence, domestic violence, sexual violence have the opportunity to either access a grant funding put to use towards their business, enhancing an existing business, or establishing a business, or use it as a scholarship where they could get training, Madam Speaker. The reason why we implemented STEP, when we reviewed some of our clients from our shelter, Madam Speaker—and we do have a shelter, a national shelter, where we accept women and their dependents 18 years and under. Some of our clients, if they were not coming back to our shelter, were reentering other shelters. When we did our analysis, we recognized that one of the main reasons they were re-entering shelter programmes was because they were financially dependent on the perpetrators, and we recognized that we needed to

step up and get something in place to help them to become financially empowered. So STEP is there, available to all those persons who might have been victims.

Again, I want to stress, STEP is not for women only. If you are a man out there and you are a victim of domestic violence or gender-based violence, you can access the STEP programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: STEP is for both men and women who are victims and survivors of gender-based violence in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we also launched our women's economic empowerment programme, what we call our Women's Village. Madam Speaker, over 300 women from communities throughout Trinidad and Tobago would have benefited from the Women's Village. We hosted a Women's Village in Macoya, one in Tobago, one in San Fernando. The next projected location is Diego Martin, Madam Speaker. The Women's Village brings women together in a space where they could have the opportunity to promote their business, or learn how to establish a business because we have the resources right on the spot. I want to encourage the citizenry to make full use of the Women's Village.

Madam Speaker, I wanted to go on to CAST but I am running out of time. But as I speak to the people of Trinidad and Tobago again, Madam Speaker, I want to mention that despite the fact that Central Administrative Services Tobago would have had—well, we are responsible for the MET services in Tobago. Despite the fact that we have had a minor fire at the facility, we continue to be able to provide reliable, real-time information as it pertains to weather for Tobago, as well as supporting the services offered to Trinidad as well.

Madam Speaker, over the years, we would have been able to acquire state of the art equipment for MET services in Tobago, ensuring that we are one step ahead of the technology, of the time and ensuring that we have been able to provide reliable, timely data for Trinidad and Tobago and sometimes for the region.

Madam Speaker, again, under Central Administrative Services Tobago, I heard the Member for Chaguanas East mentioned that not enough energy and effort is being put into digitalization. Madam Speaker, at Central Administrative Services Tobago, we have been able to enhance the way we do our business. For example, we have an electronic child tracking and monitoring system at CAST. We were one of the first Ministries to do that, Madam Speaker.

7.50 p.m.

Madam Speaker, we are able to—when persons are now leaving or retiring, it is easier to locate their files and to start processing their benefits, because of that file tracking and monitoring system that we would have implemented at Central Administrative Services, Tobago. Madam Speaker, again under my portfolio, we have responsibility for the National AIDS Coordinating Committee, and we continue to partner with the Ministry of Health, ensuring that we try to control the spread of HIV and AIDS in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as other sexually transmitted infections, by engaging our young people and building meaningful collaborative relationships with stakeholders throughout Trinidad and Tobago and the wider region.

Madam Speaker, I want to assure the people of Trinidad and Tobago that your Government remains committed to your safety, your well-being, and your ability to thrive in Trinidad and Tobago. We recognize that, yes, there is work to be done and we have the will, the desire, and the capacity to get the work done.

Madam Speaker, we recognize that for Trinidad and Tobago to thrive, for Trinidad and Tobago to prosper, what we need is not just of all-of-government approach, but a whole-of-society approach. We need more persons to show that level of commitment, to put aside differences and partner with us, as we work towards building a strong stable Trinidad and Tobago. We need more persons to be like the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—put aside the political differences, and come and sit around the table with us, and discuss issues. We need more persons to be like the MP for Mayaro, to recognize that spotlight initiative was doing good for his constituency—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—and to boldly and publicly support the initiative. We need more people like the MP for Tabaquite—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—to come and sit around the table and say “yes, these are some of the initiatives and programmes that we could do to improve circumstances”, Madam Speaker. And I see my friend for Pointe-a-Pierre smiling at me. Even though he may not agree with me, there are many times when he would offer words of encouragement. We need more people like him—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—when they recognize, Madam Speaker, a good work is being done, but they are afraid to say it publicly. Madam Speaker, again, I want to commend the Minister of Finance. I want to commend the Minister of Public

Utilities. I want to commend each and every Member of the Government Bench, all my colleagues. I want to commend them for their dedication, their hard work and resilience, but most importantly, Madam Speaker, I want to commend my colleagues for serving the people of Trinidad and Tobago, with integrity and with pride. Madam Speaker, it is no easy task to serve, but we have done it with dignity and with class. And, Madam Speaker, I am thankful for the opportunity, I would have been given by the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I want to thank the Prime Minister, for his visionary leadership.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister has been able to take Trinidad and Tobago through some murky waters, and I declare and I decree that his work will not go in vain.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Trinidad and Tobago will continue to prosper. Trinidad and Tobago will continue to thrive, but most importantly, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago will live up to its full potential, under the astute leadership of Dr. the Hon. Keith Christopher Rowley, and this People's National Movement Government. I thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Monday, 7th October, 2024 at 10.00 a.m.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly

Adjourned at 7.55 p.m.