

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, October 07, 2024


The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2025) BILL, 2024

[Third Day]

 *Order for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 04, 2024].*

That the Bill be now read a second time

Question again proposed.

Madam Speaker: Those who have already contributed, those who have already spoken, are the hon. Colm Imbert, MP; hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, MP; hon. Stuart Young SC, MP; Mr. David Lee, MP; hon. Mr. Keith Scotland SC, MP; Mr. Dinesh Rambally, MP; Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox; Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP; hon. Ayana Webster-Roy, MP. Minister of Trade and Industry.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Trade and Industries (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and it is always an honour to come to the lower House and particularly at this time to contribute to the 2025 debate, fiscal appropriation Bill, “Steadfast and Resolute - Forging Pathways to Prosperity”. And firstly, I must express gratitude to our hon. Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley for his exceptional leadership and his unwavering commitment—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—unwavering commitment to this country’s progress and development. And at this time, I want to commend my colleague, the

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

hon. Minister of Finance, Colm Imbert, for his very comprehensive, realistic and responsible budget presentation. His leadership has really been sound, taking us through some very difficult periods, and of course, leading us to an economic recovery, even amidst all of the global challenges.

So, Madam Speaker, it is quite noticeable in the response by the Opposition Leader, that very little was said on the private sector, just a fleeting discussion, a mere minute on the question of SMEs. It is just as well, you know, because let me let you know, that the private sector is not on the Leader of the Opposition, is not on the two factions, and is not on the UNC. Alright.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And I get the whispers and statements and the comments, and so on, all of the time. They want the PNM to stay in power. The private sector always does better under PNM Governments.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And so, I will go straight into the non-energy sector looking at overall GDP growth, energy and non-energy, and using GDP at constants prices. And, I looked at the 2022 figure, \$150.3 billion; 2023, \$152.3 billion; and 2024, \$155.3 billion. Growth 2022, 2023; 2024, expected growth as well. And then, I thought to look at the non-energy sector, excluding petrochemicals and the growth is there.

From 2022, \$102.8 billion; expanded by 5.8 per cent to 2023, \$105.5 billion; expanding again by 2.5 per cent with a projected expansion in 2024 of \$107.9 billion; and the fact is, that the non-energy sector has grown.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And I want to compare—and I will do that throughout my contribution, looking at the GDP at constant prices. In 2015, remember, I said that GDP at constant prices in 2024 projected is \$107 billion, and looking to what it was in 2015, that is, the non-energy, excluding the petrochemicals sector, it was a mere \$61 billion. Members, it is a 75 per cent growth, clear evidence of business buoyancy and a diversified economy

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And looking at the composition of the non-energy sector, and again minus petrochemicals, there are some major contributors, trade and repairs, financial insurance activities, manufacturing. And let us speak a little bit about three of them. Trade and repairs is all connected to business and it therefore is connected to the manufacturing sector, et cetera. And it includes all of the distribution, all of the wholesale and retail sectors in the economy, it also includes the sale of vehicles and so on.

Trade and repairs in 2023 was \$37 billion, contributing to 24.3 per cent of GDP. It has grown, and projected to be in 2024, \$38.1 billion, again contributing a 24.6 contribution to GDP. And again, I compared, I went back to 2015. Do you know what it was, Madam Speaker? 28.7 billion, representing a 32 per cent growth, since this Government has been in office. And it tells you of the heightened business activity under the PNM Government, despite all of the world economic scenarios. So very healthy sector.

Looking at financial and insurance activities in 2023, \$9.8 billion, contributing 6.5 percent. And it is projected to be \$10.1 billion in 2024. But again, this sector can only do well as it is doing, because the business sector, is doing well, because the manufacturing sector is doing well, because wholesale and

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

retail sectors are doing well. So all of this talk about 6,000 businesses closed down and so on, that is not at all reflected in the figures. They are completely wrong on that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: What we have is a burgeoning financial sector, business doing well, the financial and insurance activities also doing well. Evidence of, again, a buoyant private sector. And looking at the manufacturing sector, and again, excluding petrochemicals and chemical products, but in this case, it is minus some of the non-energy items. This is because this is the way the CSO picks up the figures, so it would be minus the melamine, which is the derivative and minus all of the bleaches and the oxygen, and disinfectants, and all of those kinds of things.

But the figure in 2023, was \$9.9 billion, contributing 6.5 per cent to GDP. In 2024, it is projected to contribute 6.8 per cent, figure being \$10.6 billion, but again, Madam Speaker, I go back and I compare to 2015, when we came into office, the figure was \$8.3 billion. What we are seeing since then is a 28 per cent increase.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And I make the point that these sub-sectors—I mean you are seeing the evidence of heightened business activities contrary to all of the doom and gloom assertions on the other side. And when I looked at the manufacturing sub-sectors—I am still talking output here—when I looked at food and beverages and tobacco products in 2023, \$7.2 billion projected to be in 2024, 9.1 per cent increase to \$7.9 billion. Looking at 2015, again, 60 per cent higher, in

that in 2015 it was \$4.9 billion. In 2024, projected to be \$7.9 billion, 60 per cent higher.

10.10 a.m.

Thanks again to the efforts, the ingenuity, the capability of our SMEs, our large manufacturers as well, and all of the private sector and their contributions, the TTMA in particular. We thank the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association and their members. Looking at the other manufactured goods, textiles, clothing, leather, wood, paper and printing, glass, et cetera, in 2023, \$2.6 billion, and in 2024, conservatively expected to grow to \$2.7 billion. I sought to validate and to corroborate domestic production and I—again, the figures that I got, looking at this index of domestic production, further validates, and the index measures the changes in the volume of production over time in various industries of the economy and shows where there are increases or decreases in output.

I can tell you, from 2015 to 2023, under assembly type and related products, et cetera, increased by 2,000 per cent; food processing increased by 583 per cent, drink and tobacco increased by 172 per cent, and chemicals increased by 28 per cent. Again, we thank the private sector for being confident enough to reinvest, to continue to reinvest in the economy in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I recognize their contribution today to our country. And I looked, I will tell you as I speak to recognizing the contribution of the private sector, and particularly the manufacturers, when I looked at the reinvestments by the manufacturing sector in 2023, reinvestments, 82 reinvestments that I can extract, \$125 billion by the manufacturing sector, creating 837 jobs, and that is reinvestment only.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: They reinvested because they have confidence in the economy under this PNM Government. I can tell you what has supported this reinvestment. We provide the enabling environment in the Government; not only the Ministry of Trade and Industry, but the Ministry of Finance as well, and other Ministries. So we have created this environment and done several things, and I will speak perhaps about them here or in the next House, but it is the forex facility which we have provided at the EximBank.

It is the numerous grants and incentives under the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. It is the trade missions and the trade agreements that we have in place. It is the implementation of new e-services to facilitate the ease of doing business. It is the development of industrial parks that only happens under us. It is the apprenticeship programmes—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—to prepare young persons for the world of work. Now we can expect to see further manufacturing being encouraged through the new Special Economic Zones Authority, which comes with a new suite of incentives now in place, and that will incentivize the business sector; not only the manufacturing, but it will incentivize, and it is important for me to say, not only for our direct investment, but, equally so, local investment as well across all sectors, micro, small, medium and large.

I segue into export performance. Once again, we have a positive trade balance in this country of \$8.6 billion in 2023, and I want to highlight something. We always speak the truth on this side so that—always speak the truth, and so you

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

will notice, as I speak about export figures, total export figures, you will notice a decline from \$89 billion to \$53 billion; that is only so, we know, because of the lower energy prices and petrochemical prices, commodity prices, and even on the non-energy side, the lower prices fetched for iron and steel. I could tell you that iron and steel went down by \$1.8 billion and that is because of the glut in the steel market and the lowering of the price. So those are the kinds of figures.

But I look directly at manufacturing and manufacturing exports and again, today we are seeing manufacturing exports and we were able to pull all of the non-energy manufacturing exports, a whopping figure of \$13.3 billion. Again, I went back and I looked at the former figures. In 2016, do you know what it was? Manufacturing exports had fallen to \$9.6 billion, and that is because of the exit of ArcelorMittal. So minus the absence of ArcelorMittal, the manufacturing export figure in 2016 was \$9.6 billion. Today it has grown by close to 40 per cent to \$13.3 billion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: There are several subsectors that have done very well, including the food and beverage subsector, grown by 49 per cent; the paper and paper-related sector, grown by 70 per cent; other chemical products, their bleach, and all of those things, detergents and so on, grown by 33 per cent; plastic and rubber products, all your PVC pipes and plastic bottles, and so on, grown by 73 per cent. These are our exports, eh. Glass and glass products—I never thought we would be exporting glass products, but all of our glass bottles and other glass products, grown by 202—22 per cent, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: This growth is across the Caribbean and at

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extra-regional destinations as well.

I can tell you, and they do not like to hear anything about CARICOM, you know. They have already indicated, in so many ways, that they will have nothing to do with CARICOM. That is not their friend, and so on, but we have always depended on that CARICOM market, and I can tell you that we have had a 47 per cent increase in exports to CARICOM in 2023 from the 2015 value. In 2015, \$3.6 billion exports to the region. In 2023, \$5.3 billion in exports, a value increase of \$1.7 billion under this PNM Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Even in Asia, Asian countries, 283 per cent from \$303 million, and that is good, to \$1.16 billion. And Oceania, I am talking Australia, New Zealand, and all of those other 15 little territories, we have seen a 55 per cent increase, and even that is encouraging, moving from \$15 million to \$28 million, and so on.

So business is good in the Caribbean, and, of course, I am very pleased with—when I look again at particular destinations, like Jamaica, Jamaica has increased by 41 per cent, eh. So much valuable is the CARICOM region to us, by 41 per cent from 2015, \$0.9 billion, that is \$900 million, to \$1.3 billion under this Government. Guyana increased by 100 per cent, from \$0.57 billion in 2015 under them, to \$1.4 billion in 2023. Grenada, 58 per cent increase, from \$153 million in 2015 to \$216 million under this Government. And in St. Lucia, 42 per cent, from \$96 million to \$228 million. Again, I mean, they are saying, even in the CARICOM region, “Never again UNC”. Right? That is the general voice.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: In the private sector, again, in Trinidad and

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Tobago, “Never again UNC”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: So, you know that trade is a dynamic thing and every country is now trying to export, manufacture and export, and so on. You have to stay competitive in order to retain your market share, and therefore we have to keep on top of our exports to continue to grow, and between 2015 and 2024, I am so pleased that we were able to do 71 trade missions and trade shows—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—which have all generated considerable export leads, I told you of the growth intra-regionally and extra-regionally. Again, and huge thanks to the TTMA and our export agency with regard to these exports.

In fiscal 2024, there are going to be—there have been, and I have been on several of them, two trade missions to Guyana, to Barbados, to Antigua and Barbuda, to Belize, to Ghana, and I have tried to lead as many as I can, Bahamas, Curaçao, Aruba, Suriname, Jamaica, Canada. And, of course, there have been in buyers’ missions and there has been attendance at trade shows, two in Cuba and China, in Panama, in Brazil, in the USA; attendance at two trade shows, and in Colombia. A lot of work being done and we are seeing the results paying off.

I can tell you that we have even had leads in the recent trade missions in this year only where I led the missions to Ghana and to Canada. So we are extending our reach beyond CARICOM. It is the only way we can survive. I could tell you, the trade mission to Ghana where we had 50 business persons with us, an entirely new territory, they were learning and experiencing and understanding the market, yet still, already, we have results. Lazuri Apparel is already sourcing raw materials from Ghana to use in its manufacturing process.

10.20 a.m.

On Cue, an ICT service provider, has secured approvals for the use of its software—and this is on the services side, eh—Ghana, Benin, Togo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, through a licensing agreement exporting ICT services. Bermudez Biscuits and KC, they are advanced in entering the market. EcoWash, a very small business, they have secured a major deal with Japan Motors in Ghana to supply car wash devices. And Japan Motors, you know, they are dealers for Toyota and Nissan and so, and they are collaborating in several West African countries, so that I can see this business doing very, very well.

Since then, we have gone on to—very quickly, in three months, the Ministry—and I congratulate all of our trade officials, our technocrats, the professionals, who, very quickly, over a three-month period—and I thank the Ghanaians as well—they were able to execute an investment protection and promotion agreement, which was signed by our hon. Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs at the UN when he recently participated. We have been able to sign that. So we are seeing advances. We are being prepared for advances on the investment side as well. And in Canada, where I came from, perhaps just less than two weeks ago, taking 27 businesses as well—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—already, RHS Marketing, they have secured orders, “kuchela and all kinda ting” going to Canada. United Bearings has also secured an order. Sacha Cosmetics and BriCha, they are already doing their follow-up meetings on very strong leads. New Wave Marketing has secured raw material supplies, and so on. So a lot is going on. I was able, fortunately, to meet—the timing was right—with Minister Ng, the Minister with responsibility for

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economic development and trade, and we discussed the further potential for trade and investment between Canada and Trinidad and Tobago—of course, Canada, where we have a significant diaspora market.

Going back to trade agreements, I want to say, again, on the participation of our hon. Prime Minister with a delegation to Chile in 2017, at the invitation of President Bachelet, our hon. Prime Minister—I was on that mission as well—was able to extract from them significant interest in our market and coming out of that, the decision was made to commence a partial scope trade agreement between the two countries. Our Prime Minister visits and we get results. Not like the other side, visits to China, visits to India, visits to New York to celebrate Divali, not one oomph of results.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: With our hon. leader, our hon. Prime Minister, there are considerable results. So I am pleased to say—mind you, we were stymied by—we had some unfortunate interventions, the COVID, the elections in Chile, that also delayed us, but we are at the point where we have concluded the technical agreement, which includes an exchange of 500 products between both sides. It is an opportunity for our exporters to access a market of 19 million persons and, of course, entering—facilitating a range of exports, a range of products, food and beverages, pharmaceuticals, articles of wood, paper, clothing, glass, et cetera, iron and steel, and would you believe as well, energy products—apart from the non-energy products being accommodated, energy products, so that all of our methanol, ammonia natural gas will enter Chile duty-free, tariff-free, Madam Speaker. I am also very pleased about the gains that we have made.

On my visit to Curaçao, I think in 2022, I remember leaving my hotel and

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going to a final meeting there, and I will tell you about the results of that. Now that is a very small market of 150,000 persons but the tourist market is quite substantial. They have more than 1.3 million visitors annually, so it is a good market for us. On account of that visit there, we had signed a general agreement between the two countries—Minister Cijntje signed on their behalf—and we agreed to commence negotiations for a partial scope agreement between the both countries, and that commenced in July 2024, and this is expected to be concluded by January 2025. Again, we see it as a good market, given its tourism population.

I want to say that what I was particularly excited about with this particular trade agreement is that we do have the opportunity to displace many of the products that Curaçao imports. For instance, they import 90 per cent of their poultry, which gives us an opportunity in poultry. They import all of their detergents and soaps, even jams and jellies, biscuits, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and so on, so that the market is wide. It is a significant market across the board for our manufacturers. There is also investment potential with regard to Curaçao, when—you will recognize that recently, Agostini's Limited had acquired two pharmaceutical and personal care production companies in that country and a third in Aruba as well. So I think there is complementarity between the both countries. Again, as you know, CAL travels to Curaçao and more recently, the Minister of Works and Transport formalized an air services agreement with Curaçao, and what we expect is that travel will grow, flights will increase and so on.

I go back to the meeting, I was telling you, the last meeting I initiated when I was leaving Curaçao in 2022, and that was with the principals of a shipping line, encouraging them to bring their boats to Trinidad and Tobago. I am pleased, Madam Speaker, that this has happened. So whereas it took two to three weeks to

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export our goods to Curaçao, it will now take just two days.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: So we were there for the first shipment on the *Dona Luisa*, a mere 19 containers were on that. It is a small vessel but that is the kind of vessel that can do the connectivity that we want for our goods. So 19 containers went on the first—mind you, there was not enough notice, but on the second, I can tell you that we already have 35 containers, a full container load to go to Curaçao on that second. I can already see where we would probably go to weekly shipments instead of every two weeks. And again, that vessel will connect with Bonaire and Aruba, where, again, you have significant tourist traffic of 2 million visitors. So Curaçao in the morning and by evening time/night time, you are going to have goods in Aruba and goods in Bonaire.

Before I go—time flies here a lot.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Very quickly. It is not—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and interruption*]

Mr. Gonzales: Plenty work. Plenty work.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I am talking about exports and there is one thing I wanted to mention—I will make the time and what I do not do here, I will do in the other place. I am talking about other industries—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon:—and sectors that we are seeing some growth and that we are going to focus on. And I want us to speak a little about the development and the export of the steelpan, particularly—I know you all have a problem with the steelpan but all of the country recognizes the steelpan as our

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national instrument, and I thank the Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts for the work that he has done on it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Right? But there is immense potential for stimulating economic activity, and generating revenue, and boosting exports of this particular item, our steelpan. So we have taken a holistic approach to steelpan manufacturing and we are going to be focusing on enhancing the quality of the product and also, the skills of the professionals.

Under the Grant Fund Facility, which we started in 2020, we have seen a 44 per cent increase. Before that, we had \$1.8 million in exports and since then, since the Grant Fund Facility, that has increased by 44 per cent to \$2.6 million.

10.30 a.m.

There is a clear indication of the success of the Grant Fund Facility, but we want to see this trend to continue and to grow exponentially. I will tell you that there have been some issues and we have done the research to find out what these issues are and Martin Daly [*Member laughs*]*—*I have to call Martin's name because he is the one who spoke about it*—*lamented the lack of chroming in the pan manufacturing cycle. So you would know that there are two ways that you will finish a pan, either through powder coating or chroming. But chroming pans will significantly enhance the value, the visual appearance of the product, the acoustics of the instruments and, of course, it will also provide a protective barrier against corrosion. However, our local steelpan manufacturers are severely impacted by the absence of a chrome plating facility domestically.

I want to tell you*—*and the problems they have had is where some of them are choosing not to powder coat but to chrome. It means they would have had to

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export their pans unfinished, re-import into the country incurring a 20 per cent customs duty, of course, then after chroming then retuning the pans for its use and sale. Of course, what that means is that the item became costly and somewhat uncompetitive. We have had to address this issue and I make the announcement here today, that a chroming facility will be opened, world-standard in Trinidad and Tobago, before the end of 2024.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Right. It will be located in El Socorro. We have supported them through our Steelpan Manufacturing Grant Fund Facility and we have been assured that the chroming will be on par with what is done internationally, adopting international standards ISO 9001:2015 and ISO 45001:2018. Of course, redounding to the reduction and the cost of the pans, and of course, giving us the chance to boost our exports of fine quality pans to the rest of the world.

When I go to the Upper House I will speak extensively about the “Steelpan Tuner Apprenticeship Programme” which we will introduce in 2025, that is preparing, making sure that we have the requisite skills for the expansion of the industry. And then, I will tell you further about the work of the steering committee for the development of the national governance framework for the steelpan industry. How much time do I have, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: Your original time ends at 10:47 and you are entitled to an additional 10 minutes if you wish to complete your contribution. So, if you wish you could make that—

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Oh, plenty time.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Okay. So Minister, do I take it that you are seeking the additional 10 minutes at this time?

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

Madam Speaker: Right, thank you.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And, I thank you.

Madam Speaker: You have 27 more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Twenty-seven more minutes. But I will still have a lot more to say in the next place. So now fleetingly they spoke about SMEs but I must tell you a little bit about you it here, right. You know that they are the backbone of Trinidad and Tobago, the CSO estimates that 20,000 SMEs are operating in Trinidad and Tobago accounting for 85 per cent of all registered businesses, employing 200, 000 persons and contributing 30 per cent to the country's GDP. I do not understand how you all could be so dismissive of them in your *three quarter* hour contribution, right. But SMEs, we know, have unique challenges, and we as a Government have understood this and we have created the right tailor-made policy and programmes focusing on three critical areas: Access to finances, capacity building and market access. This is indeed an entrepreneurial economy and this Government is committed to helping entrepreneurs recognizing this, I will just briefly tell you what some of the Ministries have been doing and will continue to do.

So as it relates to access to finance, we have had two tranches put on by the Ministry of Finance of the Government Loan Guarantee Programme to assist firms as they weather the storm coming out of the pandemic. And following that, the Ministry of Finance, again, instituted the long-term loan guarantee scheme in

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partnership with the commercial banking sector with very attractive terms and conditions. Again, through the Ministry of Finance, low-cost financing through the EximBank's Catalytic Fund in partnership with the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) and again through the EximBank these two funding facilities—and the Minister spoke about it again to treat with imports of raw materials for manufacturers and imports of basic needs for this country.

Again, another project on the tourism side. The Tourism Accommodation Upgrade Project for SMEs in the tourism sector. Again from the Ministry of Finance, VAT refunds as well as an increase of the VAT registration threshold you would remember that. From the Ministry of Trade and Industry the Grant Fund Facility providing matching contributions for them seeking to expand production that is through the Steelpan Manufacturing Grant Fund Facility, the Research and Development Facility as well.

Again, from the Ministry of Finance the exemption of Corporation Tax for approved small companies for a specific period. Again, from the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service that Micro and Small Business Grant. Again, numerous grants under the National Entrepreneurship Development Company and I could speak to the many ways that this Government continues to assist the SMEs in accessing finance.

In the area of capacity building, again, there have been a number of apprenticeship programmes and I will elaborate on that in the Upper House, focusing on the manufacturing sector, the woodworking sector, the yachting and marine industries in collaboration with the MIC Institute of Technology. And then, of course, there is the School to Work Apprenticeship Allowance which encourages businesses to hire new graduates. Again, through the Ministry of

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Trade and Industry capacity building through the national SheTrades hub focusing on 700 woman-led businesses. Again, ScaleUp Trinidad and Tobago together with the Unit Trust Corporation, under the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Again, through the Ministry of Finance, the SME Listing and Mentorship Programme, in collaboration with Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange and the Central Bank.

I can go on. Again NEDCO, numerous business-related programmes, capacity building under them. High quality training programmes under exporTT which will now continue under the new Trade and Investment Promotion Agency and several initiatives as well under the Export Booster Initiative.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Capacity building for the SME sector. And again to boost market access, SMEs have available to them other programmes under the Export Booster Initiative that promote exports including the strengthening of market intelligence in market promotion and so on. And through TTCSI, we had the GATEWAY to Trade programme which helps SMEs with regard to the exporting of service industries and this will be continued now under the new Trade and Investment Agency. And, of course, all of the bilateral agreements that I spoke of again within and together with the region and all of the several trade missions across the region. I could tell you, we have been supporting SMEs, paying for their travel and so on, ensuring that we encourage them get out into the market. All of this under a PNM Government supporting the SME sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And I have to shift a little bit, I will tell you why. I intended to do this in the Upper House but in the wake of an article which I read in the newspaper yesterday in which—

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Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And the article—

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South, do you intend to make an interruption? I think you are familiar with the particular Standing Order, okay? If not, please control your volume.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Right, yeah. I still feel I want to attach myself to speaking a little bit about inflation and food prices. And I am sure that my colleague, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will elaborate on it when he speaks in this place. So the article yesterday in the newspaper was:

“T&T food import bill highest ever at \$7.3B”

And we will not shy away from responding to this and I saw the comments by, I think it was, Professor Wuddivira and, of course, Dr. Hutchinson as well, both saying that it is not a simple fix, recognizing that it is not a simple fix to reduce your food import bill. And, of course, commenting also, that people keep buying luxury goods despite the high duties et cetera, it is not something—it is of free will. We cannot walk away from that.

10.40 a.m.

But, again, looking at our inflation and it is very encouraging, the Minister of Finance referred to it, in July of 2024 the inflation rate stood at, he said, under 1 per cent. Well, in fact, it was .3 per cent, quite remarkable. Right? I mean, this whole talk of cost of living and so on which is affecting us all, is a conversation not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but this is the a global issue, it is across the world. You would know that even in the US campaign cost of living is a significant issue, and that is why I thought I would speak about it a little bit. But.

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

.3 per cent, which is quite remarkable, but you know what I note? I note that it is significantly lower than the 8.5 per cent in 2014 and the 5.5 per cent recorded in 2015 under the previous Administration. I could tell you, in those days there was no war, there was no war, there was no pandemic, there was no shipping disruptions, disruptions of food supply chain and so on, none of that, but inflation under them was 8.5 per cent and 5.5 per cent. Under us .3 per cent. I looked across the world because you are talking about it. It is a constant talk over there and let me tell you what it is.

In the Caribbean, Jamaica, this is inflation, 7 per cent, Guyana 2.8 per cent, the more recent and this is at July, 2024. Guyana 2.8 per cent; Belize 3.1 per cent; Barbados 3.9 per cent; Antigua and Barbuda 2.6 per cent. I looked outside of the region as well, India, 4.6 per cent; Ghana 22.3 per cent; Canada 2.6 per cent; USA 2.9 per cent; Trinidad and Tobago, using our CSO data, 0.3 per cent. Then looking further at food inflation, in July 2024 food inflation—and it is a concern of this Government. It is a concern of every person who lives in this country and across the globe as well, the food prices.

Food inflation was 1.4 per cent, and I dare to say, I believe that it is being contained. We are seeing a change in behaviour. I looked at the rest of the world as it is. In Jamaica 3.5 per cent. I am talking about food inflation in July, Guyana 6.7 per cent, Belize 5.7 per cent. I looked extra-regionally, India 5.4 per cent; Ghana 21.5 per cent; Canada 2.7 per cent; USA 2.2 per cent and Trinidad and Tobago, again, 1.4 per cent, the lowest that I can find among the researched countries.

So, I am saying, whilst it appears to be an achievement, it is still a concern for us. It remains a concern, an active concern, and there are several programmes

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

and initiatives that we have embarked on in this country and, again, the performance of the manufacturing sector has certainly helped because more and more we are producing goods locally where we can, in fact, substitute for the imported foods.

I know that you have been—yeah. Again, you too on the other side, they have been speaking about the food import bill and so on, food prices, we hear it all the time. We understand, it is a global concern, but you know what is stark, Madam Speaker?—and I want you to hear this one. You what is stark about food prices? That under them from 2010 to 2015 when, as I said before, no war, no supply-chain disruption, no pandemic, et cetera, food prices increased by 71 per cent.

Hon. Member: “Nah. Nah. Nah.”

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I will remind the country because they will not talk about it. Right? It was a time of plenty, and yet still they did nothing about it, or they will say that they attempted to, they took off the duties on 7,000, but again there is misinformation there and I will tell the public what it is. Right? But food prices increased under them 71 per cent. Right?

In responding to the article yesterday I want to say that since we have come into Government in the last nine, nine and a half years, though the bill would appear to have increased at \$7.3 billion, you have to understand that in there is the inflation, the importing of food at high prices. You would remember that inflation in the post—food inflation was 17 per cent here during the pandemic period, so prices did go up exponentially, but when I checked—You always have to look at the details. When I did the research I want to say you need to evaluate where we are with the food imports, I want to say that there has been a great reduction in the

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

volume of our food imports, and that is a significant point because you know where inflation has put us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: There has been a reduction in the volume of food imports. I could tell you, I will go to the details. In 2015, this country imported 53 kilogrammes, 53 kilogrammes of beverages. Under us in 2023, a 41 per cent decline, \$31 million, and we have a way to go again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: That is because we are producing all of these beverages in Trinidad and Tobago, and the population has been buying local products. Again, when I look at meat and meat preparations the import under them in kgs was 52 million kgs. Under us \$41 million, so there is a 21 per cent decline. Fruits and vegetables, there is a 7 per cent decline, \$140 million compared with now \$130 million. Still a way to go, but it is still remarkable. And in dairy products we have gone from \$39 million to \$31 million, a 6 per cent decline.

So, I have to congratulate, as I said, the TTMA, for producing more goods locally. So a lot of their output is consumed locally, but I want to congratulate the people of Trinidad and Tobago for choosing to buy local, for also growing their own food, and because of all of the incentives that we have put in place growing their own food and consuming their food, the good that they have grown. Right? There has been significant efforts, eh. The hon. Prime Minister has only recently, through the Cabinet, asked that we put in place a food prices committee, and they have met four time already, and perhaps when we go to the other place we can get some of their early discussions and their thinking on food prices.

Then, of course, my colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

Fisheries and the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service have been putting on a number of programmes that they will detail for you in this honourable place and which will validate the steady increase of food locally in Trinidad and Tobago. So, I mean, we are seeing that we are not where we want to be, but we are seeing a positive trend in food sustainability under a PNM Government.

I want to say, I am very pleased with some of the products, some of the different products, some of the products that you have been seeing and perhaps you are really—you all did not come to the TT Agri-Expo 2024. You should have attended and you would have seen some of the new products on display. For instance, one of the new products is the locally made ghee. That is dairy value added. The locally made ghee made by a company Farm Fresh Dairy Products. That is sold in all of the puja stores. Right? We are going to help Farm Fresh Dairy Products so that they can expand their production and displace the import of ghee.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I want to encourage all, everybody, all the citizens to buy local gee from the puja stores. Again, you would have noticed half—if you had come, if you had only come for a day, half day, Half Moon Vegan Ice Cream as well made from our local products and inputs. Again, you would have seen iFarm's booth where they are now producing new product varieties in their mushrooms through their vertical farming. No. Their vertical farming is for the lettuces and the arugula and so, you know, and all of the mixed greens that you formerly would import. You do not have to do that anymore and we are helping them to expand their production, but you are seeing more of their new mushrooms which they are growing as well, pink, yellow, pearl and oyster mushrooms and, I

mean, tasting fantastically, eh. I mean, I had some of it which we traditionally we will be importing all those things. All of those things being produced in Trinidad and Tobago. You really missed a lot of the fare.

I mean, existing companies like Arawak doing the value added now so they are making chicken nuggets. Arawak is now doing chicken nuggets from real chicken breasts. Right? Therefore, they are suppliers to KFC, Popeye's, Church's and so on, and that is a prime example of import substitution. Right?

10.50 a.m.

Again, this country is thinking and the private sector is being creative and doing well in terms of coming up with new products, and again reducing our food import bill. And what have we helped—I know I might as well finish this because it is so important to the population. I am looking at my time. What have we done to help our consumers further in a period of declining revenues from 2015? Every year we have gone to COTED this is at CARICOM for the suspension of the CET on basic items. When I look at the revenue forgone for corned beef, and sardines, and cheddar cheese, and tuna, and pharmaceuticals. We have forgone in these depressing times, \$1.1 billion just to make goods cheaper and of course, to provide savings to the consumer as well. And we will continue our work in the Ministry of Trade and Industry and so on, in highlighting food prices across the country as well.

I know you talked about your 7,000 products; we are smarter than you, right? That 7,000 products does not mean 7,000 individual food products, rather they are what are called SKUs, supermarket units. So when you say okay, like they did, we have taken off the VAT on juice for instance. They are not just saying we are taking off the VAT on juice like we said you know, they are taking each flavour, each size,

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

each brand, and that is how they come up with the 7,000. So I am informing the population where you have misinformed them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: And to tell you that, again, between 2016 and 2021, we have expanded the list of basic food items that I exempt from value-added tax. So exemptions of duties, exemptions of value-added tax. And in the—you all are quarrelling? Why are you all quarrelling? They are vexed because we put back on the VAT on some of the products they like, like the maraschino cherries and so on. Maraschino cherries are for people who are having cocktails morning, noon, and night, right? We are not interested in that. So they are vexed about that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Artichokes and so—no, no. The VAT is back on, on artichokes and so on, we are not interested in that. But again, my colleagues will speak to you extensively. I will tell you what I will speak of in the short time that I have when I go to the Lower House. I will speak about the institutional strengthening that has taken place in the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Our new and the areas of institutional strengthening and we have actually operationalized the new Trade and Investment Promotion Agency, and I will give you the details in the other place.

Our commercial officers and attachés are operating in key markets, I will give you the details. We have established our Special Economic Zones Authority, we continue to strengthen the regulatory framework for the scrap metal industry. We have enhanced the e-services under TTBizLink. We have in place and we will have in place by the end of this year a new e-commerce strategy, it is on the way,

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

and will have in place as well, a new national trade strategy, which I would speak about in the other place when I go down.

Again, I will detail in our investment performance, but I can take the time to tell you, I spoke about the \$1.2 billion in reinvestment by the manufacturing sector. I can tell you the investments which we have facilitated, and that is not all the investments across Trinidad and Tobago, what we have facilitated amounts to TT \$3 billion and with job creation of 3,493 jobs facilitated through the Ministry of Trade and Industry. And I wanted to speak particularly about our nearshoring industry which has grown exponentially under us. In that short time and I will give the details when I go down. In 2015, there was the existence of one local operator, now there are 11 BPOs, nine of which are foreign investors in Trinidad and Tobago and there has been growth.

In 2016 to 2021, iQor invested some \$134 million and created 1,777 jobs, and I will show you the details when I go to the other place. I will speak as well about building the capacity of our people, I spoke a little bit about it before. Another exciting industry which has been doing very well, is the expansion of the retail—of the entertainment sector, and you see it across Trinidad and Tobago. I cannot understand how anybody would speak of a lack of confidence under the PNM Government. I can only speak to confidence, and with a surge of retail activity, a surge of entertainment activity, consumer spending, and enhanced service offerings across Trinidad and Tobago.

And in the north for instance, I could speak about these establishments and they are not only where those of higher incomes will go, there are those that the man on the street will go to like, Garden Park in the north, in Aranguez; Food Square in Woodbrook, the 16 food places there; 139 Woodbrook Yard with nine

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon (cont'd)

food spots. In the north we have now the IVY Steakhouse, Seafood & Champagne Lounge, Meena House, Elysium Bar, all of these new restaurants—

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

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: Yes. And in the south we would have the new Apsara south, D Cross and so on, the C3 Centre, South Park, all in the last 10 years. In central, Brentwood Mall which is expanding; M6 Plaza with a lot of shopping stores and food places; Heartland Plaza, this is all where you know. Dennis P. Ramdhan Complex, that is a new reservation and entertainment hall opened in 2024, in Couva. The Port in Mc Bean Couva; food village Chaguanas. In the east there is now the upgraded Valpark Plaza with five new restaurants; the Piarco Plaza; the Grande Food Hub. MP you know about the Grande Food Hub. Pennywise Plaza in Chaguanas, La Romaine, and so on. And then of course, there is Ibiza Night Club & Lounge; the Topsy Ibis on Ariapita Avenue; Sixes Social Cricket, right, which is an international franchise.

And I say all of this to say, that across the country in the north and south, in the east and the west, there is business mushrooming in various sectors, various industries. And that is why, Madam Speaker, we will beat them in the north, and we will beat them in the south, and we will beat them in west, and we will beat them in the east.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. P. Gopee-Scoon: I would not say the last sentence. I will leave it for your minds. Great is the PNM. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Mayaro.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Tell them Rush. Tell them.

Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, let me respond to the Minister of Trade and Industry very briefly and deal with the 55 minutes of rambling of numbers that I must ask. “What does all that numbers” mean to the single mother who is struggling this morning? “What does all that numbers” mean to the small businessman who cannot get \$200 in the bank to buy anything on Amazon or anywhere to support his business? “What does all that numbers” that have been rattled out mean to the small businessman who is being extorted by gang members? “What does all that numbers” that has been rattled out mean to the struggling families who cannot get a job, who are grappling with unemployment? Well, I tell Hon. Minister, that means little or nothing for those people who are trying eke out their living on a daily basis, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, I rise today with a profound sense of duty and responsibility not only to the people of Mayaro but to the wider citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago. I wish to thank the wonderful and kind people of the Mayaro constituency, who I have had the pleasure of serving and representing in this Parliament, and who I suspect I will continue to serve with passion and humility as long as they would have me.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, I will continue to uphold the finest tradition of honesty and decency in my public and in my private life, as long I hold this office. In my nine years, as a representative in this Parliament, I have been very careful to ensure that my office has never been dragged into a place it should not be, whether in the day or in the night.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Mr. Paray (cont'd)

2024.10.07

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.00 a.m.

Mr. R. Paray: I wear this badge with pride as a husband, a father, a son and the many other roles that I hold for so many people. Madam Speaker, I remain resolute and steadfast in my objective of making Trinidad and Tobago the gem that I know it can be.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: Our job on this side of the Parliament is not to rubber stamp this Government, but to scrutinize and offer serious, well-meaning suggestions for their consideration to make Trinidad and Tobago a better place. It is not like if we are not on the same boat, Madam Speaker. We are all on the same ship. But if they fail to do so, if they fail to take the comments and the commentary and the suggestions that we, who are scrutinizing their policies and plans, well then, they will fail and they will end in political demise and they will make way for serious people who are ready to do the job of governance in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, before I begin the—I would not call it an attack but a serious view on the Bill that was presented by the Finance Minister, I feel compelled to address a matter that has been weighing heavily on my heart over this weekend. I wish to express deepest condolences to the family of young Jayden Lalchan, a former student of St. Stephen's College, who tragically passed away. As a proud student of St. Stephen's College myself, Madam Speaker, this news hit particularly close to home. The bond I share with the institution, its values and the community it represents makes the loss all the more personal.

Jayden was a bright, promising student and his untimely death, allegedly stemming from the horrendous act of bullying, reminds us of the urgent need to protect our

children and create environments where they feel safe, valued and supported. His passing, Madam Speaker, should serve as a wake-up call for all of us, especially in addressing the pressing issue of bullying in our schools. To Jayden's parents, Rohan and Fareeda Lalchan, I offer my deepest sympathies. I cannot imagine the depth of your pain and my thoughts and prayers are with you at this time of grief. We must ensure that no family endures such a tragedy again. May Jayden's soul rest in peace and may his memory inspire us to make the necessary changes to protect the lives and futures of our nation's children.

Madam Speaker, as we navigate the difficult realities of our time, it is essential to recognize that the budget, though cloaked in the hopeful language of *Steadfast and Resolute: Forging Pathways to Prosperity*, this remains yet another document of missed opportunities and unrealized potential. It signifies that our country's leadership is unable to make that crucial shift from ideas to purpose, from purpose to action, and from action to delivery. Madam Speaker, after \$500-plus billion and nine years in governance, if they have not figured out how to do it by now, I do not believe they will figure out how to do it again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: While the Minister's budget speech might win an award for best fiction, the *Review of the Economy 2024* offers a front row view of the disastrous trajectory this Administration is leading us in, under the misguided leadership of the hon. Prime Minister and his Minister of Finance. Madam Speaker, while the Government speaks of progress, growth, prosperity, the people are feeling sharp edges of economic hardship, and it is our responsibility to be the voice of those concerns.

Madam Speaker, these are very challenging times for our nation. Our

citizens are under siege by record levels of crime. Our economy is in intensive care. There is lower consumer confidence, low local investor confidence, low foreign direct investment and an overwhelming sense by everyone that things are not going to get better. Given these challenges, it speaks to the callous and brazen nature of this Government, that the Minister of Finance would have the audacity to present to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, a most visionless, a most uninspiring budget in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, over the last nine years, this Government has waged an unprecedented assault on every sector of our economy. The Government has presided over the decline of every economic indicator known to mankind. Everyone has deteriorated. They have weakened our energy sector by banking on baskets of eggs in “fowl belly”. They have undermined our small and medium-sized businesses, neglected our agricultural and tourism sectors, and they have allowed a crime wave to transform itself into a tsunami that is targeting the very fabric that is desperately attempting to keep our country together.

You see, Madam Speaker, budget 2025, it truly is an assault on the collective imagination of every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago. It is an attempt by the Government to tell the people of this country, “Stop dreaming of a better life. Stop imagining a better future for your child. Stop believing that our country could be safer, could be more prosperous and that you could be happier.” The people of Trinidad and Tobago, they are not fools. I know that my country should be a place where children should not have to worry if they can go to school and not be shot or stabbed. I know my country should be a place where small businessmen are trying to work hard and not extorted by criminal gangs. My country should not be a place where young people feel that they need to migrate to get a decent job, or the ones

who are outside, they do not want to come back home. Madam Speaker, I nor any other citizen of this land will ever stop believing in the vision of a better Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: The people of this country must reject the idea that we must accept mediocrity as our new normal.

Madam Speaker, the Minister in her delivery, she spoke briefly on inflation and ultimately, referring to the cost of living. But the Minister celebrated this inflation of 0.3 percent, but I must ask, as I asked in the opening: What relevance does this figure have to the ordinary family struggling to make ends meet? The Minister may find comfort in these statistics, all of them, but the people of Trinidad and Tobago are feeling the strain of rising costs.

In an article in the Trinidad *Express* recently, they revealed that food prices—and this is the food index—has gone up by over 15 per cent in the last two years. Madam Speaker, families are being forced to make impossible choices. There are forcing themselves to decide whether we should pay for groceries or we should pay for school fees. Madam Speaker, that is not prosperity, that is hardship. And while the Minister celebrates the inflation figures, there a book that was supplied to us called the *Review of the Economy 2024*, which states clearly as a warning, rising inflation risk, driven by pressures, including increasing energy cost and higher electricity tariffs are coming.

But, Madam Speaker, this is not the Member for Siparia that wrote this, eh. This is the officers of the Central Bank, I suppose, and the Ministry of Finance who have written this book. So they are the experts, I am going with what they are saying. Madam Speaker, these factors, as identified, will only push the cost of

living into a crisis mode. Yet the budget, as delivered by the Minister of Finance, spoke of no real solutions to mitigate these risks. Instead of focusing on policies that would support local food production, the Government continues to rely on food imports, which keep prices high but accessibility very low.

11.10 a.m.

Over the past nine years, Trinidad and Tobago's business climate, Madam Speaker, has significantly worsened under this Administration, and it can be evidenced by what the global organizations who are looking into Trinidad and Tobago, what they are saying, and I will just call a few of those. Under the ease of doing business, we are still ranked at somewhere around 105/106, somewhere there. But it is the commentary that comes with the ranking, Madam Speaker. They said that Trinidad and Tobago continues to struggle with bureaucratic inefficiencies in starting businesses, securing permits and accessing credit.

Madam Speaker, the Global Competitive Index, they said that the country faces gaps in innovation, technological readiness and business dynamism, lacking diversification beyond energy. Now this is a sharp contrast to what we now heard the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry spoke about. Madam Speaker, the Global Innovation Group, they claim that Trinidad and Tobago remains mid-tier, due to limited research, infrastructure and human capital focus, stifling growth. Foreign direct investment (FDI), Madam Speaker, remains inconsistent and energy-reliant. So we are getting some investment, but we are going down still at this one trick pony called oil and gas. And they believe that not sufficient efforts are being made by the State, in terms of its policy direction, to improve the bandwidth and the variety of foreign direct investments coming to Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the economic freedom, which is the Heritage Foundation,

they ranked us 97 as well. And they claim that high government spending, heavy regulations and inefficiencies hinder business activities. And then we have the old elephant in the room, Madam Speaker, corruption. Transparency International, they still comment that corruption remains a significant barrier, undermining investor confidence due to a lack of action on transparency. Madam Speaker, overall, inefficiencies, corruption, and lack of strategic reforms have weakened Trinidad and Tobago's global standing, making the business environment challenging and unattractive to investors with missed opportunities.

Madam Speaker, the Minister also spoke a bit about foreign exchange. I want to place on the record that foreign exchange is, and it is going to continue to be, one of the crisis in our economy. And when you listen to the Minister in his budget presentation, there was no real policy to deal with that. And what is our role here? Our role here is to scrutinize policy. I do not have access to all the 10,000 bits of data that the Minister came with, but we can look at policy from an objective and a subjective way and figure out how it is going to affect the man on the street.

Madam Speaker, the Minister boasted of a \$5.5 billion reserve in terms of our US reserve, which is good. It could be better, but it is good. But why, as reported, 70 per cent of SMEs, they have over a three-month delay to get foreign exchange from the commercial banks? Now, this affects businesses in Mayaro. Fishermen or small agro-processors, retailers, they are struggling because of this. Now, half of them cannot get foreign currency through the EximBank and they are at the mercy of commercial banks.

Madam Speaker, there was a lot of talk about special economic zones. But according to the *Review of the Economy*, net foreign direct investment outflows

reached US \$1.6 billion out. This is not the Opposition saying this, Madam Speaker. This is the *Review of the Economy*, the experts who are looking at these things. What does that tell me is that our investors lack the confidence in their ability to get a fair return on their investment if they put their money in Trinidad, and capital is coward. In business, Madam Speaker, we say capital is coward. It is going to go to a place where it has the least amount of risk with the best returns.

Now, instead of encouraging export growth and supporting SMEs, the Government seems to favour large corporations, leaving local, small businesses sidelined. And I say that in the context that there is no clearly-defined policy, as stated in the 2024/25 budget. Madam Speaker, there is an absolute disconnect between the Government and their approach to trade and investment. The trade and investment proposals, again, in my view, are a bit lofty and at times, because of the drip-down effect, I am not seeing the connection to the businesses on the lower end, the smaller end, more so those that are operating within rural communities, like the one that I serve.

The Minister highlighted initiatives like the Trade Investment Promotion Agency (TIPA), the special economic zones and EximBank's forex windows for manufacturers. Now, Madam Speaker, these measures sound progressive. I absolutely understand what the Government wants to do, but I think their failure is in handling. The Government's failure is in the environment that these agencies have to operate in. I think that is where the failure is. The State is not giving these agencies the best possible chance of success. Madam Speaker, one must really ask, when we consolidate these agencies, are we trying to improve the outcome, or we are just trying to rebrand it and make it look better, you know, jump on a plane and fly to 75 places when the year come?

Madam Speaker, despite everything the Minister of Trade and Industry said earlier this morning, the numbers sound good and I am not arguing with those numbers, we continue to rank poorly. Why? If we are doing such a fantastic job, why are we ranking poorly? Common things, Madam Speaker, bureaucratic red tape, slow approvals, fake regulations, are still the experiences that businesses bounce up every day. So the rhetoric does not match the reality and the Government's inability to address these barriers will continue to hinder meaningful progress in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, as we go on, I want to talk a bit on this whole issue of diversification. It is a whipping horse that has been whipped for the last nine years. But you know, the Minister of Finance, when he spoke, he continues to paint a rosy picture of economic resilience and growth, particularly within the non-energy sector. Well the Minister of Trade and Industry came and she spoke, and she spoke lovely about all the non-energy sector areas that are doing well and like the hon. Minister of Finance, touted the same 2.5 per cent growth in 2023 and an anticipated 2.2 per cent growth in 2024. But how can we honestly speak of resilience when our economy remains shackled to the volatility of the global energy markets, Madam Speaker? We are still heavily dependent on oil and gas, and despite nine years of repeated promises to diversify, the Government has achieved virtually nothing, Madam Speaker, nothing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.20 a.m.

For example—and I want to quote the *Review of the Economy* again. This is not the UNC, this is not the Member for Siparia saying this. This is the experts at the Central Bank or the Ministry of Finance who write this book. Madam Speaker,

according to the *Review*, in 2023—and I heard the Minister of Trade and Industry say some other figures. I do not know where those figures came from, but this is what this book says:

“...Trinidad and Tobago’s Balance of Trade with CARICOM...”—which is one of our most closest and competitive markets, shrunk, plummeted—
“...by 35.2 per cent.”

We moved from \$10 billion to \$6.5 billion. That is in contrast to what the hon. Minister said a little while ago, but I am taking it from the *Review of the Economy*.

So what does that tell me, Madam Speaker? It tells me the stark decline exposes—I hope “falsehood” is a parliamentary word—behind the Minister’s claim that the non-energy sector is seeing some progress. The truth is, the Government has failed, in my respectful view, to implement any meaningful long-term strategy to diversify our economy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, the PNM came into Government in 2015 on a platform of diversifying our economy away from the reliance of the energy sector. Yet after nine years that promise, amongst others, are still not fulfilled.

In the early years of this Administration, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance championed—sing, dance, you could see clearly now—10 pillars of diversification. Nothing to show for it up to today, but you have to give credit to the Minister of Finance. He has perfected the art of recycling old promises with new phrases and yet the results are non-existent, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, we do not need to revisit any of the other alarming statistics. In energy outputs, I think the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre did a

fantastic job in dealing with that when he spoke, but every year there is a greater need to move our economy away from this dependence on energy. Yet each year, the Minister drifts further, and further, and further, and further away.

In the last budget speech, the Minister leaned heavily—the hon. Minister today spoke a bit about the economic zones and these bilateral trade agreements with Curaçao, and Ghana, and of these other places. But, Madam Speaker, special economic zones are still in their infancy and they cannot be expected to deliver large-scale economic impacts overnight. So despite these bleak circumstances, I want to give our manufacturers the kudos that they deserve. Madam Speaker, the manufacturers in this country have shown resilience, innovation, and a commitment to growth despite all the issues that I have spoken about. So they must be commended. They must be commended for the work that they continue to do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: But as I mentioned, they are hampered by the very same environment that the State is failing to secure and enable. High utility cost; low productivity; bureaucratic red tape; shipping delays; and the ever more present crime crisis that is curtailing the movement of employees, customers and so on.

Madam Speaker, the Government speaks about Phoenix Park, the Piarco AeroPark as major economic alternatives. I have no doubt when these facilities come on stream sometime in the future, they can make an impact to our overall economic fortunes. But, there has been nothing new. I have been hearing about these things three, four, five years and the speed at which it should be going is just not there, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, our maritime sector, the financial industry, creative arts, all of which were promised as pillars of diversification, I

feel they may have been tossed as afterthoughts now. Leave them on their own. But if you are leaving them on their own, what new are you coming with? What new are you putting on trial to excite this country, to excite our people that we have something to look for when the day comes?

Madam Speaker, if I were to draw your attention to an incident during the Hurricane Beryl, you know it demonstrated a strategic importance for our maritime industry in north-west Trinidad. But because of the Government's archaic bureaucracy it hindered us from capitalizing on a potential. Madam Speaker, would you believe that yacht owners were fleeing the storm from all over the Caribbean, heading to 10 degrees north latitude, which is two degrees below the hurricane belt, and they had to line up like on the Sir Solomon Hochoy to fill out a paper form just to enter our waters, Madam Speaker. That is something that we could have addressed years and years ago. These are the kind of things, Madam Speaker, that is hampering our ability to drive our diversification. Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, has a unique opportunity to leverage our maritime sector for key economic diversification beyond oil and gas, but I am telling you that this potential, it is going to remain untapped, unchecked under this present Administration.

Madam Speaker, with our strategic location outside of the hurricane belt we have naturally deep water ports,. Trinidad and Tobago is ideally positioned to become a regional maritime hub. But, Madam Speaker, do you know this conversation about the maritime sector has been bandied about under Prime Minister Manning 16 years ago and to today we have not figured it out as yet? Madam Speaker, as we go along, this maritime industry is a big area that we need to pursue and I trust that the Government will continue to push forward.

Madam Speaker, as time goes on, I want to talk just briefly about digital transformation. I do shadow that Ministry and I have been looking at what the Ministry has been doing, how digital transformation has been going through the public sector, and some issues I believe we need to address if we have to play catch up. Madam Speaker, over the last decade Trinidad and Tobago has fallen behind in digital transformation, particularly so in the public sector because in the private sector we are moving fast ahead. In private business, engineering companies and so on you are seeing the movement towards AI and so on, but we are not seeing the movement that we ought to be having in the public sector. So when you look back at the initiatives like the National ICT Plan 2018—2022, providing Government e-services, the country continues to struggle with inconsistent implementation, outdated systems, and more so over the last year, Madam Speaker, poor cybersecurity infrastructure. We have gotten hit several times and that is just the ones that make the newspaper.

Key digital services, Madam Speaker, remain inefficient compared to global standards, and cybersecurity efforts have been insufficient in the face of rising crime. One of the major failures that I can talk to you about, Madam Speaker, is the Government's failure to adopt the Budapest Convention on cybercrime. What that has done is isolate us from getting the best international cooperation needed to combating the growing threat of cybercrime. Why have we not done that? That has been before us for years, Madam Speaker.

Now because of that, because of these instances of cybercrime, this has left the public vulnerable, undermining public trust in digital services, and it is going to stunt the growth in the digital economy because people would not trust the system, Madam Speaker. Again if I were to refer your attention to the *Review of the*

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Economy 2024, it highlights delays in key projects like the national eID system, poor progress in digital infrastructure especially the rural areas and this is where it touches me the most, Madam Speaker.

11.30 a.m.

Madam Speaker, global indices such as the UN E-Government Development Index and the World Bank Digital Adoption Index, they revealed that Trinidad and Tobago's declining global standing in digital development is trailing behind our regional partners like Barbados and Jamaica. Why are we behind? We used to be in front of everything.

In 1998 the *New York Times*, they described Trinidad as “a tiger in the sea of pussy cats”. Look where we are today. We are behind in every single thing in the region. Madam Speaker, urgent reforms are needed to catch up with global standards. When the Minister speaks of public sector reform, there is no clear strategy and there is no clear strategy in the budget that was presented, and we will continue to be inefficient and we are going to continue to be plagued with wastages in the public service for many, many years to come if we do not take immediate action.

Madam Speaker, again, the newspaper writes about these things in an editorial in the *Express* this year. They complained—there was an article where public servants feel that they are overwhelmed by the bureaucracy and the old systems are slowing them down. You know, the best example of that Madam Speaker, is this line up to pay property tax. You know, I believe in this country or in any country, you must never line up to pay money. You must line up to receive money, but to pay money you are supposed to be able to roll off your bed in your pyjamas and drop it somewhere, if the State really wants money. We could have

put systems, put bins in commercial places, write your cheque, put it in, drop it in a bin, walk in front of the warden's office and drop it in if you are paying via cheque. Why are we to stand up in the hot sun to pay money?

Madam Speaker, digital transformation is a process that has to happen if we want to see improvement in Government service—and I will tell you this as well. The movement of digital services, it creates a space for good decentralization of Government services and that has the ability to solve a lot of problems outside of the digitalization. I will just talk briefly on that.

So Madam Speaker, I have read about a concept of something called intelligent municipalities and it envisions a decentralized model where Government services are relocated from central hubs like Port of Spain into municipal regional districts, complexes making these services more accessible to citizens. So you are using IT, you are using AI, you are automation, but this is what it does. Madam Speaker, there are benefits from that.

Local staff, our young public officers who are leaving Tabaquite, leaving Brothers Road, Mayaro to Port of Spain, they can work in their local municipalities. That enhances the quality of life for our young public officers. They can look after their children. They do not have to have a nanny to make breakfast in the morning, somebody to do homework in the evening. They can get to work, they can get home on time to strengthen their family, which is something that is being pressured today with the lifestyles that we have today in the current situation.

Madam Speaker, decentralization via digitalization can reduce traffic congestion. It has a huge environmental impact—“and well, we eh burning so much gas” to head into Port of Spain and San Fernando, Madam Speaker. Citizens

can access multiple Government services in one place. So I am going to the passport office in Rio Claro, “de man tell meh, meh name spell bad, ah walk down and ah go by de JP, he signs up the paper, he tell meh walk by de next office, pay de fee and ah come back by the immigration officer right in Rio Claro”. I do not need to take more than one day to do all of that. So there are benefits outside of just pure digitalization.

When you build these regional complexes—look, another good feature. Right now, vendors are fighting with store owners in front of the place for space. The municipal police harass vendors to move from in front—so there is conflict. If we build these campuses and these complexes in our regional corporations and we move these vendors to these areas, they now have traffic, they now have a market, they do not have to fight with the store owners, they do not have to fight with the municipal police. They have a market, they can sell their goods, it is a high-traffic area because everybody goes for Government services when the day comes. So Madam Speaker, I just wanted to show how that in itself helps quite a bit in terms of moving our digital infrastructure.

So then one person when I was discussing it, they said well, what will we do with Port of Spain? If we decentralize everything from Port of Spain what happens? Well, we get smart, right? We turn Port of Spain into the cultural and entertainment capital of the world, of the Caribbean. Let us move cargo to Pt. Lisa, to Point Fortin, send them down to Point Galeota. Let us put five cruise ship docks in Port of Spain, use the waterfront, get our artisans, small vendors, art and craft people to work. Get them into downtown Port of Spain. Fix our museum, our zoo, our botanical gardens. Let us create a product that the world wants to come and visit, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: We solve the problem with that. We solve the problem of this unemployment bogey. Madam Speaker, as we go on as the time is going, I just want to touch quickly on agriculture. The Minister spoke for five hours and 12 minutes I think it was, and agriculture was reduced to a single paragraph. Mere tax exemption without any strategic vision for the sector's transformation as late as it would be. Madam Speaker, but rural constituencies like Mayaro, agriculture and fishing should thrive. Yet they are so neglected that the sector contributes—the whole sector, less than 1 per cent of our GDP, and you know what? We have a fisheries Bill that is laid down somewhere in a drawer in this Parliament—I do not know where for the last year or two—and this Bill will address a number of the problems that are holding back the fishing sector and I hope that Bill comes in this year this legislative year that we can deal with it.

But despite the rhetoric of this \$7.3 billion food import bill, which is the highest in our history, and I understand it is the highest in the whole region. What is odd, CARICOM neighbours like Guyana, Barbados and Jamaica, they are all making strides. We signed an agreement two years ago, Madam Speaker, to reduce food import to the region by 25 per cent. I have it on good information that “we eh participate in nutting” in the last two years.

Mr. Charles: What?

Mr. R. Paray: We have been lazy to even report to the CARICOM Secretariat on what measures that we have been making. So are we serious? Are we serious on this issue of driving this \$7.3 billion food bill?

Madam Speaker, I looked at the *Review of the Economy* as well and I saw some data in terms of our vegetable and fruit production. You are looking at 25

per cent reduction in the production of vegetables, 33 per cent in the reduction in pineapples. The Minister talked a little while ago Madam Speaker, on finding poultry to send to Curacao, when our poultry record is in diminishing returns here and then just recently we had the State threatening to knock down a man's poultry farm with about 15,000 chickens in it. So how do you make that make sense of how we want to operate? "Find ah market in Curaçao but we doh have enough chicken for we, but we knocking down farms."

Madam Speaker, these are things that as a Member of Parliament who is serving a rural community—and when you have to explain why things are how they are. Madam Speaker, we need to have more collaboration, we need to have more farmer training, we need to have private sector hold-handing with some of our farmers if the extension units of the Ministry cannot do it. We must address the issue of praedial larceny. We must address the issue of a reliable water supply. We must leverage international expertise to deal with the issues of climate-resilient crops. These things are coming, freshwater security, all of these things ought to be huge policy positions that we ought to be articulating from now. Whether it is two years down the road four years down the road, we on have to address—we have to confront these things, Madam Speaker, and it is not there as any part of any policy.

11.40 a.m.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two minutes of ordinary speaking time left. You have 10 additional minutes available to you, if you wish, to complete your contribution. So you are going to use the additional 10 minutes?

Mr. R. Paray: Yes.

Madam Speaker: Okay. You may proceed.

Mr. R. Paray: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, we have to revitalize our coconut and cocoa industry. In the Minister's budget presentation, he spoke about this 900 acres of coconut on the east coast. I drive that east coast every day and I am still trying to find that 900 acres of coconut that we are trying to rehabilitate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that the farmers in Mayaro, we do have the potential to drive meaningful change. All they need is a government that is willing to invest in their future. With a genuine vision to support the agricultural sector, I think our farmers in Mayaro, that is the constituency of Mayaro, can be on the forefront of our national development. The time for all these empty promises is going, it is going fast and the State must act now.

Madam Speaker, let me talk quickly about job creation and there is a crisis of youth employment. The data as presented by the Minister, he says, it is 5.4 per cent. In Mayaro, the unemployment rate is tipping over 11 per cent and what is amazing is the percentage of that, that is youth unemployment and that has a psychological effect on the future of our country. So this *Review of the Economy 2024*, you know what it said, Madam Speaker? That youth unemployment nationwide stands at 25 per cent and in one quarter alone, it went up to 31.7 per cent. That is the *Review of the Economy*, eh, so "ah taking it" word for word.

So, Madam Speaker, when you have this level of youth unemployment, that is nothing short of a national crisis. You know what it is to spent five years in university and to come home and sit down and watch "yuh neighbour son, short pants, two gold chain—he eh wuking nowhere, yuh know, but he moving like ah big boy". But you now sacrificed five years, "yuh mudda and fadda stop eating,

drinking, going on holiday so they could pay school fees”, and you cannot get a job. As an MP, we are limited to see where OJT could offer a job and it is only so much that they can. So that is something that we have to address head on. How are we going to move—

Mr. Hinds: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. R. Paray: Well, you are the Government. You are the Government. When we change, “ah go tell yuh how to do it”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, sorry about that. The Minister spoke about creation—

Mr. Hinds: Would the Member give way?

Mr. R. Paray:—and we need to find a sustainable way to do it. And you know, if we push our diversification as we talk about decentralization, you know, the issues around agriculture, we can find the jobs, we can find the good jobs, the sustainable jobs for our young people. But if it is not in a policy, we cannot turnaction, ideas, deliverables, Madam Speaker and we go on.

So, Madam Speaker, in the few remaining minutes that I have, I want to talk specifically now on this issue of crime because it is hitting everyone. It is turning wonderful, beautiful constituencies like Mayaro, that has always been a place of rest and relaxation, a place where to come with your family to feel safe—and slowly, that is changing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, we are indeed living in fear. Everywhere you go, you go to temple, you go to mosque, you go to a prayers, there is this question about crime and why the Government is

not getting a handling on it. Madam Speaker, crime has escalated into very, very terrifying levels. I took note that the hon. Member for Port of Spain South has put some actions in place, in terms of getting these joint patrols, this joint task force to get outside there and get some work done.

But, Madam Speaker, it is not only about the 12 boats that I think the Minister said we are going to buy and 2,000 vehicles over three years. We are not addressing operational issues in the police service, operational issues in forensics, operational issues in the prisons, operational issues in the Judiciary. If we cannot convince the public that swift justice is around the corner, we will not improve justice. And if we do not improve trust in our law enforcement, no matter what we do, I do not think we are going to make a dent in crime in any way.

Madam Speaker, illegal guns: Illegal guns is what is driving the gun-related murder. Crime—I think we have over 500 today. But the approach has to be proactive, not reactive, which is what is happening now. So we cannot stop the guns on the high seas because “we eh ha no boat. We cyah stop de guns on de port because de scanners eh working”. So, “wah we ha tuh do”? We have to find them in the homes where they are sitting. And my understanding is that between 1.00 and 4.00 in the morning, “de gun and drugs not in de house, it across the road by de fig patch”, so you have to be smart “where yuh going and look for it because dey bring it back five o’clock in de morning”. If “we cyah ketch dem in the house, they are moving in motor car to somewhere to put down ah crime”, so we have to attack them there. If “we cyah ketch them in the car”, they are walking with it on their side gallantly on the streets, walking with it bravely.

So, Madam Speaker, what does the police do? The police has to take an immediate crackdown, attack with full force, island-wide searches, go after them.

We must equip these very same teams, hon. Member for Port of Spain South, with scanners, dogs, metal detectors, give them the tools. Let them pursue and go after the criminal element. We must provide the funding for them. Let us take the fight to the criminals, let us not wait for the criminals to fight us. So, hon. Member, I hope that you pass that message on and we can get somewhere.

So, Madam Speaker, in the five minutes that I have left, I want to make a suggestion in terms of dealing with crime. The Prime Minister—as a Member of this Opposition, I will continue to hold every Minister of Government to account for their Ministry, I will continue to hold the Government in charge of the future of this country. But the Prime Minister is leader of this nation. He carries a heavy responsibility for the welfare and the safety of every citizen. In that spirit, I am prepared to work beyond any line, anyone, to grant the Prime Minister the authority that he needs to provide our protective institutions with the legislative tools that is required to combat and suppress crime in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: And if the legislation can come with the protection for our citizens, their constitutional rights and it could stand the test of the Judiciary, I am prepared to consider it. Madam Speaker, but I want to tell the Prime Minister that this is not about him, this is about Trinidad and Tobago. This is not about the Leader of the Opposition because the buck stops with the Prime Minister. He has to make it happen.

Madam Speaker, and I, I do not make this statement out of any love or admiration for the PNM as a political organization and I neither make it because some misinformed person say that “I is ah PNM operative come to mash up ah party. I eh doing that”.

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Hon. Member: Who say that?

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, I am lucky. I am doing it because I am lucky. I am lucky because I am luckier than the 500 people that lie dead today because of gun violence in this country. I am lucky because my family has never had a home invasion, a gun stuck by their neck. I am fortunate. And you see what I do not want for you and your family, Madam Speaker? “I doh want fuh mines”, and it is for that single reason that if something is presented, we have a duty to act in accordance for the well-being of this country.

Madam Speaker, I acknowledge that we have imperfections but I also recognize how far we have come and how far we need to go as a young Republic. I believe in this country, Madam Speaker. I believe in our resilience, our intelligence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray: I believe in our ability to recognize that doing the right thing is easy, doing the wrong thing is hard.

11.50 a.m.

Madam Speaker, I have made my stance clear. I am willing to put Trinidad and Tobago above everything else, above partition politics, above any type of politics that will cause another toddler to be shot—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Paray:—another pensioner to be robbed, and another family to face any type of violation. Madam Speaker, with those few words, this may very well be my swan song. Let the chips fall where they may. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for San Fernando East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Brian Manning): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute in this extremely important debate, Madam Speaker. I sat here last week, and I listened to the Minister of Finance deliver what, from all quarters, is being seen as a reasonable and responsible budget, in what is ostensibly a budget year, Madam Speaker. Then to everyone's shock and horror, I listen to the Opposition leader, the Member for Siparia, deliver a response that I could only describe as unhinged, Madam Speaker. Never has one spoken so long to say so little, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: The entire response was filled with so much misinformation that if we decided to refute, if I decided to refute all of it, in this one contribution, we would be here all day long, Madam Speaker. So, I will not do that. Not only was it filled with misinformation, it was also filled with these puerile acronyms, Madam Speaker. They just simply irritated everyone listening. When that did not work, the Opposition leader, the Member for Siparia, decided to segue into the dangerous, Madam Speaker. The Opposition leader began to attack the business community, the business chambers, and the energy chamber in this country, Madam Speaker, because those entities came out and also said that this was a reasonable and responsible budget. The Opposition leader decided to attack those bodies simply because they did not agree with her assessment. That is something we should all be concerned about, Madam Speaker.

But fortunately for us, all the numbers tell the tale. I heard the other Opposition leader, the Member for Mayaro, mention that the contributions were

filled with these numbers. Madam Speaker, on this side of the aisle, we call those numbers facts. I am going to present a few more facts for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, who want to know what is actually going on in the economy of this country. Madam Speaker, to begin with, Trinidad and Tobago has been given a clean bill of health by every single independent international agency that has taken a look at our economy. That is something to be extremely proud of.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: And that is no accident, Madam Speaker. That has come from proper management of this economy over the past decade. And keep in mind that over the past 10 years, Madam Speaker, that this Government has been in office, Trinidad and Tobago has experienced maybe the most challenging economic period in the history of this country. And let me give you the facts. Let me explain exactly why. In 2008, we had the global financial crisis. The effects of that were felt worldwide and went on year after year after year, Madam Speaker. We had an extreme reaction to that incident.

In 2014 and 2015, there was the shale oil drilling revolution, Madam Speaker. We are still very much an energy economy. The shale oil drilling revolution dramatically affected international energy prices, both oil and gas, and dramatically had a dramatic negative effect on the revenues from the energy sector of this country. At one point, I remember looking at it, the oil price, the international oil price, fell to somewhere around \$27, \$28. But, of course, during that period it did not stop those on the other side from foisting on this country, two of the largest budgets in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. But, I will speak more about that going forward.

After the shale oil revolution, which collapsed energy prices worldwide, we were faced, of course, with the once-in-a-lifetime incident of the global pandemic, Madam Speaker. It shut the entire world down for almost two years. Yet, Madam Speaker, coming out of that Trinidad and Tobago remains the only investment-grade country in all of CARICOM and one of the few within Latin America and the Caribbean, and that is something to be proud of, Madam Speaker. We are the only ones; it is not by accident. It is because we have prudently managed this economy.

Those before me have spoken so much about rising debt levels and has spoken so much about the Government dipping into the HSF. I read an article over the weekend by one economist, I believe attached to the University of the West Indies. He warned about deficit budgets and that deficit budgets could lead to the destruction of our economy. I would like to ask this gentleman and others to consider where would this country be without deficit budgets during this critical and crucial period. I guarantee you, if the Government of Trinidad and Tobago were ever irresponsible enough to pull 5/6/7/8 billion dollars a year out of this economy, it would be a completely different place.

Right now we are investment-grade, and let me explain what that means to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. An investment-grade rating is much like a credit score. It determines the cost of borrowing for this country because, because of that rating, Trinidad and Tobago has the ability to access relatively low-cost debt on both the local and international markets. Madam Speaker, that, along with our reserves and the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund has saved this economy, and those are all PNM policies that have benefitted the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, coming out of this challenging period we have seen quite a few changes within the economy. The biggest change I would say is that now the non-energy sector now outperforms the energy sector in Trinidad and Tobago. I want to say that one more time. The non-energy sector, in this so-called energy economy, now outstrips the energy economy. And we are still investment-grade. We still have one of the lowest unemployment rates within the entire region.

Madam Speaker, during this difficult time, the people of Trinidad and Tobago have shown their creativity and resilience, and we have been able to adapt to the challenging times. As my grandmother used to say when I was growing up, “a bad ting never happen yet.” The people of this country have adapted to the challenges that we have faced. I am extremely proud of how we have responded to adversity in this country. Let me give you a few facts about the manufacturing sector, which is leading the non-energy sector in this country.

Madam Speaker, right now the trade and repair sector, and the accommodation and food services, and transport and storage industries make up approximately 28 per cent of our GDP. Manufacturing in the non-energy sector is about 91 per cent of the non-energy sector. Inflation rates, Madam Speaker, from 2022 to '23 have gone from 8 per cent to 3.9 per cent. In July 2024, we had an inflation rate of 0.3 per cent, food inflation, though still high, has gone from 2022, 17.3 per cent to 2024, 1.4 per cent, Madam Speaker. We have been running deficit budgets in this country since, I believe, the year 2009, and during that time, only one Government has ever presented a surplus during that time, and it was in 2022, and it was this PNM Government, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, we are well aware of what it takes to manage an economy. Some of the advice that we have gotten just does not make any sense. It would have created such severe hardship in this country that no one would have been satisfied or happy with that. So we did listen to good quality advice, but we decided to implement policies that were to the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, let us compare some of what was done under this Government, in an election year ostensibly, to what was done by those on the other side in 2015, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, they come here and they complain about deficit budgets, about the Government using debt to supplement some of its revenues so that we can continue this economy growing. Madam Speaker, in 2014, in 2015, the Government of those on the other side presented a budget in 2014 of \$64.6 billion. This is in the face of collapsing international energy prices.

12.00 p.m.

In 2015, they presented a budget of \$61.4 billion. Madam Speaker, those are the two largest budgets in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. Both years were deficit budgets mind you. They were borrowing money in an attempt to buy an election, which they eventually still lost, Madam Speaker. But what they did during that time—because of their reckless borrowing—buried future generations of this country under a mountain of debt that is going to take us a very long time to dig ourselves out from under. Madam Speaker, in this budget, which is an election budget, none of that occurred.

In 2024 our budget was \$57.5 billion, a far cry from what was done in 2014/2015. This year it is one of \$59.5, with an average deficit of between five to

six billion; it is \$5.5 billion expected deficit this year, Madam Speaker. That is reasonable and responsible. The Minister of Finance has been expertly managing the debts of this country in an attempt to not mortgage the future of our young people just to win a general election, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: And that is why the people of Trinidad and Tobago trust this Government and do not trust those on the other side because they know what to expect, they have seen it before, and they do not want to see it again, Madam Speaker. It was wanton and reckless. Both the Member for Siparia and the Member for Mayaro spoke about the SMEs in Trinidad and Tobago. They are saying that we are doing nothing for SMEs. Madam Speaker, that cannot be true. We cannot have a growing and burgeoning non-energy sector in a growing economy that has grown for the past three years as opposed to what we have seen throughout CARICOM, and not have a system and policies in place to benefit SMEs within Trinidad and Tobago.

I know in the constituency of San Fernando East we have seen many young people, and also smaller businesses, grow and prosper in the last few years because they have decided to take advantage of many of the policies implemented by this Government. And let me let the national community become aware of a few of these policies, Madam Speaker. We have one, the Small and Medium Enterprises Stimulus Loan Programme. It provides up to \$300 million to help SMEs impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. That is available to the SME sector of this country. Loans are guaranteed by the Government and come with a two-year moratorium. So it allows you to take these loans and also a period to get on your feet so you do not have to immediately start making repayments, Madam Speaker.

There is also the SME Listing and Mentorship Programme aimed to support SMEs by providing mentorship and facilitating their listing on the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange, Madam Speaker. It invites collaboration with the Central Bank and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Now, the Minister of Trade and Industry earlier on went through a laundry list of programmes available to the business community of this country including SMEs. This is one of them, Madam Speaker, we are not just in the business of handing over finances to some of our burgeoning business people, some of them need help. As someone said earlier, “They need some handholding.”

So not only will the Government finance your burgeoning business, they will also give you advice as to how to do your books, how to pay your taxes, how to have formal statements, all of these things that business people require to be able to function within any industry, Madam Speaker. And that is also with the purpose of one day allowing these businesses to grow and to be managed properly enough so that they can list themselves on the stock exchange, and I will get to more of that as we go on. Madam Speaker, SME for development financing facility. The Government guarantees 80 per cent of the loan amount making accessing financing easier for SMEs in Trinidad and Tobago.

Next, we have, of course, NEDCO, The National Entrepreneurship Development Company, which provides services to support small businesses including financing, training and advisory services. This company is well known to all in Trinidad and Tobago and plays a major role in economic diversification through entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, next we have the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, which provides support to small businesses through various programmes aimed at fostering economic

growth and stability. All of these programmes exist, Madam Speaker, we are not making this up. Not only will we provide funding, but we are to provide technical support to SMEs, and that is a major reason why the non-energy sector now outstrips the energy sector in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: So they want to talk about diversification, but they want to pretend as if it is happening by accident, as if the Government did not do any of this, it just happened all on its own. It could not have, Madam Speaker. This Government, and especially the Minister of Finance, has put a special focus, especially on the SME sector from day one. And I would like to especially thank the hard-working people at the Ministry of Finance, the Central Bank, and also at the Unit Trust Corporation for effectively supporting these programmes and providing them to the young entrepreneurs of this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, let me mention some of the things that the Units Trust Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago is doing to benefit entrepreneurs. There is:

1. The Scale Up TT Programme: A business accelerator programme for SMEs with significant growth potential. There are workshops, mentorship sessions; all of that. Scale Up TT at the UTC, Madam Speaker.
2. SME listing support: This assists SMEs in being listed on the stock exchange, more of that soon because there are many benefits that come from that.
3. Collaborative efforts with the Ministry of Trade and Industry to provide

comprehensive support for SMEs, financial support, mentorships, strategic guidance; all of this is available.

So, Madam Speaker, I encourage young people and maybe the not-so-young who are involved in small businesses in this country to take advantage of these opportunities. Developing SMEs in Trinidad and Tobago comes with major benefits. It benefits the economy, we are seeing it. They create employment, and they add so much to the economy of this country. The Government has focused especially on that and because of that focus, we are seeing more and more strides in terms of the contribution to the economy. And also, many of the SMEs have been encouraged and mentored to take part in the technology that makes them competitive in today's world. So it boosts the digital transformation of this country, it is seen through the SME sector.

Initiatives by this Government have encouraged the adoption of e-commerce strategies, digitization of operations, which have aided SMEs in expanding their market reach and improved operational efficiency. That has been happening in the SME sector. The Government has also developed programmes to improve access to financing, but also access to training and skill development for both SME owners and employees. So not just the owners, employees are also being trained by this Government. This ensures that the potential is there to become competitive both domestically and internationally.

Of course, to become competitive internationally you are going to have to develop a competitive advantage, and part of that is, of course, a knowledge-based competitive advantage. Because that is how things are in this globalized economy, Madam Speaker. They talk about diversification, they talk about expanding our economy, but neither the Opposition Leader nor anyone else on the other side has

said anything about exactly how that should be done. It is easy to come here to this Chamber and talk about diversification, and throw out some buzzwords. I heard machine learning, AI, what do you call it? Data analysis, but not a single word of exactly how this country can become competitive in any of those areas. It is about competitive advantage. Trinidad and Tobago's greatest competitive advantage is, of course, our people. This Government has gone to great lengths to educate the people of this country. That gives us a knowledgeable and skilled workforce. That is an extreme competitive advantage.

Another advantage we have is also in the area of low-cost energy, Madam Speaker. It is one of the advantages that underpins our manufacturing sector, which tends to be energy intensive. We are also fortunate enough to be outside of the hurricane belt, Madam Speaker. We are below the hurricane belt, which makes us a prime place for the marine industry, Madam Speaker. So, that is how we have been looking at it, we have been looking at these sectors and growing other sectors with an intention to really attract more foreign exchange, and to make our businesses internationally competitive. That is what this Government has been doing.

12.10 p.m.

But let me move on, Madam Speaker. The Member for Mayaro spoke at length about the rise of food prices in Trinidad and Tobago, and is saying that the Government is doing nothing to offset this increase in food prices. Madam Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. Coming out of the COVID crisis we saw a global supply chain inflation. The cost of shipping goods across the world increased dramatically and that in turn increased the cost of imported foods in Trinidad and Tobago.

At the Ministry of Finance we have attempted several initiatives to, one, deter many persons from purchasing expensive luxury food items in the local economy, so that we can protect our foreign exchange and also ensure that we can remove any source of duties and tariffs on essential food items. So we added duties to the luxury goods by removing duties and tariffs from essential items. But Madam Speaker, Trinbagonians in many senses are victims of our own success. No matter what kind of tariff we put on luxury food items, the food import bill just continues to rise. We hear this all the time about, what is the Government doing about protecting foreign exchange?

Madam Speaker, do you know what is the largest consumer of foreign exchange in Trinidad and Tobago? It is new motor vehicles. New motor vehicles. So, I always have this discussion with various entities. We have to understand where we are. So Trinbagonians want access to new vehicles and they want cheap fuel, but they do not want any traffic and they do not want any of the negatives that come out from this. You want access to foreign exchange but you also want luxury food items which deplete foreign exchange even though we need that foreign exchange for essential items.

Madam Speaker, in any economy it is a give and take. When you do something in one sector it affects another sector somewhere else and we have to be knowledgeable and informed about exactly how it is we are dealing with the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. And I would say, as I said earlier, this Government in the past decade has been both reasonable and responsible in managing the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. But let me get back to food inflation. What have we done?

We decided to implement many social programmes to put money back into

the pockets of the people of this country so that it can be used to offset some of the food inflation that we have seen. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services would have spoken to many of those earlier on, and we have seen many of these programmes which were designed to really protect the most vulnerable. And we have said from day one, from day one, that we are going to do what it takes and if that means deficit budgets, then so be it, to really maintain this economy, ensure that there is growth, but also while not leaving the most vulnerable people in this society behind. Madam Speaker, I would dare say that this Government has done exactly that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, between year 2020 and 2024, 6.3 million bus pass holders in this country were able to use the public transportation system for free. From senior citizens, the general public grants, the disability grants, recipients, uniforms, schoolchildren, at a cost of one \$1.05 billion to the State. So the State took that cost, so that the most vulnerable people in this country would not have to take money out of their pockets to pay for those fees. And that way it could be used to offset the increase in imported food prices.

Madam Speaker, the utilities assistance grant, and I am sure my good friend from the Ministry of Public Utilities would speak more on that later. There is the T&TEC bill assistance programme. Madam Speaker, if you are a vulnerable person and you are receiving benefits from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, whether it is grants or whatever, you have an opportunity to have the State offset your electricity bills. Madam Speaker, which other country in the world could you have a government that would pay—help you to pay your electricity bills on already heavily subsidized electricity. We have one of the

lowest electricity rates in the hemisphere, in the Western Hemisphere, Madam Speaker, and yet if you are vulnerable—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning:—and living on a fixed income this Government will help you even further to pay your electricity bills. And that is so you could offset the increased cost of the imported food inflation that we saw after the COVID crisis.

Madam Speaker, in the past year \$5.1 million and also 5,317 customers benefited from the T&TEC bill assistance programme. Not only electricity, Madam Speaker, we will also assist you with your water bills. There is the WASA bill assistance programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, again, our water in this country is heavily subsidized. We have one of the lowest water rates in the Western Hemisphere and this Government will still assist you further in paying your water bill; \$7.1 million Madam Speaker, guess how many customers access this programme?—47,839 customers access the WASA bill assistance programme. That is what a caring, reasonable, responsible government would do in a time of crisis. And that is why we are, our economy is where it is today.

Madam Speaker, there is the Water Tank Assistance programme which benefited 292 households. Also significant investment in the agricultural sector. Madam Speaker, this Government is determined to make the agricultural sector of this country completely tax free. Tax free agricultural sector. So there is no import duties, no taxes so that our agriculturalists in this country can benefit from the programme and also feed our country, so that we would not have to rely as heavily on imported food and the cost of imported food.

Madam Speaker, we have dedicated \$101 million to support farmers, fishermen and agricultural workers in Trinidad and Tobago. There is the Agriculture Finance Support Programme which benefited 285 farmers at \$27 million in one period. Also the incentive programme provided subsidies for fishermen also. No one is being left out with this caring, reasonable and responsible PNM Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, next, let me move on to a topic that I know is extremely—has been discussed a lot in the past few years I would say, in Trinidad and Tobago, and that is the issue of property taxes. We have heard all kinds of dangerous rhetoric from those on the other side about property taxes being used to damage the people of this country, to harm the most vulnerable, people are losing their homes and so on. Madam Speaker, none of that can be true. There are so many exemptions for the property tax legislation, also deferrals, and I am going to mention some of that here today. Because I have been, you know, meeting with the public in general as we do regularly in San Fernando East, I am in office almost every Thursday and I meet the public and they have their questions. So I answered them, so I know what the issues are.

With property taxes what we had to do, Madam Speaker, at the Valuation Division was really populate the valuation roll. Now, this is a massive database. We have over 400,000 residential properties in Trinidad and Tobago, approximately. We had to populate the valuation roll to at least 50 per cent to ensure that we were in keeping with the legislation. Now, we came up I believe with 197,000, approximately, property owners on the roll. Of course, some persons would have more than one property, that is why it is less than 200,000, so

197,000. Then we had to make sure that the valuation roll information matched the database at the Board of Inland Revenue, so that the property tax could be assessed and notices sent out to the general population.

Now, to rectify and to verify, cross-reference the valuation role, we had to access databases at T&TEC, WASA, TTPOST all of these places. So we have all of this information for 400,000 properties and we have to discover which one is correct and accurate and lines up with the information also at the BIR. Madam Speaker, this has been an extremely difficult and challenging situation. And that is why it has taken us so long. I think we have taken, maybe, 15 or 20 years to implement, what is, ostensibly, an effective and also upgraded property tax system, and it is one that I believe is fair to all. Previously we had the land and building tax legislation, and what it did, you would be charged a percentage in terms of property tax on the overall capital value of your property. This property tax system, this modified, updated, upgraded property tax system charges just 2 per cent on the annual rental value of your property.

12.20 p.m.

What the annual rental value is—and I do not want to bore you with too much technical finance, Madam Speaker. What the rental value is, it is an estimate of what you would get for your home if you decided to rent it on the open market in an arm's-length transaction. So, why that is used is because the ARV encompasses all of the things that give your property value.

Madam Speaker, if you and I lived next to each other in a house that is similar, and you have AC, and I do not have AC, I could charge more ARV if I was renting out my home. If you had a covered carport and I did not have that, it would also add value to your property. So, all of that is taken into consideration

with the ARV. And then on that, it is 2 per cent of the annual rental value. Madam Speaker, it is one of the lowest property tax rates you would find anywhere, anywhere at all—

Hon. Member: And it is widely used.

Hon. B. Manning:—and widely used. And let us not forget also, that the revenues from property taxes will be used to support the local government system, Madam Speaker. It is going to cut through bureaucracy, it is going to ensure that our local government bodies are well funded, so that now you would not have the same complaints we had before about not having access to capital for fixing roads, collecting garbage, fixing drains, all of those things that make our properties liveable in the first place, and that is because this Government decided to implement a modified, and fair, and just property tax system.

But just in case you live on a fixed income, Madam Speaker, or you are a person who is struggling at the moment, there are exemptions and deferrals to really protect the most vulnerable people in our society. So, all the rhetoric that we hear from the other side about, “The Government is trying to take your home, the Government does not care about you, the Government is trying to torment poor people,” nothing could be further from the truth.

Let me let you know some of the exemptions in the property tax legislation, Madam Speaker:

“lands used exclusively as churches, chapels and places of public worship of any religious domination and every cemetery or burial ground...” —exempted from property taxes.

“school buildings, offices and playgrounds of schools within...the Education Act;”—exempted, Madam Speaker.

“Lands...”—used—“...for educational, philanthropic or religious purposes...”—exempted.

“lands owned...and used exclusively by an incorporated charitable institution;”—exempted.

“land of a designated class that is declared by the Minister of Finance to be exempt...

land belonging to and in occupation of

the State or its servants;

a Statutory Authority; or

state enterprise controlled by the State for public purposes...”—also exempted.

“land used for the purposes of public hospitals, public asylums and all almshouses and institutions for the relief of the poor, whether publicly or privately administered;”—also exempted.

“land belonging...”—or—“...occupied by the University of the West Indies...”—and—“...its servants;”—Madam Speaker, exempted.

“land belonging to a tertiary learning institution or managed by the State;”—exempted.

“land belonging to the University of Trinidad and Tobago;”—exempted.

“land belonging to the University of the Southern Caribbean...”—also exempted.

“land belonging to the College of Science , Technology and Applied Arts, (COSTATT)...”—exempted, Madam Speaker.

The Government is not here to pauperize anybody.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: We want to ensure that we continue the growth and development that we have seen in his country, even during the worst of times, while ensuring that the most vulnerable amongst us also have the opportunity to succeed. And that is just the exemptions, I have not even mentioned the deferrals just as yet, Madam Speaker.

There are several deferrals within the property tax legislation. One, a person who is on a Public Assistance Grant can defer property tax payments, Madam Speaker. That is usually a person on a fixed income, they have challenges and they would have a difficult time increasing their income going forward. Those persons can defer property tax payments. Persons on a disability grant also can defer those property tax payments, Madam Speaker. Persons on Senior Citizens' Pension can also defer payments.

“a Trinidad and Tobago conditional cash transfer card,
from the State...”—also can defer.

Madam Speaker, anyone who:

“...does not receive an annual income exceeding the maximum amount specified in section 3 of the Senior Citizens' Pensions Act...”—can also defer those payments, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the legislation is modernized, it well thought out and it is designed to benefit the most vulnerable people in this country, while finding a new source of funding for the local government entities in this country, so that we can move our country forward and have a cleaner environment for all.

Madam Speaker, earlier, I spoke about all the myriad programmes that this Government, including the Ministry of Finance the Ministry of Industry and Trade, Central Bank, UTC and others have implemented and made available to the SME

sector of Trinidad and Tobago. Now, Madam Speaker, the goal that we have is that we want to see more SMEs in this country accessing capital on the Stock Exchange in Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, accessing capital in the Stock Exchange has many benefits. One of the major benefits is that you are not borrowing money. You do not have to put yourself in debt to really finance the growth of your business. To get to that level, you also have to have the right management in place, you have to have the right systems in place to ensure that there is an ability to understand exactly what is happening within your company and there is a level of transparency that would give investors great comfort.

Madam Speaker, for companies listing on the Stock Exchange in Trinidad and Tobago, there are several incentives. One incentive, there are tax incentives. For the first five years, there will be a full exemption of corporate taxes, businesses levy and green fund levy for all businesses listing on the Junior Stock Exchange in Trinidad and Tobago. And if that is not enough, total tax holiday for five years. For the next five years, you have a 50per cent reduction in all of these taxes. Madam Speaker, that is what a caring, sensible government can do, and that is why we are seeing so much growth in the non-energy sector and the SME sector in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: We are giving our businesses every opportunity to compete and to thrive, so that they can hire employees and they can also compete internationally and generate much needed foreign exchange within our economy.

Madam Speaker, next, another benefit, access to equity financing. SMEs can raise capital without the need for collateral or the repayment of debt. I

mentioned that earlier. That it is a major benefit of listing a company on the Stock Exchange.

Three, increased visibility and reputation. When a company is listed on the Stock Exchange, it gives investors the confidence that it has gone through a stringent due diligence process. It makes you feel confident that you are taking hard-earned dollars and investing it into a company that is doing things the right way. It is not some overnight company, you are not sure what is going on, you cannot see any financial statements. A fella comes to you and says, “Ay, I want you to make an investment in my company,” and you are not certain what is going on, you know if a company is listed on the Stock Exchange, the Junior Stock Exchange, especially, it has been properly vetted and has gone through a stringent, due diligence process. So I encourage more and more SMEs in Trinidad and Tobago to register themselves and to list on the Junior Stock Exchange. And I encourage more investors in Trinidad and Tobago to take a look at some of these companies. You may be looking at the future of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, and maybe beyond, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, another benefit: Price discovery. You may not know the market value of your company, you may have questions about it, you may say it costs one thing, another person who may want to invest or buy, you may think it costs something else. Listing on the Stock Exchange gives you the market value of the company in no uncertain terms, so there is no more debate or discussion as to exactly what your company is worth.

Also, the ability to have an employee stock ownership plan. A stock ownership plan, especially for growing ventures, is extremely important. I looked at some of the recent AI companies internationally and many of the employees,

because they have invested in an Employee Stock Ownership Programme, have become millionaires, as those artificial intelligence companies have taking off in recent months or recent years. It is extremely important. It gives you the ability to attract investment, attract employees and to make sure that those employees are well compensated when the company becomes successful, Madam Speaker.

12.30 p.m.

Next, it allows you the ability to raise additional capital through APOs, or additional public offerings, which means that you can offer additional shares if you need to raise capital for future projects in your business, Madam Speaker. Whether you wanted to add more inventory, whether you are growing your business, whether you have to invest in storage somewhere else, another country, and so on, you can raise capital to do these things without incurring more debt, and you do that by an APO, which means selling additional shares into the public market, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, those on the other side seem to like to pretend that the global pandemic in 2019 did not occur. They want to pretend that Trinidad and Tobago did not come through an extremely difficult period where the global economy shut down. It went to zero, Madam Speaker. I have heard the Opposition leader, the Member for Siparia, come to this House and questioned, one, vaccines, and then, two, decide to ask, “Where did all the money go during COVID?” Well, Madam Speaker, that is absolutely laughable. Our revenues fell to zero, yet during that time, not a single public servant in this country lost their job, and they were all paid in full and on time, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: This was for two years. I do not know how the Opposition

leader thinks that happened, if it was a miracle or what, but it was not a miracle. Well, maybe it was a small miracle, but it was mainly due to the planning and the competent management by the Ministry and Minister of Finance and this Government, Madam Speaker. That is how we were able to pay all of these persons their full salaries during the COVID crisis when revenues were minimal at best.

Let me remind the people of this country and also the Opposition Leader as to who that entails. Madam Speaker, during that time, a two-year period where revenues were next to nothing. Teachers, paid; police, paid; fire officers, paid; soldiers, paid; nurses, paid; doctors, paid; corporation workers, paid; public servants, paid; port workers, paid; pensioners, paid—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: —grant receivers, paid. Madam Speaker, paid, paid, paid.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: So the next time the Opposition leader comes to this House and asks, “Where de money gone?” I would like to inform the good lady to look in her pocket because she got paid too.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. B. Manning: Paid, all of them, yet they come here asking the craziest questions. Madam Speaker, I would like to move on to the performance of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Madam Speaker, when I came into office in 2020, one of the first suggestions that I made was to take a look at the strategic asset allocation of the HSF. Madam Speaker, we had a team of experts come to Trinidad and Tobago from the IMF and they also reviewed the fund and made

certain recommendations. Madam Speaker, during—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two more minutes of original speaking time available to you. You also have 10 minutes of extended time, if you wish. Are you going to utilize that now?

Hon. B. Manning: Gladly, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Yes. Okay. Please continue.

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you so much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Madam Speaker, as we compared what those on the other side did during the dark ages of 2010 to 2015, let us also look at what happened with the HSF Fund, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in 2015, the NAV or net asset value of the HSF was \$5.6 billion, Madam Speaker, but the one-year return was in the region of 2.5 per cent, Madam Speaker, 2.5. Because this Government took a look at the fund and decided to make certain adjustments so that the capital invested in this fund, that is supposed to be used to the benefit of the people of this country, would be more heavily invested in the stock market, Madam Speaker. Why? Because that is where the best returns are, as opposed to the fixed income segment. So that is exactly what we have done.

Madam Speaker, in the last few years, the HSF performance has been the best in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: The one-year return in 2023 was 10.59 per cent, Madam Speaker, this is coming out of the COVID crisis. Madam Speaker, before that, we were basically not heavily invested enough in the equities market, and because of it, we missed out on maybe the longest bull run in the US stock market, Madam

Speaker. The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, as I tell persons on the other side all the time, is not a savings account. You are not putting money in there for savings. It is an investment fund. What the HSF is supposed to do, Madam Speaker, is to smooth government spending over a period of time.

Now, why would you want to do that? Because if the Government spent too much, it can have negative effects on the economy. That is how you end up with Dutch disease and rampant inflation and so on. None of which has occurred under this Administration, Madam Speaker. And in times where things are difficult, like we have seen in the past few years during COVID, the Minister of Finance is allowed to dip into the HSF so that we can continue to have the kind of spending in this economy that lends itself to a stable economy and puts us on the pathway to growth, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this country has seen growth in the economy for the past three years because of the expert management of the economy and the Minister of Finance's use of the HSF, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, as I come to a close and wind up my contribution to this budget debate, I would like to thank the people of San Fernando East for their support, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: During my time in office in the past four years, I have made it my business to be in my office almost every Thursday and be on the ground in the constituency almost every weekend, Madam Speaker, going from community to community.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: In 2020, in the run-up to the election campaign, we began walking in every community and that was so I could meet with constituents and I

could get to know them, and they could also get to know me. Madam Speaker, during that time, we have not stopped walking and we have continued our walks throughout San Fernando East for the past four years. I have gotten to know people all across the entire constituency and I greatly appreciate the support and love that I have given to all of them, Madam Speaker. I have a saying in the constituency that I say to all of our people and our executives and to others who work in the office staff, and that is, “There is no sleep in San Fernando East”. We will work tirelessly to ensure that we are there to support and serve the people of our constituency, Madam Speaker. I do have another saying, which is, “If we stay ready, we don’t have to get ready”, Madam Speaker. And the San Fernando East constituency is ready for whatever may come and we are ready to deal with those on the other side in any election, whenever that is called, Madam Speaker.

On another note, and a sad note on that, I would also like to offer condolences for one of our executive members, Mr. Kern Sargeant, who recently passed away. Kern Sargeant was an integral part of our constituency and a person that we all knew and loved, and he can never be replaced. I would like to offer condolences to his family and we will miss him and the tireless work and service he has brought to the people of the San Fernando East constituency.

Finally, I would like to wish my loving wife a happy birthday around this time every year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: This is her birthday period, so she is celebrating her annual 21st birthday and I would like to wish her a happy birthday and thank you so much. Madam Speaker, thank you so much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West.

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me and giving me the opportunity to contribute to this very important debate on the budget for 2025 fiscal. Madam Speaker, before I begin with the meat of my contribution, allow me to respond to one of the most lost, blissfully clueless, out of touch, misinformed and proudly ignorant contribution—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—made by the speaker immediately before me, the Member for San Fernando East. Madam Speaker, the honourable gentleman began with a quotation, “ah bad thing never happen yet.” I am sure that the family of the over 4,000 murder victims in this country do not agree with you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

I am sure that the victims of home invasion, they do not agree with you.

12.40 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: I am sure that the pensioners who today are suffering, having to choose between food and medication, they do not agree with you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: I am sure that the thousands of unemployed youths who are desperately trying to find a job, they do not agree with you, junior Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: I am sure that the business community who are suffering today because they cannot get access to foreign exchange, they do not agree with the

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Minister, the junior Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: But the Minister went on, he also spoke about six billion bus pass holders between 2020 and 2024.

Hon. Member: Six million

Mr. D. Tancoo: Sorry, six million. Thank you for the correction. 6 million bus pass holders. When last I checked, we had 1.3 million people in Trinidad and Tobago; 1.3 million people. I do not know where this Minister got his six million bus pass holders from.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: I do not know where he got it from. The Minister himself—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: The Minister said—his words, “six million bus pass holders”.

Hon. Member: Yes.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Try to understand the language. If you do not understand English, try to find another language. As I move on, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: The Minister said, just to show their obsession with taxation, the Minister in the Ministry of Finance says, no matter how high the tariff on food prices they place, people are still importing food. That is their focus. Do you know what is the solution Minister? Do you know what the solution is? Produce more food.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Treat the farmers well. We still have a Government, Madam Speaker, who up to today has refused to provide an allocation to the Agricultural

Society of Trinidad and Tobago, the farmers' group, the group that represents farmers across Trinidad and Tobago. This Government, has refused to pay them their stipend for the last nine years, Madam Speaker, and you want to figure out now why agriculture is in a crisis in this country? It is because the Government simply does not care. Their priorities are elsewhere.

Madam Speaker, last Monday, Trinbagonians needed a plan to breathe. We needed a plan to seize the economic opportunities of the next decade, a plan to treat with the problems that citizens face now and may face in the future, a chartered passageway for the future, a plan to give them hope that the Government that they pay is suddenly focusing on the issues that they have and has a solution for it. Instead, Madam Speaker, what we got is five hours plus of noise. Five hours plus, Madam Speaker. This budget, the 2025 budget, does not speak about the country's present or the Government's plan for the country going forward, for the future, Madam Speaker. Instead, it is a sad story of nine years of PNM waste, mismanagement, incompetence, neglect of the population, Madam Speaker, and running away from responsibilities by Ministers who are charged with the responsibilities and paid for it by the taxpayers, Madam Speaker.

Nine years of ignoring the problems and cutting the funding for the solutions, Madam Speaker. If you listen to the Minister of Finance and his colleagues opposite, Madam Speaker, you would swear that this country is going well. You would swear that citizens in this country are doing exceptionally well. As a matter of fact, the Minister of Finance himself boasted that citizens are happy. But in the words of the great Bob Marley, "Check out the real situation", Madam Speaker. So for me, there is an easy test. For me, there is an easy test that any citizen can apply to determine what this Government's function and performance

has been over the last nine years. Citizens only have to ask themselves, are you better off today than you were in 2015? Do you feel safer?

Hon. Member: No.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Is it easier for you to pay your bills today and to make ends meet? Can you and your children find a job easily? I am hearing colleagues on the opposite side, Members from the Government Bench, saying yes, yes, yes. The past nine years have been good to the hon. Prime Minister. It may have been good to various Members and Ministers for those on the opposite side. But has it been good for taxpaying citizens, Madam Speaker? The answer is an overwhelming no.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: And if the answer to these questions is no, then citizens must understand that the crises that they face now is a direct response to the policies that this Government has put in place, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, Mufti Menk, a spiritual leader who I have great admiration for, pointed out that we have enough successful people in this world. We need more with compassion and empathy, good behaviour and conduct. We in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, need a Government made up of people such as these. We need a budget designed by people such as these, men and women with a heart for the poor and downtrodden. That is not what we have for this Government on that side, Madam Speaker. We need a Government of caring souls. We need in this country a UNC Government, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Tragically, what we got from the Government in budget 2025 is a continuation of the policies from 2020 to current.

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: From 2020 to current, Madam Speaker—

Mr. Scotland SC Hear the thunder rolling.

Mr. D. Tancoo:—empty noises from the other side.

Madam Speaker: Continue.

Mr. D. Tancoo: When you hear the thunder rolling my friend, that is God telling you he is in agreement with what I am saying.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, all I could say about the contributions on the other side can be summarized in one line. If this is what the Government on that side believes and delivers, this is why the country is in the crisis that it is in today.

Madam Speaker, I am proud to begin by congratulating my colleagues, Madam Speaker, particularly the hon. Leader of the Opposition—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—for her sterling contribution in this honourable House, where she provided not just a critique of the budget, but solutions to many of the problems facing this country, Trinidad and Tobago, today. I want to also congratulate my colleagues on this side, who have similarly critiqued the budget and made suggestions for the way to treat with the problems, because clearly this Government has no idea or does not care, and in either of those two situations, Madam Speaker, it is unacceptable. I would also want to express my appreciation to my staff for their support in researching the issues that I will raise here today. Sylvérine, Cindy, Darius, Janelle, Joshua, Lisa, Nicholas and Ralph, thank you all very much for your support.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Madam Speaker, I am also grateful to the constituents of Oropouche West and the various interest groups and NGOs and stakeholders who have been reaching out, who have made suggestions to collaborate with us in moving this Government from that side into this side, in making suggestions so that we could build a better country, in making suggestions, Madam Speaker, so that the Government could get a clue somewhere along the line of how they could treat the problems, because they clearly have not been able to.

Madam Speaker, the junior Minister of Finance, the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, says that the numbers tell the tale, and I am in some level of agreement with that. That is the only thing that the Minister said that has, in my humble view, any value. The numbers tell the tale, and with your permission, Madam Speaker, I want to provide some of those numbers. I want to raise a very serious issue of disappearing money under this Minister of Finance and that Minister in the Ministry of Finance and this Government, Madam Speaker.

We begin by asking where the money has gone. The Minister in the Ministry of Finance said that we keep asking where the money has gone. We will continue to ask where the money has gone, Madam Speaker, because that is a major issue. This Government has spent over half of a trillion dollars with nothing to show for it. Every single indicator, and we will hear it again, every single index, every single indicator has shown that this country is going negatively. We are regressing rather than progressing, and they are spending more and more money for that benefit. Madam Speaker, where has the money gone? And no, I am not speaking about the \$3.4 billion, which became \$2.6 billion in revenue, which up to today cannot be confirmed by the Auditor General, because the agencies of the State under the Ministry of Finance have failed to provide the supporting

documentation to have those accounts audited, Madam Speaker. And no, I am not speaking about the \$2.6 billion in value of foreign exchange lost every year, that is TT \$17 billion, US \$2.6 billion dollars lost every year since 2015, because the hon. Minister of Finance has refused to implement the BEPS legislation, Madam Speaker, passed here just recently.

12.50 p.m.

This money has been lost because of a tax evasion in the natural gas sector alone, for one year, that works out on average, Madam Speaker, of \$172 billion since this Government has been in office on one sector alone, and there are multiple sectors under which the same base erosion and profit shifting legislation would have prevented the loss of funding, the loss of money to the taxpayers, to the tune of billions and billions and billions of dollars, Madam Speaker. Where has that money gone? One hundred and seventy-two billion dollars, Madam Speaker, on the basis of one source of revenue which these taxpayers of this country should have been benefiting from, remember that figure, Madam Speaker, \$172 billion.

Central Bank data tells us that the Government borrowed \$107 billion, Madam Speaker, with at least \$12 billion more to be borrowed in 2025, fiscal. But remember, I told you, Madam Speaker, \$172 billion that the Government could have accessed, tag that, juxtapose that to the \$107 billion that the Government borrowed. If the Government had only done its job, which was to access the funds that are due to tax paying citizens, we would not have had to borrow a single red cent in this country.

As a matter of fact, there would have been an extra \$65 billion that would have gone to the benefit of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, if only this Minister of Finance, his Attorney General, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago had done

what they were supposed to do, which is to implement legislation, draft legislation that was sitting at their hands when they assumed office, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Sixty-five billion dollars that should have gone towards building schools; \$65 billion that should have gone towards fixing hospitals, providing social support, lost because this Government sat on its hands, Madam Speaker. And no, I am not speaking about the \$5.2 billion lost to corruption with former head of the procurement office had indicated were lost invaluable potential revenue because the procurement legislation had not been put in place, Madam Speaker. That is yet another \$34 billion that should have been collected in revenue by the taxpayers and used for their benefit, Madam Speaker.

Just those two items, Madam Speaker, that is over \$100 billion lost because this Government did not act. One hundred billion dollars that would have been, after the repayment of all the debts, we would not have had to pay to—after the repayment of all the excesses that this Government—we would not have had to borrow a cent, and the pockets of the Treasury, Madam Speaker, the pockets of taxpayers would have been \$100 billion in the black, positive, not where we are today, Madam Speaker. I have not even started speaking about the \$5 billion that the Procurement Regulator recently in her report said that were given out in contracts without the vision, without the oversight of her office, Madam Speaker.

So, while Ms. Mavis from La Romaine has to choose between paying property tax and buying food, billions of our tax dollars every year have gone up in smoke, and not a soul has been held accountable. Somewhere, Madam Speaker, a few PNM bigwigs are living like kings on the backs and pockets of taxpayers of this country. A few, because 99 per cent of these citizens of Trinidad and Tobago,

including 99 per cent of PNM supporters are suffering today because of the negligence of this Government, Madam Speaker—99 per cent of us are catching our “nen nen” thanks to this incompetent Government, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—that is accountability, PNM style. That is governance, PNM style, Madam Speaker. Malfeasance, corruption, history is repeating itself. PNM has established a track record for corruption, Madam Speaker. “Where de money gone?”

Recently, the Minister of Education, I have a very long quotation here, so I would not trouble you with the whole quotation, Madam Speaker. But recently, the hon. Minister of Education, Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly, told the country, and I quote:

I want to be very clear and the public has to understand this, that the amount of money required for school repairs is simply not available and that has been the situation for some time.

Children are being forced in this country, after nine years of the PNM, Madam Speaker, to live and work in schools—go to a school that is compromised by bat droppings, by pigeons, by rats, by mosquitoes. You have had to close down schools under this PNM Government, Madam Speaker, because of mosquito infestation, because of rat infestation. They have had to close schools. That is because, according to the Minister who sits in the very same Cabinet as the Minister of Finance, they did not have the money, they did not have the money. The Minister of Finance just recently, just a few months ago, said, and he wants citizens who are accessing CDAP, that has become very difficult for the Government to finance the CDAP programme.

I want to caution citizens to pay attention to this, Madam Speaker. I want to caution citizens because what that means, is the Minister of Finance has now put his evil eye on the CDAP programme.

Madam Speaker: Listen, I think you should withdraw those words. I think that is unparliamentary, please. I know you can find another way to say that.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The Minister of Finance has now placed his emphasis—

Mr. Imbert: Point of order.

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*]—point of order.

Mr. Imbert: Yes. I do not know the exact number but we are talking offensive language.

Mr. Young SC: 48(6).

Mr. Imbert: There is already a programme in CDAP, the “P” is for programme.

Madam Speaker: So wait, have you asked for an interruption?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: All right, so I have already ruled on the offensive language, and the hon. Member has withdrawn.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Despite having spoken for five hours-plus, the hon. Minister still believes that he has not said enough. Frankly, he has said more than enough, and he will have his chance in the wrap up. He will have his chance in the wrap up, Madam Speaker. The truth of the matter, Madam Speaker, is that this budget was an exercise in misdirection.

No matter what figure that the Minister presents here, no matter what figure he presented in the budget, no matter what figure he comes with in the Standing Finance Committee and talks about, no matter what those figures are, Madam

Speaker, they are no resemblance to what will actually be spent. We all know that, Madam Speaker, because it is historical that allocation by the Minister in the budget has nothing to do with the disbursements of funds. The one does not relate to the other, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: This budget debate then, Madam Speaker, is a deliberate waste of time by the Government, since they have no intention in implementing any of the plans and the policies that they say that they have focused on, Madam Speaker. Every year, the Minister of Finance comes to the Parliament with a multi-billion dollar budget, every year. That budget would have been informed by various Ministries who over the year, would have collected their data, made their proposal, made their estimates, identified what projects they wanted to implement, focused on it, costed it, provide a request to the Minister for funding and approval for funding, et cetera. All of those things, Madam Speaker, would have been the basis on which the Minister would have come up with a budget, according to him, of plans and programmes and money for said plans and programmes, Madam Speaker.

So, for example, these budgets are very, very specific. The Minister of Finance in this current budget, for example, in the *Estimates of Expenditure* for 2025, which the Minister just provided, estimated expenditure for the current year will be \$59.7 billion, according to the Minister, with the Ministry of Finance, getting \$7,277,544,030 in fiscal 2025. Down to the last \$30, Madam Speaker, is estimated. Moreover, there is a potential for supplemental funding in the mid-year review if we get to the point where we have a mid-year review, because we do not

know whether this Government will stay or leave, and we all hope that they will leave before the mid-year review, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: But it is that this budget state, it is at this budget situation, is at where we are today, it is at this budget stage, Madam Speaker, that the Minister and the Ministers on the opposite side will come with plans and policies of programmes and initiatives they want to engage in that they plan to undertake in fiscal 2025, between now, October 1st and the end of September next year, Madam Speaker. This is an opportunity to grab the headlines, to pat themselves on the back, to grab the headlines for a week. chambers of commerce, business houses, NGOs, et cetera, commenting, not realizing the repeated illusion that is being foisted upon them by the hon. Minister of Finance and this Government, Madam Speaker. It is a fiscal sleight of hand, Madam Speaker.

1.00 p.m.

Remember this, at the Standing Finance Committee, all Ministers come, sit before this honourable House, and the country by extension, and defend their budget, defend why they want \$1, \$2, \$5, \$50, \$20, and in the case of the Minister of Finance, why he wants that \$30 that he has in his allowance, Madam Speaker. But as with this Minister, the devil is always in the details. You simply cannot trust the words of the hon. Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Let me give you an example, Madam Speaker. In 2016, this Parliament approved the expenditure of \$66.97 billion. Do you know how much money was actually spent? Madam Speaker, \$56.6 billion, a difference of \$10

billion that was not spent. Approved by the Parliament, but not spent in the benefit of the country, Madam Speaker.

In 2017, same thing, \$59.8 billion; \$59.8 million approved by the Parliament; the amount spent, \$54.9 billion. In 2018, \$56.8 billion approved, \$54.2 billion spent. In 2019, \$58.3 billion approved; 2019 Actual spend, \$54.6 billion. In 2020, \$62.3 billion proposed, approved by the Parliament; Actual spend by the Ministry and the Government, \$57.4 billion, Madam Speaker. In 2021, \$59.9999999 billion approved, Madam Speaker, \$56.5 billion spent. In 2022, \$63.3 billion approved by the Parliament, \$59 billion spent. In 2023, \$75 billion approved, \$69.4 billion spent, a total, Madam Speaker—and we could go on.

On average, it is \$5 billion a year, approved by the Parliament and not spent. And if you check for the mid-year review, Madam Speaker, when they come back—on more occasions than one, the Minister is coming back to ask for money for specific purposes and then not spending the money. That is an absolute waste of time—in the first instance, Madam Speaker, it is the waste Parliament's time. But secondly, Madam Speaker, you have gotten approval for the money to be spent by the Parliament, you have identified where the funding is going to come from—all of this, by the way, comes from the Auditor General's report on the accounts of Trinidad and Tobago, eh; all of this. So ask yourself, Madam Speaker—they claimed that they needed the money, they came back and they asked for more in the mid-year review, and then refused to spend an average of \$5 billion every year that was already approved by the Parliament, without once explaining why, without once explaining which projects that they announced in this Parliament that they had no intention of implementing.

From the current state of the country, Madam Speaker, we already know that that every single Ministry has been underfunded. The result of that, Madam Speaker, is that we have today, the worst level of national security, the health sector is in crisis, education in crisis, roads and infrastructure in crisis, social support in crisis, public utilities in crisis, all underfunded by this PNM Government.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

They have refused to collect billions of dollars, Mr. Deputy Speaker, outstanding and available to their hands, but not just that. They have refused to spend the money that they have approved in this Parliament, and the Minister of Finance will come and talk about a \$10 billion tax gap annually. So, who is the Minister in charge? Who has been in charge for the last nine years, going into 10 years, to come to cry about a \$10 billion tax gap? The responsibility is his. The fault is his, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is his responsibility to implement legislation that exists. And the Minister will come afterwards in his wrap-up probably and speak about the TTRA not being available.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the Minister was interested, \$172 billion would have been collected—\$172 billion would have been collected in moneys that should have been collected, and a substantial \$10 billion-plus would have also been collected to add to the tax revenues currently. Mr. Deputy Speaker, ask yourself, why this Government has a passion to borrow instead of accessing the funds that they have access to? Why is the preference to borrow, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Ask yourself, who is pocketing the multimillion-dollar finder's fees and the other related expenses that have to do with respect to the \$107 billion borrowed since 2015. Ask yourself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who is pocketing the multimillion dollar

finder's fees and other related expenses with the respect to the \$107 billion borrowed since 2015? Why are they borrowing, when they could have simply accessed the funds that they had at their fingertips?

Who are the lawyers engaged in the legal transactions required to formalize these loans? Is this why the hon. Attorney General has refused to provide any sort of accountability to this Parliament or to this country for the billions—the millions of dollars being spent on legal fees—the millions—the hundreds of million dollars spent on legal fees to anonymous attorneys? Clearly, the hon. Attorney General does not understand that the citizens of this country are his clients, not the lawyers. The citizens of this country are his clients and he owes an obligation—as a citizen himself, being paid as an employee of taxpayers, he owes an obligation to taxpayers to account for the money that he is authorizing and spending.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: In this House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the taxpayer comes first and not the attorneys hiding behind shadows, collecting millions in bribes, but as it is written in the *Mahabharata*, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“There is no duty which is higher than Truth...”

You may laugh, it will come to you. When the facilitators of these loans, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are identified clearly after the next general election by a UNC Government, I think citizens may find no surprise when they discover a substantial number of young companies that have grown from immaturity, from grown—from struggling companies to multibillion enterprises today, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Another interesting question, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is if the Government is not spending as much as they budgeted. Because I just explained how many—\$5 billion on average that they budgeted and did not spend. If the Government is not

spending as much as they budgeted, how is it that the deficit on average is still higher than projected? If we are spending less, why are we borrowing more? That is metrics the Minister of Finance alone understands, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And when I tell you that this country is in a mess, and this Ministry is in a mess, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is what I am talking about. And I want to make it clear, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that it is my opinion that this is a deliberate chaos orchestrated by the hon. Minister to ensure that the actions that he is committing cannot be clarified. Where did the money go? Billions and billions—so it is not just \$530-odd billion that they spent. It is the billions of dollars otherwise that they have not spent, but I want to deal with the money that they spent.

Every day, I meet persons who are desperately in need. My colleagues opposite, the Member for San Fernando East, talks about going to his office on a Thursday. Congratulations, at least on a Thursday. When we on this side were elected Members of Parliament, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we were elected Members of Parliament to represent the constituents 24/7, 365 days a year, plus an additional day on a leap year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.10 p.m.

We do not sit and say, “We are in our office on a Thursday”. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are on the ground every single day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: That is performance. Not the “ole talk” that we are hearing on the other side. Before I get carried away with that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to bring it back to “where de money gone”. As I realize, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened to the Minister in his presentation last Monday and I realize, at least we

are 400-and—I believe it is \$87 million—over \$400 million has gone where it was extracted from and how this Government may have managed to disappear that money, \$400-plus million.

Pay attention, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on page 111 of the 2025 Budget Statement, the Minister of Finance boasted that the Government had invested heavily in the health sector, referring to several hospitals that the Ministry had funded, completed and opened. The desk thumped on the opposite side, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I paid attention. One of those that the Minister boasted about that his Government built was—and I am quoting:

“...the 100-bed Point Fortin Hospital at a cost of \$1.3 billion...”

Remember this figure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because a basic online search—and I know they do not like to do online searches—revealed some startling information which would make every single citizen ask a question.

A basic search online raised a question which would make every single citizen ask a question: WTF, where the funds, Minister? Where the funds? Because in September 2017, at the sod-turning ceremony, the Minister of Health announced that very same “100-bed Point Fortin Hospital”. The Minister repeated, 100—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

D. Tancoo: He knows what the other one is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. Well, you realize where the disturbance is coming from, right?

Mr. D. Tancoo: It is on both sides, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Member: Both sides. Both sides.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Alright. Please, Members, in silence.

Appropriation (Financial Year 2025)
Bill, 2024
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2024.10.07

Mr. D. Tancoo: It is on both sides, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because my side must respond to his side, from the utterances on his side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: So I fully endorse with them.

So the Minister of Health says that the hospital cost \$1.3 billion—sorry—the Minister of Finance announced in the budget, \$1.3 billion. The Minister of Health in 2017, when he was turning the sod, said that the hospital—the same hospital—was going to be built, contract signed at \$1.2 billion. He repeated that statement a year later:

“...the project was reduced from \$1.5 billion to \$1.2 billion...”

Again, that is the Minister of Health.

In November 2018, boasted about having saved \$1.6 billion on six projects, the Prime Minister, the hon. Prime Minister had this to say:

“The Point Fortin hospital, he said, was awarded at \$1.5 billion and the PNM renegotiated an arrangement and settled it at \$1.1 billion—saving \$400 million.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, do you remember what the original figure was? The Minister himself at the budget statement last Monday said, \$1.3 billion. Everybody else, 1.3—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: You know what it is. The number is the same, \$1.3 billion.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please, please, Members.

Mr. D. Tancoo: How then is it that the cost is now being announced at \$1.3 billion, not the \$1.2 billion that the Minister of Health announced, or the \$1.1

billion announced by the Minister, but at the cost of \$1.3 billion?

This is not chicken feed, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is substantial money. Where did that additional \$200 million come from and where did it go? Three different figures from three different Ministers sitting in the same Cabinet, Mr. Deputy Speaker. At least two of these Ministers are guilty of misleading the country or maybe all three. Citizens deserve to know. I hope that the hon. Minister of Health who is here now will respond. Citizens deserve to know. WTF, Minister of Health? WTF, Minister of Finance? WTF, Prime Minister? “Where the funds”?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: But it gets worse—it gets worse, the same Minister of Finance also boasted about the construction of the Roxborough Hospital at a cost of \$133 million. Remember that number now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$133 million.

Speaking at the opening of the Roxborough Hospital, as quoted in an official release by the Office of the Prime Minister, dating January 2021, and I quote:

“The new 31,320 square feet hospital located on Bloody Bay Road, Roxborough Tobago, was completed at a cost of \$98,379,410.04 (VAT Inclusive).”

Not the \$133 million the Minister just raised, you know, \$98 million. So where did this \$133 billion come from? Again, one or both of these Ministers are guilty of misleading the country. Where did this additional \$34.6 million charged on the public purse come from and who got it? Who benefited from it, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because the hospital was fully finished and operationalized when the Prime Minister was there cutting the ribbon? He was there, and this is the figure that he quoted, \$98 million, compared to \$133 million quoted by the Minister on

Monday last.

WTF, Minister Deyalsingh? WTF, Prime Minister? “Where the funds? Who this financing? What this financing?” Why taxpayers’ funds? And there is even more money unaccounted for, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as revealed in the Minister of Finance’s budget statement. In the same budget statement, the Minister of Finance told the nation:

“The new \$1.1 billion Sangre Grande Hospital was opened earlier this year and serves over 155,000 persons from neighbouring...”—constituencies and—“...communities.”

—and the PNM banged their desks. But remember that figure too, Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$1.1 billion, according to the Minister of Finance.

The Prime Minister told the country something totally different in 2018. According to an unchallenged *Express* article:

“He said...”

—that is the Prime Minister—“...the Sangre Grande hospital (exactly as Point Fortin) came in at \$850 million-\$550 million less than the Point Fortin hospital.”

And, more recently, in April 2024, the *Newsday* confirmed this cost when it was reported that the hon. Minister of Health, the Member for St. Joseph, said, I quote:

“Health Minister Terrence Deyalsingh said the new Sangre Grande Hospital Campus cost \$850 million, VAT-exclusive, and called the facility ‘pure excellence.’”

This is one more case where the cost of a hospital was inflated, this time by \$250 million, and this came within mere months. What was it?—five months; within five months a 30 per cent increase in cost with no additional work being done

overall between just these three projects that the Minister gave us figures for, and you know after this, they will give us no more figures for anything else. After this, they will cover it up completely.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on just these three projects, \$484.6 million suddenly emerged on the books to be cleared by this budget, in this budget to be washed by this budget. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is completely unacceptable. We want to know, citizens of this country want to know, where did this money go? On what basis were these figures inflated, because what the Minister is giving here is substantially, substantially more, half of \$1 billion more than the cost that was advised to the national community before? They just put it in here so we will approve, figures gone, everything is under the carpet clean; \$500 million—\$500 million, half of \$1 billion. Poof! Just vanished by sleight of hands by the Minister of Finance, Mr. Deputy Speaker; \$500million which again cannot be accounted for.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, do you see why it is so concerning, why you also cannot trust anything the Government says. You cannot trust anything they say.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Think about this: if this is the corruption on only three projects that they are doing openly in front of the eyes of the national population, via the annual budget statement, if this is the level, can you imagine what they have done over the last nine years? Can you imagine what they have done over the last nine years? I want to remind you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Procurement Regulator just told us that in 2023, \$5 billion worth of contracts were awarded without proper procedural oversight—

Mr. Indarsingh: Correct.

Mr. D. Tancoo:—\$5 billion. Is that why the Government stalled the implementation of the procurement legislation so they could engage in the construction of these three hospitals and come now and inflate the figures and expect that we must close our eyes and approve \$500 million more in expenditure without an explanation? Not acceptable at all.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.20 p.m.

Mr. D. Tancoo: This Opposition will continue to hold this Government accountable for every, single cent that they have spent. Every single cent. They must account for it, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They may get away today because they are in Government, but when Government changes heads will roll—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—for this kind of “bacchanal” and “bobol”, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I call on the Procurement Regulator today, from this podium, this platform, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from this House of Representatives, I call on the Procurement Regulator to undertake an immediate investigation into these three multimillion-dollar projects with a view to determining who has received this mysterious \$450 million. And for what? Because, it could not have been for work done on these hospitals, unless the Ministers, including the hon. Minister Prime Minister, are engaged in misleading the population deliberately. Heads must roll; citizens must be accounted to. We demand transparency, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the speaker before me also spoke about property tax.

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Well he spent his entire period—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members please, the little comments and stuff “nah”, let

us, you know, try to stay away from it, please.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister spent his entire period—in fact, not his whole contribution because he went all over the place—trying to explain how it is that property tax, his words, “it is equitable, it is fair to all”. It is fair to all, let me help him with the spelling. For the Minister in the Ministry of Finance “fair to all” means, if there are—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before you move on Member, again, you have two more minutes, approximately, of your initial speaking time. You can avail yourself to an additional 10, you care to?

Mr. D. Tancoo: Yes, thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. Member: “Time flying”.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Time does fly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sure my colleagues on the opposite side are breathing sighs of relief, but I am not yet finished.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: I am not yet finished.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You have plenty of time.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much. Mr. Deputy Speaker, while the Government wastes money and cannot account for billions and hundreds of billions of dollars, taxpayers are being forced to pay for their negligence via the property tax. While it splurges on PR gimmicks and parties non-stop for the last nine years, they are telling citizens to tighten your belts. We must tighten our belts when they spend millions of dollars on all kinds of activities and refuse to account to the taxpayers for billions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in front of the—I will treat with that outside, Mr.

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Deputy Speaker. I will treat with that outside, but I want to stay on the property tax because the Government, according to the Minister of Finance, he says “it is fair to all”. I said it before. His spelling would be F-A-I-R. I want to tell the Minister that for all it is fear for all, property tax is fear for all; F-E-A-R because it is—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—unfortunately, an unethical, abusive tax, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is a tax based on fake revenue, revenue that is not in the possession, revenue that is not coming in. That is ironic, the Member for San Fernando West had agreed with me on that and I am hopeful that he would say it in this House as well. It is a tax based on an income that people are not receiving. It is a tax based on a fictitious income and therefore, the fruit of the poison tree is poisoned as well, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is a real tax based on fictitious revenue. It has been nine years since this Government has been trying to implement this tax.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have in my possession three tax assessments; I will not display them. Three tax assessments for the same property; three. Same two per cent, same revised; three tax assessments based on the same property. It is the same house, with the same doors, the same windows, the same mirrors, the same lights, the same people living in the house, the same post, the same louvres, the same toilet fixtures, the same tiles, the same everything, Mr. Deputy Speaker; three different property assessments for two different people. Mr. Deputy Speaker, amazingly, the owner got one of these evaluations and his sister who stays with him, does not pay a rent, she stays with him, she received two valuations and she never filed any documentation for this piece of property. But, she is now being told, that is, the young lady who lives in this place, she is now being told that

because she is living with her brother she must pay property tax or else; on penalty or else.

That is not all, of the two assessments, one she got is five times higher, five times higher than the other one. That alone should tell you, that alone should tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the calculation of this property tax is random, arbitrary, and purely subjective and is completely opposite to what a tax regime should be. But the Minister does not care, as long as he gets his pound of flesh via the property tax, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a lot more to say and I know that my time is running, I know that my time is running.

I want to spend a few minutes on the foreign exchange cartel in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In fact, I will spend very few minutes on this point because there are other issues. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think the issues with regard to the foreign exchange crises that we face in this country is well known. Regular persons cannot get access to foreign exchange but big businesses can, and as a result of that, we have what is called a polarization of our economy, where only certain groups can access foreign exchange.

Dr. Moonilal: To buy pumpkin from America.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Only certain groups—Yes to buy American pumpkin et cetera. Only certain groups while we in Trinidad and Tobago are producing. — Farmers are being victimized by this Government for producing local pumpkin.

Dr. Moonilal: Pumpkin from America.

Mr. D. Tancoo: You can now buy, in some conglomerate-based supermarkets, you can buy American pumpkin. The Minister of Finance is complaining that no matter how much taxation they put people are still importing. They are importing foreign pumpkin, while local pumpkin is being sold in this country, Mr. Deputy

Speaker. They are victimizing, discriminating against the very same farmers that they are talking about, that they have some concern about.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this foreign exchange cartel created by this Government has ensured that foreign exchange only gets into the hands of a favoured few but those favoured few have now enveloped. They have now taken over small, micro and medium-sized businesses via this ability to have this unfair competition by easy access to foreign exchange. This is perhaps why this Government reacted so unfairly, so actively, and so aggressively, and with such great hostility when former Governor of the Central Bank, Jwala Rambarran, raised the issue of providing clarification as to exactly who was getting foreign exchange in this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think it is fair. I think it is fair because that foreign exchange does not belong to the PNM. It does not belong to the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: It belongs to taxpayers of this country. I think it is fair and it is a matter of time, a matter of priority that this Government should now start considering changing the legislation to ensure that when moneys are spent that belong to the citizens of this country, that we could ask for, and get that information. I think there is time now to bring an amendment to the Central Bank Act to provide the facilities so that we will be able to know who is getting the foreign exchange. And, when that happens, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will see what we already know, that there is, unfortunately, the development of a foreign exchange cartel which has been victimizing small and medium-sized business in this country, to their detriment.

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

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Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member I give you some leeway but—kindly proceed. Kindly proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: You see, I understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the truth offends.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thread lightly, please. Proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No need to recommend anything [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to touch base a bit on what—

Hon. Members: Five minutes.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Yeah—on an issue that was raised by one of my colleagues previously.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: On the same time, you just have about three more minutes of your final speaking time.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Alright, thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I will be very quick. The divestment issue, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have raised some issues and I want to raise the issue by asking a question, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister of Finance indicated that there had been a shortlisting of three companies, whom he named, who have become priority, the preferred bidders for the Petrotrin refinery. I have a couple questions I would like to ask.

1.30 p.m.

Is it true that one of those companies shortlisted in September was suspended from the Johannesburg Stock Exchange on March 27, 2024 for failure to publish their

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accounts for the last two years as required by law? I am asking for my one and only friend, the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who own this asset.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Is it true that in June on a website called the economy post, is it true that company—that it was reported that the company has incurred losses of over Nigerian Naira \$156 billion in two years and lack the assets to repay their loans, is that true? How is it that suddenly this company, bankrupt just a few months ago, has now emerged as one of the top bidders for the Petrotrin refinery? Has there been a capital injection by some other entity? Maybe another gentleman who may have been in Trinidad and Tobago who may have expressed an interest in the refinery, who decided that he will find another avenue, Mr. Deputy Speaker? I am asking for my friends who are the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago. We must not allow this PNM to engage in a PNM election fundraising using tax resources—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—using the patrimony of Trinidad and Tobago. It is ironic that all of a sudden Clico shares, Clico company, Magdalena, Petrotrin all of a sudden just on the urge and the verge of an election, this Government suddenly decides that it wants to divest, give it away. They are spending hundreds of millions of dollars to fix up the Magdalena to sell it off again. Suddenly, just before an election without procurement regulation being—my political leader has already indicated a desire to have all of these regulations, all of these transactions, all of these divestment opportunities come under the procurement regulator and we insist that that should happen.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, before I close, I want to say that the citizens of

Oropouche West are fed up and tired of begging this Government to treat with the issues in front of them. Vicious home invasions and robberies in my constituency continue because the police service there, the police, they are underfunded and un-resourced. We have a water crisis. The Minister of Public Utilities will talk about a one to three-day and a one to seven-day cycle. There are constituents in Oropouche West who have not had water for over a month. The water truck system is overburdened because of the demand, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to tell those citizens to hold strain, the time is near, the Government will change because the only way that their issues and the issues relating to the country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the only way that that will be resolved is if this Government is removed from office and I challenge them again, call the elections now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Give the country a chance to breathe, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the citizens are fed up. In closing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I heard a song on my way up today and I got the lyrics for it. There was a collaboration between various Caribbean artistes including Kes, Destra and David Rudder, it goes like this:

“Problem problem problem everybody got dem.

But dem ah mek money so they don’t wanna solve them.

And the days and nights will fall.

But I know we’ll carry on.

Now is this time for us to stay strong.

So let’s come together and...”—rise again

“We...”—will—“...rise again.”

I thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for recognizing me. Let me first start, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by commending my colleague from Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Finance, for a well-presented National Budget 2025.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Let me also thank the hon. Prime Minister, the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin West, for giving me the opportunity as well as the People's National Movement, to be of public service to the constituency of Lopinot/ Bon Air West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: As well as to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, all the people in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I have done on previous occasions, I will do so again today. I am a proud citizen of Trinidad and Tobago and I am a proud PNM Minister of Government—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—standing on the shoulders of great men and women who would have devoted their lives to the service of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Our first Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams, Mr. George Chambers, Mr. Patrick Manning, all of the great men and women who would have served Trinidad and Tobago in public life, giving their time and giving their life in service to the people of this country. But more so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government has been in power, the PNM, since 2015 and if you look at the track record of the Government

under this PNM regime since 2015, the people of Trinidad and Tobago must feel a sense of pride that emerging out of that 2010 to 2015 darkness, that we have a Government that is in place that offers sober, stable leadership to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: A lot of challenges, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We would have heard Members on the other side speaking, and every time they get up to speak, especially in a budget debate, it is as though Trinidad and Tobago is some hell hole, as though Trinidad and Tobago is some place that is unrecognizable. Mr. Deputy Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago is like any other country faced with its own challenges but we in Trinidad and Tobago can stand proud in this region and around the world that we have faced our challenges with pride, we have faced our challenges with respect and we would have conducted ourselves in a way where we protect our children, protect every man, protect every woman—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—protect every community despite our challenges, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But I listened to my colleagues on the other side and I must say whatever is your influence, whatever is your mind set with respect to bad-talking this country, you will not break our spirits.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: You will not weigh us down, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is the PNM, we stand on the shoulders of great men and great women. We are an institution. We cannot imagine Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, without the PNM because outside of the PNM they continue to exist in chaos and confusion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened to my colleague from the other side who just spoke and he had every manner of bad things and ills to say about this country, nothing good. I do not know where he was, perhaps a normal citizen in Trinidad and Tobago as I am and I was during the 2010/ 2015 era, and I want to ask the previous speaker, my colleague from Oropouche East?

Hon. Members: West.

Hon. M. Gonzales: West. Do not be a “snake oil” politician. Conduct yourself in a way where children will not regard you as a political conman. We live in this country and we remember the reign of the UNC in 2010 and 2015. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the people of this country will not return to life support.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: The people of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will not return to Reshmi Ramnarine.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: The people of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will not return to email-gate.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: The people of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will not return to section 34.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: The people of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will not return to the multi-billion dollar scandal in EFCL that jeopardized the education of our children.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will not return to a failed state of

emergency that saw hundreds of young black men in the East-West Corridor being incarcerated with not one shred of evidence offered against them and their lives tarnished for all. We will not return to those dark days anymore.

1.40 p.m.

We will not return, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the days of the Beetham wastewater scandal that cost the children of this country \$1.5 billion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: We will not return to those days. He asked about, where the money gone. I want to remind him, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you recall, under the leadership of the Member of Parliament for Siparia, the Curepe Interchange Project was set to cost the people of Trinidad and Tobago over \$650 million. It is the PNM and the good judgment of the people of Trinidad and Tobago that replaced that corrupt government and put the PNM in Government in 2015, where that highway, that same interchange on the East-West Corridor, cost the people of Trinidad and Tobago under \$350 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That money, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the savings from that project was used to construct a major interchange project in Diego Martin. That is where the money gone.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is where the money gone. Despite all of our challenges, Mr. Deputy Speaker—because we were faced with a lot of economic headwinds since 2015. As a matter of fact, since 2010 to now, under the sober and inspiring leadership of Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, we are proud to say that at this point in time, inflation is below 1 per cent.

We would have heard, year after year, Members of the Opposition coming here and saying that, the economy collapsed, everything collapsed, nothing is working good, this one is bad. Everything is going good, employment and what have you. But despite their bad mouth and bad talk and negative vibes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, today inflation in Trinidad and Tobago is under 1 per cent. Is that not an indicator that what the Minister of Finance is doing in the Ministry of Finance and my colleague from San Fernando East, under the leadership of Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, Trinidad and Tobago and our economy continues to face economic headwinds and yet still is grounded in stability?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, can we say that an economy is collapsed when there are three consecutive years of economic growth? Despite all of the challenge that we are faced with, with falling gas revenue in the energy sector, our colleague from Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, under the leadership and the guidance of the hon. Prime Minister, engaged in a restructuring of our energy sector; that despite falling gas production and oil production, we would have seen an incremental increase in energy taxes because of the hard work that the Prime Minister and our Minister of Energy and Energy Industries would have done in revitalizing our energy sector on behalf and for the people Trinidad and Tobago.

Inflation rate is below 0.3 per cent, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is something that we should be very proud about, that despite the challenges being faced in all CARICOM countries in the region, in Latin America, all over the world, when the inflation rate averages 5 per cent, in Trinidad and Tobago, it is 0.3 per cent. It is because of the good, stable, sober and sound leadership of the hon. Prime Minister under this PNM Administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. M. Gonzales: Food inflation rate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, fell three years ago from 17.3 per cent in 2022, to 1.4 per cent in 2024, all strong economic indicators. Despite our challenges, it shows then that the work that we continue to do by this PNM-led Government, the economy is grounded fundamentally strong, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and with the work that we continue to do with our international partners in two or three years from now, we will continue to see a growth in our revenue position where we will continue to provide for the services of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So let us get it. No corruption. No fraud. No Ministers being fired. Are we going to remove the future of Trinidad and Tobago and put it in the hands of people like Oropouche East and Oropouche West, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Are we mad as a people? Are we going to remove my colleague from San Fernando West, the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, to put the Member for—what is it? St. Augustine? Are we crazy? Are we going to move the Minister of Finance, the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East, to put the previous speaker from Oropouche East—Oropouche West? Are we crazy?

Hon. Member: Everything could collapse.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Are we going to collapse as a country, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Are we going to move my colleague from D'Abadie/O'Meara, the Minister in the Ministry of Education, and put, who? Well, it would have been Tabaquite.

Mrs. Cudjoe-Lewis: She is not getting to run.

Hon. M. Gonzales: She might have to consider membership of the PNM, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Are we going to move the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the hon. Stuart Young, to put my friend from Pointe-a-Pierre?

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Mr. Lee: “Chinee for Chinee”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: He probably resembles my colleague from Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West but in no way, his political calibre is close to my colleague from Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—no way, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: If it was anybody else that said it—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed. Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, are you going to move my colleague from La Horquetta/Talparo—

Hon. Member: Put Ram.

Hon. M. Gonzales:—to put Couva North? What example are we going to be setting for our young people, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Are we going to move my colleague from Tobago West to put, who?

Hon. Member: Rambally. Chaguanas East.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Chaguanas East? Nobody lives there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, nobody. And certainly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you are not going to move the Member of Parliament for Lopinot/Bon Air West, this Minister of Public Utilities, to put the Member for Princes Town.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am speaking to the people of

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Trinidad and Tobago, and I am telling the people of Trinidad and Tobago that the alternative to the PNM continues to be chaos and confusion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Continues to be chaos and confusion. It is for that reason, Mr. Deputy Speaker, some good and hon. Members on the other side who were sitting on the higher Bench, they are of no use to this current UNC and they have been demoted to this side of the House, but we welcome them. We welcome them, good honourable men and women.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Good honourable colleagues on the other side, we welcome them and we will ensure that with the PNM on this side and they who sit on other side, that we will continue to represent the people who send us to this Parliament with dignity and decorum, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Because that is our role and that is our responsibility. I want to tell them, do not be faint-hearted, God is good and He is good all the time.

Mr. Mc Clashie: Every day.

Hon. M. Gonzales: He is good every day. Stand for what you believe in. We will work with you for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and we will ensure that this current UNC, under the leadership of Siparia, will not see the reins and the corridors of power because our children deserve better, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Our children deserve better.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

1.50 p.m.

Hon. M. Gonzales: But that is enough of them, I have to report on a very

important Ministry and I have a lot to report on. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Public Utility Sector is good hands and is in better hands.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2020, when the PNM was returned to Government, it is the hon. Prime Minister who placed on public record that we need to look at our water sector and determine whether our water sector is discharging—especially, under the Water and Sewerage Authority—its responsibilities to the people of Trinidad and Tobago as it is required to do, under its current structure, under its current legal framework.

As a result of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we undertook a comprehensive review of the water sector and in particular WASA, and that report was completed by the end of 2020, a report that was laid in this Parliament for all to see. In that report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it called for a comprehensive transformation of the leadership of the Water and Sewerage Authority. In addition to that it called for a number of capital invested projects to be undertaken to stabilize and improved the supply of water to all citizens and all communities in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, two years after, despite challenges in the court system, at the Industrial Court, to stop this transformation in progress, I am pleased to report that in November, next month, the Water and Sewerage Authority will be under new executive leadership. A mandate and responsibility, and a promise that was made by this Government that we will ensure that the Water and Sewerage Authority is placed in good management hands by competent people, so that it can discharge its mandate to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

In addition to that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we recognized that in addition to restructuring the leadership of the Water and Sewerage Authority, we needed to

engage into a number of projects all over Trinidad and Tobago where communities have been crying out for water, and citizens have been crying out for water for one reason or the other. We decided that we will undertake a number of projects, under several headings: The Community Water Improvement Programme; the strategy action plan to improve the supply of water in Trinidad and Tobago; the North West Water Improvement Programme, and the National Water Stabilization and Improvement Programme.

All of these programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, were designed for short-term, and medium-term intervention as long-term intervention, because we recognized some of these projects, because of their complex nature, will take a lot of time, the procurement process is going to take a prolonged period of time. But whilst we do all of that, we will ensure that we make the necessary interventions in many communities all over Trinidad and Tobago to bring short-term relief to all our citizens, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And as a result of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am proud to say that between 2020 and 2024, the Water and Sewerage Authority has completed 191 projects all over Trinidad and Tobago, 100, something that has never happened in the history of the water sector in this country. No corruption, no allegations of corruption, nobody shouting about pipe or anything like that, no Beetham Wastewater scandal, projects being rolled out all over this country to improve the supply of water, and to bring relief to all our citizens, 191 projects successful executed under our development programme for the Water and Sewerage Authority.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are a number of communities where I would have visited, where projects have been successfully completed, where people got water for the very first time, and there was one project that stood out to me. It was in the

constituency of Tabaquite. My colleague from Tabaquite was part of that commissioning ceremony, because the people there would have cried out for water for over two or three decades. I would have met citizens there who complained that their cry and their hope for water was over 30 years, spanning various administration.

This community of Corosal in Tabaquite. Simple people, farmers, teachers, the simple public servants, and the people of Corosal under our Community Water Improvement Programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, got water for the very first time in 2023, thanks to this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And I must commend my colleague from Tabaquite because from time to time, she engaged me in conversation in this Parliament about this programme. And working with the people from her constituency and in this particular community, we engaged a project that cost the taxpayers over \$6 million and brought water for the very first time to over 300 people who live in Corosal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And that is in a UNC constituency.

Mr. Al-Rawi: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is in a UNC constituency. Mr. Deputy Speaker, another project that resonated deep with me was in a community called Morne Diablo in the constituency of Siparia. A constituency, and rather a community, that suffered for decades by a well-oiled water-trucking racket, right under the nose—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, retract that word, please and use a—

Hon. M. Gonzales: I retract the word, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it was an act of profound criminality and corruption on the people of Morne Diablo. The 5,000

people who live in Morne Diablo that suffered under this water-trucking scheme, right under the nose of Member of Parliament for Siparia. And we made that intervention faced with all kinds of threats to our lives, even a reporter was threatened when we sought to make the necessary intervention to liberate the people of Morne Diablo. But we were steadfast, we stood fast, and we faced the criticism, and we returned pipe-borne supply of water to 5,000 people in Morne Diablo for the very first time after 30 to 40 years.

And when that was done, the hon. Leader of the Opposition got on the stage and complained that it is was not so, and they never suffered for water, and we just came and turn on a pipe and the people are now getting water and without the Minister responding to her, it is the very people who lived there responded to their Member of Parliament and, said it is not so, the intervention was made and we now have a steady supply of water for the very first time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And I say that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because a profound and gross mistruth was spoken or repeated in this House by Members opposite, that when the UNC was in Government, over 70 per cent of the population received a supply of water, that has no foundation in truth. It never happened and I want to challenge my colleagues on the opposite side if that was in fact so, because you like to come and boast that under the leadership of the Member for Siparia, that 70 per cent of the population received a supply of water. What about Morne Diablo in the constituency of Siparia that you turned your blind eye on, what about them?

If you are boasting all over that you provided a steady and a reliable supply of water, why were 5,000 people in the constituency of Siparia ignored, what about them? Why have the people of Granville, and Icacos, and Cedros that now

continue to get a steady supply of water because of the interventions that we have made by drilling three and four wells, providing them with water for the first time after 20 years? If you provided them with water, when you were in office boasting that 70 per cent of the people there got water in this country.

2.00 p.m.

The last time I checked, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the people there voted the UNC consistently over the last 25 years, and I ask you, why did you turn your backs on them? Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2013 a former UNC Minister of Government commissioned a desalination plant in Point Fortin, bringing four million gallons of water to the grid, and this is what he boasted and said. *Guardian* report September 4, 2013.

“Point gets improved water supply

Minister of the Environment and Water Resources Ganga Singh commissioned the Point Fortin Desalination Plant at the Petrotrin Marine Terminal Facility on Wednesday, ending four decades of water woes in south-western peninsula.”

Four decades, according to him, and I want my colleague from Princes Town to hear that. In 2013 he boasted that when he assumed office the 24/7 supply of water was just 12 or 13 percent, and he boasted that under his leadership in 2013 it rose to 26 percent. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 26 percent in 2013. Where did you get 70 percent by 2015? But it go on to say that:

“The desalination plant”—according to this former Minister of Public Utilities—“will serve an estimated 29,000 persons living in the communities between Point Fortin and La Brea...Mahaica, Clifton Hill, Newlands, Fanny Village, Egypt Village, Reservoir Hill...Salazar Trace, Cap-de-Ville,

Gonzales, Parry Lands, Lot 10...Vance River, Vessigny, Sobo and La Brea.”
Mr. Deputy Speaker, what a monstrous untruth, a diabolical untruth. Because it is only today, because of the intervention that has been made under this Government, the communities that I have just mentioned they now continue to get and now is getting a supply of water. Only today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: But in 2013 this former UNC Minister, commissioning a new Desal plant, bringing to the grid four or five million gallons of water, promising these communities that they will get 24/7 level of service, it never materialized. It never happened, and one must ask the question, and perhaps when my colleague from Point Fortin stands and speaks in this debate he will tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago what the four million gallons of water, and where it went. But the communities that were promised a supply of water never got their supply of water. It is thanks to the interventions that we continue to make over the last two years, with wells being drilled in Icacos, wells being drilled in Carapal, wells being drilled in Granville, that 20,000 people who suffered for water for decades, they now have access to a reliable supply of water.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, over the last three years, based on the allocation that was made to the Ministry of Public Utilities we drilled 15 wells, increasing water production by over six million gallons of water today, and as a result of that communities in Freeport, communities in Tobago, in Granville, in Icacos, part of Point Fortin, parts of Sangre Grande, they are now starting to get an improvement in their supply of water. My colleague from Tobago, I know when she stands she will go into more details, but I can tell you that there are a number of communities in her constituency in Tobago West and in Tobago East that now continue and now

get and are receiving a reliable supply of water because of the successes of our Well Drilling Programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Two weeks ago I was in the constituency of La Brea and I met the people of Carapal where we commissioned the drilling of two wells in that Carapal area, Carapal A and Carapal B, and we expect that those wells will come into production before the end of the year. And I want to guarantee and to celebrate and to promise the people of Los Iros, the people of Palo Seco, the people of La Brea, as well as the people of Point Fortin, in this whole south-western peninsula, that based on the success that we continue to have and we will continue to have, towards the end of the year 25,000 people will see an improvement in their supply of water.

And because of the successes that we continue to enjoy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am proud to say that in 2020, when I assumed the portfolio of Minister of Public Utilities, I was told by the Water and Sewage Authority that based on the evidence that they have at their disposal only 32 per cent of the population enjoyed a 24/7 level of service. And as a result of that we commissioned a number of projects all over Trinidad and Tobago under the programmes that I have identified a short while ago, especially our Community Water Improvement Programme, benefiting over 500,000 citizens in communities all over, and we have been able to improve and increase the 24/7 level of service from 32 per cent in 2020 to now today it is at 65 percent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 65 per cent of the population are now getting a 24/7 level of service. I am being advised that with the success that we

continue to enjoy in our Well Development Programme that towards the end of 2024, 70 per cent of the population will enjoy a level of service of 24/7, the very first time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. The very first time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And I want to assure the people of Trinidad and Tobago insofar as it relates to our Well Development Programme, 14 wells are going to be drilled towards the end of the year and communities like Cascade and Belmont and St. Ann's and Pomme Rose will see a significant improvement in their supply of water. We will continue to drill wells in Signal Hill in Tobago to improve the supply of water there, and in the Sangre Grande area. In Valencia and in Sangre Grande we undertake to continue our Well Development Programme so that communities like in Vega de Oropouche and Manzanilla and in Sangre Grande, in the middle of Sange Grande, Sangre Grande North, Valencia, Mr. Deputy Speaker, even back down in south-west peninsula, we will continue our Well Drilling Programme that the people of Palo Seco and Los Iros and Point Fortin will see an improvement in their supply of water. As we speak now four wells are being drilled in the Clarke Road, Penal area, three in the Freeport area that will see an increase in the production of water by over one million gallons per day, and by doing so hundreds and thousands of citizens, wherever you are in this country, you will see an improvement in your supply of water. And we are marching towards a level of service for the very first time to 85 per cent

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: At the end of this budget contribution I want to assure some communities in the constituency Diego Martin North/East, my colleague, Minister of Finance, Moraldo Street, based on the intervention that we are have made over

the last two years Moraldo Street and Upper Celestine Trace they are now getting water for the very first time, and I want to thank the Minister of Finance for his generosity in ensuring that our Community Water Improvement Programme is sufficiently funded so that simple people, simple man, a simple woman, a simple child will have access to a reliable supply of water. The Minister of Finance, my colleague from Diego Martin North/East I thank you very much for the support that you continue to give the Water and Sewerage Authority and the Ministry of Public Utilities so that we can touch simple lives. Mr. Deputy Speaker, my colleague from La Horquetta he would tell you that we drilled a well in the Las Lomas area—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—and that community of Kernahan Trace that suffered for water for decades, we increased the production of waterer by over 300,000 gallons of water, and Kernahan Trace moved from a level of service of no water at all to almost getting water under 24/7 basis, and as a result of that we will continue to drill wells in the Las Lomas area and in the Wallerfield area, benefiting thousands of people.

2.10 p.m.

Under our IDB Programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to place on record my strong commendation for the team at the IDB, for the work that they do and they continue to do under that programme. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the IDB has informed me that that loan that they have made available to the people of Trinidad and Tobago to improve the supply of water is one of the best performing loans the IDB has made available to Trinidad and Tobago over the last 20 years.

As we speak now, a simple loan of \$80 million, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the

execution and the implementation rate is over 50 per cent. Mr. Deputy Speaker, under that loan programme, the Goldsborough Water Treatment Plant in Tobago east, we are going to commence the construction of that Goldsborough Water Treatment Plant; that will be the biggest water treatment plant to serve east of Tobago, serving over 15,000 to 20,000 people by increasing water production by 3 million gallons of water per day. And in the Santa Cruz area, in the constituency of St. Ann's East, we are also looking to commence the construction of the Santa Cruz Water Treatment Plant that will improve the supply of water by 5 million gallons of water under that IDB programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And when that plant comes into production, it means that 5 million gallons of water from the Caroni Water Treatment Plant can now be diverted to communities that are unserved and underserved, because water from the Caroni Water Treatment Plant will no longer have to be pumped from different stages all the way from Santa Cruz down into Cocorite, down into Fyzabad and central Trinidad. It means that we are now localizing our sources of water so that more water can become available to provide communities that are unserved and underserved.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, under this IDB programme, the Guanapo Water Treatment Plant will be fully refurbished, that will increase its production by 2 million gallons of water and the town of Arima and environs, D'Abadie/O'Meara, Lopinot/Bon Air West, La Horquetta/Talparo, Sangre Grande and Arima, over 50,000 people stand to benefit tremendously by the construction of the Guanapo Water Treatment Plant under the IDB Programme.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are moving to Freeport. We are expanding water treatment plant in the Freeport area, where the people of central Trinidad will continue to see an improvement in the supply of water. The North Oropouche

Water Treatment Plant will see a tremendous refurbishment that will serve the community of Cumuto/Manzanilla and the people of Toco/Sangre Grande.

And in Chatham, this water treatment plant will be fully refurbished, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with the people of Point Fortin and the people of La Brea, and southwest Trinidad will see an improvement in the supply of water. Under this IDB Programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, all communities, wherever you are, be it in south, in central, in Tobago, in east and in the west will be touched, cutting across race and geographical boundaries, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because what we see in this PNM is not party, is not colour, but we see citizens who we pledge to provide good service for, by our oath of office, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I want to assure all our citizens that under this PNM-led Government, every dollar that is made available to the Ministry of Public Utilities will be put to the good use of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, regardless of where you are located.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it has never happened in the history of the water sector. The water sector is in good hands, and despite our challenges with climate change and what have you, the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the Ministry of Public Utilities, undertaking a suite of capital projects, short-term, medium-term and long-term, we are already seeing the fruits of our hard work, with 65 per cent of the population at this point in time getting an improvement in the supply of water, with 70 per cent by the end of 2024, and that by September 2025, moving way past 85 per cent; never happened.

And, therefore, I want to tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago we have to do what we must do. We have to vote in the way that we must vote to ensure that the development of Trinidad and Tobago is not derailed by making bad political judgments and putting people in office whose track record in the water sector is

nothing but a sordid state of affairs. It must not happen. We must not derail this train of national progress and put people whose track record is the Beetham Wastewater scandal; a CEO who was taken from the political office, never interviewed and put directly in the CEO's office in WASA and running WASA, even when he was moved back to the Ministry of Public Utilities, but still running WASA in a CEO's office inside of that organization. That is their history, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we will not return to that sordid past. It must not happen.

But despite all of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I must say that, as a result of climate change our reservoir levels continue to be low. The World Meteorological Office, as well as the Caribbean Meteorological Office, our local met office, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have warned that climate change will continue to have an impact on our utility services, especially water and electricity.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are in the month of October. Hollis Reservoir and the Arena Reservoir, Navet Reservoir are way below their long-term averages. It is not something that is unique to Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker. All our counterparts all over the region and around the world, they complain about the impacts of climate change on lives and communities, and we are seeing the evidence of that. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and therefore the work that we continue to do, the infrastructural intervention that we continue to make; the wells that we continue to drill; the high leakage pipelines that we continue to replace to save our non-revenue water; the booster stations that we continue, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to refurbish and ensure that we have pumps that are working so that people can get a supply of water on a daily basis; all of that hard work can be derailed by climate change, but our well development programme is providing the level of resilience to protect communities.

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Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, at this time your initial speaking time, you just have about two more minutes and you have an additional 10. You care to avail yourself?

Hon. M. Gonzales: I will avail myself, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have quite a lot to talk about.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to thank the hard-working men and women of the Water and Sewerage Authority, especially those who are going into the communities, meeting with people, talking to communities, talking to the children, making the necessary interventions to improve their lives. I want to thank the hardworking men and women in the Water and Sewerage Authority for the work that they have done over the last four years, going on five years, to touch simple lives and improve the living circumstances of our citizens, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a couple of months ago, something very good happened again in the water sector, and we commissioned a brand new state-of-the-art operational control center. And what is very interesting about this center, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2009, I was advised that efforts were being made to put together a main SCADA office in WASA in order that the national grid for the transmission and the distribution of water can be done remotely, so that whenever you have disruptions taking place in communities, that for one reason or the other do not have access to water, this operational control center can detect what is happening, so that the issues of some communities not getting water for a prolonged period of time can be significantly reduced, because you can now control and see what is taking place in real time. There was a change in

government in 2020 and that project was not pursued for one reason or the other. Two months ago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can report that the operational control center was commissioned in the Water and Sewerage Authority. A 2,500 square foot facility that is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, including touch screen video walls, modern data visualization software, 24 hour monitoring and control of SCADA systems, GIS and telemetric devices. The OCC (Operational Control Center) allows for remote management of all of the selected remote facilities from the control room that improve operational efficiency and features robust cyber security measures, all aimed at progressing WASA towards its own digital transformation.

2.20 p.m.

I am very proud, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that this operational control centre, which is the largest of its kind in the entire Caribbean, was done by engineers from within the authority and by partnering with a local firm. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can tell you that the IDB visited, and the CAF visited this particular centre and gave raving commendation to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the leadership of WASA for putting together this modern state-of-the-art control centre, which is now the envy of our colleagues in the entire region. And I want to commend the leadership and the Board of WASA, and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for investing in this very important infrastructure.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, our leak repair programme.

Five years ago, we heard that WASA had a leak repair backlog of 5,000—water was wasting all over this country—and because of the strategic work that we have been able to do over the years, by providing the necessary tools and the

necessary equipment, the leak repair backlog from WASA reduced by 90 per cent from 5,000, five years ago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to under 300, as we speak today, and it is being maintained at that level.

We will continue to rollout our Community Water Improvement Programme, touching lives and touching communities all over this country. We will commence a major infrastructure work in Pluck Road in Central Trinidad and Penal. We will continue to drill wells in the Penal area and in Morne Diablo area that will see an improvement in the supply of water to some of the unserved and underserved communities there.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me now turn to the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission. And despite what some of the naysayers and the negative speakers may say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, T&TEC remains a model utility company, not only in Trinidad but the entire Caribbean—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—so much so that they were on standby in the event that there is a light out in Guyana last night, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They were on standby, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I got a call to put T&TEC on standby that in the event that there is a lights out in Guyana, the T&TEC crew was waiting to go down in Guyana to ensure that we have a full match, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: In the same vein, Mr. Deputy Speaker, just two months ago, a team of men and women in T&TEC went to Grenada after the passage of Hurricane Beryl to restore electricity supply to a CARICOM country. And I can tell you that the words and the communication that I received from my colleagues in the region is that the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission is a utility

agency that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago should feel proud about. I want to stand here today and commend the Board and to commend the management of T&TEC, that despite all of the challenges, that T&TEC remains a stable and a responsive utility agency, responding to the needs of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Under the PSIP programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2024, for the very first time, over 1,200 LED lights were deployed all over Trinidad and Tobago. In Diego Martin, the Diego Martin Highway, the lights were upgraded to LED lights, improving visibility and safety to the people of Diego Martin. From Westmoorings, straight down to Chaguaramas, lights were improved by the installation of LED lights to improve visibility and to improve the visuals by persons who traverse there, especially at night-time. And in fiscal 2025, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to assure that our LED programme will be rolled out in some of the major highways and byways and streets all over Trinidad and Tobago, reducing our carbon footprint and improving the safety of citizens all over.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the lighting of our grounds and the lighting of some of our public spaces: In 2024, over 13 recreational spaces were lit all over Trinidad and Tobago in areas like in Laventille, some parts in central Trinidad, in south Trinidad, recently in Point Fortin and in La Brea. We improved the lighting in some of our recreational spaces, so that the communities can come together at nights and enjoy each other's company by engaging in sporting activities and cultural activities. And when this budget is passed, I will ensure that I will work with my colleagues on the other side and on this side to ensure that some of our recreational spaces are properly lit, so that our communities can engage in

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productive behaviour and productive activities, especially at night-time, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, our Street Lighting Programme: In 2024, T&TEC repaired over 25,000 lights all over Trinidad and Tobago; 25,000 lights in addition to the 1,200 LED lights that we deployed. T&TEC, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a model utility company that is deserving of our praise and our commendation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Mr. Deputy Speaker, ongoing infrastructure projects, which is the upgrade of the Pinto Road substation: Works on the Pinto Road substation were ongoing in fiscal 2024, and will continue in 2025. The reconductoring of the Wrightson Road, Westmoorings, 66KV circuit substation, and the upgrade of the Bamboo-Wrightson Road No. 2 and No. 3 will continue in 2025. And in the Mayaro area, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in St. Mary's, we will continue the upgrade of that circuit, installing over 127 light poles—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Just about two more minutes, Member.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker—that will improve the supply of electricity to all of the people in the Mayaro area.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, our social programme: We continue to provide for the vulnerable people in Trinidad and Tobago. Despite the lowest rates for water and the lowest rates for electricity in Trinidad and Tobago, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago continues to fund our social programmes, our Utilities Assistance Programme, our aged people, our vulnerable people who are not employed and what have you, providing over \$70 million over the last five years to ensure that

they pay for their utility bills, water and electricity.

Our rebate programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker: Despite the lowest rates for water and the electricity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that over 220,000 citizens benefit from our rebate programme under our Utilities Assistance Programme.

Our Residential Electrification Assistance Programme: For persons who may wish to wire their homes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or who may wish to improve the electrical on their homes to ensure their safety, we would have provided support for hundreds of people under our Residential Electrification Assistance Programme. And in our allocation for 2025, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago will provide support for some of our vulnerable citizens.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would have given you a glimpse, and the country a glimpse of the great work that we continue to do in the utilities sector in Trinidad and Tobago by the allocations that have been provided to us in the national budget over the years. We see the evidence and the fruit of our hard work, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We will continue to provide good, sober, strong leadership for all our people and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they will not put God out of their thought and put those Member opposite—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Member.

Hon. M. Gonzales:—in charge of Trinidad and Tobago—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Member.

Hon. M. Gonzales:—because Trinidad and Tobago is in good hands under the PNM. I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize Member for Princes Town.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when the Leader of the Opposition responded to the Government's presentation of the 2024/2025 fiscal package, the Leader of the Opposition labelled her response, a decade of destruction, deficits, debts. After listening to the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, I believed that she should also have added, a decade of delusion and devoid of solutions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.30 p.m.

You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Prime Minister often refers to former Prime Minister Manning, who used to say, when you have nothing to talk about, you have no achievements, you have to say something. So just now, we heard something, which was really nothing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, after listening to the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, one would have thought that this Government was a paragon of virtue. But let me remind the national community that up to today, \$3 billion remain unaccounted for as identified by the Auditor General.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$5 billion has been identified by the Procurement Regulator as unjustifiable expenditure and questionable contracts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: The Member wanted to tell this side of the House that people was saying no more UNC, never UNC again. Today the people are saying the PNM—yes they are saying PNM but they are saying PNM, please no more.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Please no more, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is the cry of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. You see the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West wants us to forget the billions that were lost in NiQuan, the billions that were lost in NGC. You see Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you cannot talk public utilities, you pivot to a prepared text or the issue of inflation of the economy.

The Minister essentially engaged in an apology in the first 10 minutes of the debate when he presented. He gave us all of the excuses for the lack of performance and the lack of competence in terms of dealing with the public utilities sector in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I found it most curious that the Minister took his first 10 minutes to make a case for the PNM A team and the PNM B team.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, our party is strong. Our party does not need to take three days for a political leader to get 8,000 votes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: We take one day, where over 20,000 of our members come out to vote for the real UNC, not the PNM B team. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to tell the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, that when you do not come prepared, cockroach must stay out of fowl business.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: “Stay out of de UNC business”.

Dr. Moonilal: That is good advice.

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to take the opportunity, first and

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foremost, to thank and congratulate the Leader of the Opposition for a visionary and sterling response. The Leader of the Opposition really reflected the pulse of a very beleaguered, hopeless and in many instances hapless country, but the Leader of the Opposition stood resolute. Not resolute that the Minister of Finance with one side of his mouth he tells us, “I can see clearly now the rain is gone” and then the Prime Minister tells us, “hold strain, hold strain”. The Member for Siparia was resolute in identifying what the challenges are but also providing solutions and an advance plan in terms of how the UNC will turn the economy and transform this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And I want to deal with an issue that has been parroted across the floor by Members. “Where yuh going to get de money from?” How are you going to bring about all of this change? How are you going to implement all of these plans? The Member for Siparia was the Prime Minister who oversaw the highest foreign direct investment this country ever saw in 2014.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: It was that Prime Minister then, Member for Siparia, who incentivized the local business and manufacturing sector that we saw some of the largest numbers in terms of the turnaround of the manufacturing sector in this country. Today we heard the “Minister of Bubble Gum”—no no. The Minister for Trade and Industry, which is the same difference because up to today the Minister cannot tell us—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member, Member.

Mr. Indarsingh: Chilibibi also.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, please you know, the term.

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Mr. B. Padarath: Well that is what the Minister came and spoke about.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, no. but the term. You know what I mean, the term. It is how you refer to it. You understand?

Mr. B. Padarath: The Minister of Trade and Industry—

Mr. Indarsingh: With a vision for bubble gum.

Mr. B. Padarath: —hon. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Indarsingh: With a vision for bubble gum.

Mr. B. Padarath: —whom one would have thought after nine going on 10 years, would have told us how you intend on dealing with issues surrounding the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago, the electronic window, working alongside legal affairs and the Attorney General's Office to ensure that investors had a conducive business environment. We did not hear that. Instead, we heard about bubble gum, we heard about chilibibi, we heard about PVC pipe. That is the vision that this Government has for this country, but Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC stood resolute in identifying critical sectors for the transformation of health—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: —for the transformation of education and also for the transformation of public utilities. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to congratulate the UNC A team. The UNC A team who has spoken in this debate, who has given a voice to the people of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: —in terms of things that impact them most in their pockets and in their homes, be it on the issue of crime, be it on the issue healthcare. We heard from MP Tancoo a short while ago in terms of where we are in terms of our macroeconomics in this country and as colleagues flesh our other portfolio areas,

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will continue to stand in this House and speak on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will tell you this, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, while they are concerned they are also seeking vengeance and I will tell you why I would say they are seeking vengeance. You see, every year they are told to tighten their belt. They are told to eat less macaroni pie. They are told to ride your bicycles to work. They are told to cook on your coal pot. They are told they are too greedy waiting for hampers. They are told nobody lives there. They are told to wait until 2027 for better days. The population, however, witnesses a stark contrast of million-dollar mansions for the Prime Minister. They witness millions in Cazabon paintings. They witness ostentatious Hyatt soirees. They witness million-dollar vehicles. That is why I say the population is seeking vengeance on the 10th budget presentation and the vengeance is voting them out, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Charles: Get them out.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, public utilities is one of the most stagnant sectors for the past nine going on 10 years. Nothing positive has happened in critical areas that affect people every single day of their lives; water, Mr. Deputy Speaker, electricity, communication.

The Minister had the audacity to stand in this House and tell us all the glowing things that are happening in the water sector when every Monday morning, including his own constituency, people are protesting every single day because of dry taps and dry taps not for one day, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Sometimes it goes on for weeks, if not months, and that is the reality of the water sector in this

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country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: What about that \$29 million that [*Inaudible*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, instead, the nine going on 10 years have been less about plans, policies and action. It has been about anxiety. The government's focus in the past nine years in the public utilities sector has been on sending up water, electricity and blood pressure rates.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, this financial year the Ministry of Public Utilities was allocated \$3.2 billion. Out of that, WASA was allocated \$1.25 billion. The 2025 Estimates represent a cut of \$522 million on the 2024 revised figure of \$1.72 billion. Therefore, this will have a significant impact on the operations of WASA and the production and distribution of water. Mr. Deputy Speaker, from time to time, I have come to this House together with several of my colleagues and we have raised critical water projects within our own constituencies in terms of water production, but also the issue of water distribution. I heard a short while ago my colleague from Lopinot/Bon Air West speak about the investments that will be made. It is always a "coulda, woulda, shoulda" but has never happened after nine going on 10 years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And who has suffered? Who has suffered? That is the critical question we must ask ourselves. Who has suffered as a result of incompetence and poor management of the water sector? Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$522 million has been cut in WASA. Critical areas of materials and supplies, repairs, and maintenance. Year, after year, after year, we have seen no investment in those critical areas of

infrastructure and that has had a significant impact on not only the production side of the coin but also the distribution side of the coin.

2.40 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the panacea to every issue in the water sector identified by this Government has been the restructuring of WASA. The Minister spoke for 55 minutes, every single time he stands up in this House, his excuse has always been the restructuring of WASA but today when he had the opportunity to account and speak to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, not one word on restructuring of WASA. But it is often said the devil is in the details and I will go on to tell you why the Minister refused to say anything today about the restructuring of WASA even though this Government has identified that the panacea to the issue in WASA is restructuring.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on September 07, 2020, the country was told that a sub-committee of Cabinet was established to address WASA's lingering water woes and was given three months—in 2020 eh—was given three months by the Prime Minister to come up with a comprehensive plan to improve the Water and Sewerage Authority operations. In a September 08, 2022, Trinidad *Guardian* article written by Shaliza Hassanali with the headline:

“Cabinet body given 3 months to do WASA plan”

Article said that the committee would focus on:

“...WASA's operations, mounting debt, ageing pipelines, governance structure and poor water distribution.”

It went on further to say that the committee was given three months to report to the Prime Minister with a deadline date of November 20, 2020. Today we are in 2024, almost the end of 2024, the Minister stood for 55 minutes, not once spoke about

the restructuring of WASA but “they think we forget. They think we forget, Mr. Deputy Speaker.” A sub-committee of the Cabinet was put to deal with the issue of WASA. They told the country that the panacea to the issue was restructuring WASA. The Prime Minister gave them three months, a report was sent to the Prime Minister on November 20, 2020.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, four, almost going on five years, how far are we with the restructuring of WASA? What improvements since November 20, 2020 when the Government received the plan has occurred in the water sector? None. How much of WASA’s debt has been addressed since the Government received the plan on November 20, 2020? How much of the ageing infrastructure has been addressed since the Government received the plan on November 20, 2020? How has the Government fixed the poor water production and distribution since receiving the plan on November 20, 2020? Mr. Deputy Speaker, absolutely nothing has happened since November 20, 2020.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to turn to the same article I mentioned and identify two things. The article says:

“The findings, which were contained in a 135-page report was dissected by Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley on Monday...”—22, February 2021—“during a special sitting of the Cabinet.”

On December 11, 2020, Dr. Rowley admitted that he had received the report. Despite telling the country that the restructuring of WASA was the panacea to the issue, they said that WASA was:

“...operating blindly”—and noted—“an absence of credible information in key areas...”—such as WASA—“...customer data base, liabilities, staffing levels, payables, location of transmission and distribution mains...”

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The same Minister and his team told the country that they had the solution because they knew what the problems were. The Cabinet Sub-Committee Report said that one, they would establish:

“...a new water company”

Five years later, no new water company. Two, they will acquire:

“...water management capability”

The only thing that they have been able to acquire is telling people to put “barrel and bucket outside yuh house to collect rain water” and I will go into the rainwater harvesting programme in dealing with that. Three:

“...winding up and concessionary negotiations with the three (3) registered majority trade unions”

Today, they have decimated the trade unions in this country. Four:

“...aligned parallel operations...”

Five:

“...technology enhancement.”

Six:

“Office of Water Resource Management”.

I want to ask my colleague from Lopinot/Bon Air West, because with much fanfare, they came to this Parliament and they told the country that they will establish an office of water resource management under the Ministry of Public Utilities. You know when go through the Estimates, there is absolutely nothing as it related to the office of water resource management, nothing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the article went on to say that despite receiving \$21.6 billion between 2010 to 2020, WASA has not been able to fulfil its mandate with estimated 34 per cent of the population currently getting a 24-7 supply of water.

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You know I heard the Minister say the Opposition must point to where they got this number of 70 per cent and I want to correct the Minister because it is not 70 per cent. It is 74 per cent of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—had 24-7 supply of borne water under Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the People's Partnership Government.

But I also in the same vein, I want to remind the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West that under his tenure as Minister of Public Utilities, when WASA appeared before the Joint Select Committee of Land and Physical Infrastructure in February of 2023, their General Manager admitted to the Joint Select Committee that under the People's National Movement, under Minister Marvin Gonzales, Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, they brought us from 74 per cent under the Partnership in terms of a 24-7 supply of water to you know how much, Mr. Deputy Speaker? A shameless 16 per cent—

Hon. Members: “Orrrrr.”

Dr. Moonilal: “What ah shame.”

Mr. B. Padarath:—of Trinidad and Tobago today receive at 24-7 supply of water.

The Minister comes and tells us about all these grandiose projects, all the expenditure that is happening in WASA. If it is so grand and things are so wonderful and rosy, why is it that every single Monday morning in Lopinot/Bon Air West, Princes Town, Oropouche West, Penal/Debe, Oropouche East, Chaguanas East, Caroni East, St Augustine, even in their own constituencies. As we speak, Mr. Deputy Speaker, parts of Lopinot/Bon Air West and Arouca/Maloney is under severe flooding.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. B. Padarath: Parts of WASA right now in St Joseph is under flood waters. Therefore, when you ask the Minister instead of identifying all these pie-in-the-sky projects, why did you not invest in these retention ponds along the East-West Corridor?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Why did you not invest in surface water resource management along the East-West Corridor, your own constituencies? You know, I often say when people tell us in our own constituencies, well why do you not get the Minister to help you do this, the Minister to help you do that. If they are not concerned about fixing their own constituencies, it is flooded out across the East-West Corridor right now when that same surface water could have been captured in retention ponds, when that same surface water could have been dealt with in terms of surface water run-off for water resource management to translate that into water production for water distribution, their constituencies would not be flooded out today.

Dr. Moonilal: Good point.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: They cannot say that they have now arrived on the scene, it is nine going on 10 years and therefore you could talk about the Partnership ad nauseam, facts remain facts, 74 per cent of this country received a 24-7 supply of water under the Partnership.

Dr. Moonilal: Now 16, shame.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, on Wednesday 19, 2022, the Trinidad *Newsday* headline an article:

“...No decisions yet on restructuring WASA...”—said the Prime Minister. And since then, so it has been going, kicking the proverbial can down the road with no effective real transitional change in WASA to bring about national development in the water sector. Little or nothing has happened.

The employees in WASA, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has had a proverbial noose around their necks. And, I will go into that because you see last year, in the Standing Finance Committee, when I raised that \$60 million was cut from WASA in the area of NIS, the Minister of Public Utilities, answering the questions on behalf of public utilities, admitted that yes, WASA employees were going home. Sheepishly the Minister admitted it having been caught out in the Standing Finance Committee by the Opposition. The country then went into pandemonium because it was headline news for days that WASA employees were going home.

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, their general election handlers are telling them “wait Dorothy, wait, wait Dorothy, wait” and last year when we identified the \$60 million cut in NIS and caught them out, since then they have gone into a holding position. So they came with the mid-year review.

2.50 p.m.

The Minister of Finance did some shifting around, additional allocations were given to Public Utilities so that they do not receive the political backlash that they are certain to get. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the workers in this country, WASA workers, are not foolish. They know what is coming. They know that it is a holding pattern of “wait, Dorothy, wait,” but the devil is in the details.

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this year, while WASA received \$552 million less than the previous year, I will tell you where the major cuts are, and it is in the area of Personnel Expenditure. Salaries and Cost of Living, \$37.3 million cut;

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Wages and COLA, \$15.4 million cut; Monthly Paid Officers - Overtime, \$17.7 million cut; Government's Contribution to NIS, \$30 million cut; Contract Employment, \$66.5 million cut; Daily-Rated Workers, \$10.1 million cut; Allowances - Daily-Rated Workers, \$3.5 million cut.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would also recall that a year ago the Minister of Public Utilities was at a water resource management conference at the Hilton. And a citizen had taken the Public Utilities Ministry, WASA, to court because her home had collapsed because of water from dilapidated water mains undermining her home. And before I go on to make that point of that citizen, who took WASA to court for WASA infrastructure undermining her home, causing it to collapse, I want to make reference to my colleague from Moruga/Tableland who has been raising in her own constituency Sahadath Trace—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—where several homes have collapsed and we have spoken to successive Ministers of Public Utilities about the exposed dilapidated mains in WASA, in the areas of Moruga/Tableland. But they only come down to Moruga/Tableland when it is election time, when it is election time. When they come to give you \$300 in a red jersey, and they expect that you will forget the five years. Let me tell you, the people of Lengua/Indian Walk—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—The people of Lengua/Indian Walk are not all the people of Moruga/Tableland, and Michelle Benjamin and the people of Moruga/Tableland are well prepared for you in the next general election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. B. Padarath: Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I make that point in relation to the citizen who took WASA to court. In the budget Estimates I was shocked to discover for the first time that there is a line Item for Settlement of Claims under WASA. A whopping figure of \$25 million under line Item 02, page 212. You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$25 million to settle claims, but you will not take that same money to change out the infrastructure of WASA in some of those critical areas that are undermining people's homes. So, when the Minister told people to go ahead and sue WASA, it was an issue of laziness. It is an issue of incompetence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Where you have to fork out \$25 million, \$25 million, Mr. Deputy Speaker, under claims instead of dealing with the root issues and the root problems that are facing the water sector. Mr. Deputy Speaker, repeat, repeat, repeat, was the mantra for the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West. The Member spoke about the social sector and PSIP. You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the past, the social sector and PSIP for ongoing projects will give you the percentages of how far the projects have gone.

And I heard the Member talk about wells in Freeport and Cap-De-Ville, and the Member spoke about revolutionizing the water sector in Cedros. I want to make a special plug for the people of Cedros and Cap-De-Ville today. Because you see, we have heard these promises time and time again. And while the Leader of the Opposition told us, PNM: promises never materialize, today shamelessly, the Minister of Public Utilities came and he repeated the projects in Cap-De-Ville and the projects in Cedros. Those projects have been identified by successive Ministers, from Minister Le Hunte, all the way done, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to Minister Marvin Gonzales. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will not go through that, except

to say that when I heard Cap-De-Ville and I heard Cedros again, I said, how unfair, but how shameless can you be to once more lie to the people of Cedros and Cap-De-Ville.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: There is no better word. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is no better word.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member, you know the rule of the House. Retract and proceed.

Mr. B. Padarath: I retract, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I will say what an untruth to perpetrate on the people of Cap-De-Ville and Cedros. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know they say, “If yuh doh laugh, yuh will cry”. This Minister of Public Utilities, after telling everyone in the country that the panacea to WASA was restructuring, on March 23, 2021, grand announcement again, told the country that the Government has agreed, and they have signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of Canada for 10 water-modulated treatment plants. And that 10 water-modulated treatment plants will bring on several million gallons onto the domestic grid, and therefore, the water that is being produced by Desalcott will go back on to the industrial grid, where it was meant for.

Let me first deal with modulated water treatment plants that the Member spoke about because since that grand announcement, the Member also told us that the first water modulated treatment plant would come in central Trinidad in 2021. Well, “2021 come, 2022 come, 2023 come”, and we are almost at 2024 and not one water-modulated treatment plant. But you see the Minister has stopped speaking about those 10 water-modulated treatment plants because they have abandoned that

idea. They have abandoned that project just like they are abandoning the restructuring of WASA.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I heard, again, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West speak about the issue of the desalinated water plants, and the Member, again speaking that Government will look to increase the capacity of WASA through desalinated plants, they promised the people of Moruga/Tableland a desalinated water plant. I had my staff do a word search for every budget document, and Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, once more, PNM: please, no more.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Please, no more. Deceiving the people of Moruga/Tableland, there is no allocation for any desalination plant. They were parroting this in Lengua/ Indian Walk. They were parroting this in the last year. No—maybe “dey” smelling the rat, Michelle, in Moruga/Tableland. So they have, they too, just like they have abandoned 10 water modulated treatment plants—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member, this is the second time you are referring to your colleague by their names. Please use the proper titles.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Moruga/Tableland. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to turn to the issue of T&TEC. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Cabinet in October of 2023, we are now in October 2024, on the 19th of October, 2023, the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago received from the Regulated Industries Commission, a proposed increased rates.

Subsequent to that, the Minister of Public Utilities and every Government Minister, have been telling us that we need to collect additional revenue and that we have the lowest rates in the world, and therefore, we need it, and the Government is intent. They even, in an IMF report, told the IMF that one of the

strategies to increase revenue collection was to increase water and electricity rates. That is even contained in the 2023 first quarter Central Bank bulletin, where the information provided from the Ministry of Finance was that they are intent on collecting additional revenue for water and electricity.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Those were not my words. Those were the words of the Government. One year later, you have the report. But again, it is “wait, Dorothy, wait,” because their public relations handlers have told them that there is a severe backlash. I want to thank the UNC A-team, my colleagues who turned out in their numbers, who supported me at every public consultation—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—giving a voice and pushing back at this Government, that today the reason why you cannot introduce new water and electricity rates is because of the hard work of the Opposition UNC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3.00 p.m.

Mr. B. Padarath: It is because of us. And we will take the kudos and credit for that, Madam Speaker. But we are calling on the Government—as the Leader of the Opposition has said, “We must go into in this general election, in terms of public utilities, with our eyes wide open.” They owe a duty of care and responsibility to be frank, open and honest, in terms of what is your intention and what is your policy as it relates to increasing water and electricity rates. “Wait, Dorothy, wait”, is not a strategy, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, in the area of T&TEC, we filed a question in the Parliament and one year ago, we were told that T&TEC is owed \$1.8 billion. I had

Mr. Padarath (cont'd)

my staff do an exercise because every year when we go into the Standing Finance Committee, under the Ministries, you will see—from the Actual to the Revised, to the projection for the year going forward, you will see a disparity in the figure. And when asked, the Minister of Finance or the line Minister will say to us, “Well, the issue is that there are arrears.” So I asked my staff, I said, “Can you then compile for Ministries, state enterprises, see how much of these arrears have actually been paid?” Madam Speaker, with \$1.8 billion being owed by the State to T&TEC—and we have continuously said that any time you under-resource and you under-budget state entities, it is because you are driving them into the ground. You want them to fail—

Mr. Indarsingh: Fail. Correct.

Mr. B. Padarath:—so you can then privatize and do as you wish.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Strangling them.

Mr. B. Padarath: And the devil is in the details, because out of a \$1.8 billion debt that the Government—this is not the average man and woman on the street, you know, Madam Speaker, this is the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago owing over the years, and not under the UNC, this debt was accumulated under this Administration. Madam Speaker, \$1.8 billion and out of that, they have paid \$223 million. They have not even cleared 0.8 of the billion dollars, Madam Speaker, and therefore, T&TEC continues to remain in the position they are in today. And the Minister has the audacity, and the boldface and brass faced disposition to come out and tell us that T&TEC is one of the best-run state enterprises. That is utter hypocrisy, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, since taking over the shadow portfolio of Public Utilities, I have been raising the issue of the subsidy; the subsidy. And for those in the national community who do not understand how it works, it is that T&TEC purchases gas from NGC for the production of electricity. But it is the Cabinet subcommittee on energy, and the Cabinet that determines the price that NGC sells natural gas to T&TEC. And the question must be asked and the Government must say, what is the Government's position with respect to the subsidy going forward? You are not telling us what your position is on the increased proposed electricity rate, but the electricity rate will be impacted on the Government's position on the subsidy.

And the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries has been dangling a carrot before the horse, because the Minister says one year, "Well, we will talk about the subsidy in time to come." Madam Speaker, we are months before a general election, these are critical issues that not only the population wants to hear about, but investors, they want to hear about what are the incentives, what are the prices that they will pay for water and electricity when they invest in Trinidad and Tobago. These are the critical issues that we want to hear today, not the pie in the sky that we heard from Lopinot/Bon Air West.

Madam Speaker, I want to turn to the issue of TSTT. And again, October is a very significant month in the area of public utilities. I just told you why October was significant because it was the month, the specific date being the 19th of October, 2023, that the Cabinet received the report from the Regulated Industries Commission. October 2023 is also another significant date in the area of public utilities. You know why, Madam Speaker? In October 2023, Trinidad and Tobago's telecommunications service—

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Dr. Moonilal: Oh, yes.

Mr. B. Padarath:—provider, TSTT, was hijacked, was sabotaged, it was almost treason to sell out the data.

Madam Speaker: So, I rule those words out of order, and I ask you to withdraw them and find some other words.

Mr. B. Padarath: I retract, Madam Speaker. I will say that the telecommunications sector was undermined. The telecommunications sector, we are being told, was sabotaged—

Dr. Moonilal: Correct.

Mr. B. Padarath:—and October 2023, the first instance of that cyberattack at TSTT occurred.

Subsequent to that, in a question asked by my colleague, the Member for Couva South, in this very Parliament, and by myself as the Member for Princes Town in a follow-up, frontally, the Minister of Public Utilities was asked, “Can you give the country the assurance that citizens’ data was not breached and compromised?” The Minister stood in this House and the Minister “boldfacedly” told us that no citizen data was breached or compromised.

Dr. Moonilal: I remember.

Mr. B. Padarath: October 2023, one year ago, exactly one year ago. Subsequent to that, it was then discovered and a Private Members’ Motion was filed—it was not a Private Members’ Motion. It was a privileges motion.

Mr. Indarsingh: Privileges motion.

Mr. B. Padarath: When the Member got wind of the privileges motion by the Opposition—

Dr. Moonilal: “He take in front before front take him. ”

Mr. B. Padarath: Horridly, the Member took front—you know in local parlance they say, “Yuh take front before front take you”? That was the case of the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West. It then ensued into a very messy battle between one former CEO of TSTT, Lisa Agard, and the then Chief Financial Officer, with several firings and so on. But most importantly, before we got the information before the Joint Select Committee, that both those aforementioned persons spoke before and divulged some very alarming details, it was confirmed that over one million subscribers of TSTT’s data was on the dark web. It included their credit card information, it included their mobile numbers, it included their addresses—

Mr. Hosein: Personal IDs .

Mr. B. Padarath:—their personal ID, et cetera, Madam Speaker.

Since then to now, we have had a promise of an independent report into the cyberattack at TSTT, and I will tell you why this is so important. Apart from the issue of protecting, in terms of data protection of subscribers’ information, it also has to do with the protection of the telecommunications industry, in terms of investor confidence, in terms of the analytical and infrastructural arrangements with other telecommunications and Internet providers.

Up to this time, Madam Speaker, one year has passed—one year—and the Minister of Public Utilities, standing in the Parliament today, had not one word to say, to restore or give any idea of when we can expect that report. The Minister did not add any confidence to the service providers, to the investors in the telecommunications industry that this matter is being dealt with. Obviously, Madam Speaker, efficiency is not in the vocabulary of the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West.

Therefore, today, as I stand here dealing with the public utilities sector, it is

evident, in terms of the cuts across the Boards from WASA, to T&TEC, to TSTT, the only common trend we have seen is driving the companies into the ground by under-resourcing the companies, driving the companies into the ground by sending home and laying off employees. The only common trend that we continue to see, Madam Speaker, is the privatization—the attempts to privatize these companies in a lack of transparent process. Therefore, Madam Speaker, we can expect a lot more secrecy, a lot more of the Government taking the position that they will not answer the critical questions that affect the public utilities sector.

3.10 p.m.

But I started off by saying that the public utilities sector impacts people the most in most instances, because it impacts their homes and it impacts their pockets. And the Leader of the Opposition was very correct when she said, should citizens take God out of their thoughts and elect a People's National Movement Government in 2025, or before, they can very expect that the very first act would be to send up electricity and water rates. And, Madam Speaker, you know they say in local parlance, that, you must go with your eyes wide open, and therefore we are asking people of Trinidad and Tobago to ensure that your eyes are wide open and see them for who they are. Madam Speaker, I am almost certain that the population this time around will not exhibit cataracts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: They will exhibit no symptoms of cataract. They have 2020 vision and they are seeing them for who and what they are.

Madam Speaker, you may also notice from time to time I shadow the area of the Children's Authority and children's issue. Madam Speaker, yesterday was the most difficult and painful day of me being a parliamentarian in the almost 10 years

since I was first elected as the Member for Princes Town. The death of 15-year-old Jayden Lalchan has not only rocked Princes Town, it has shaken all of Trinidad and Tobago. A school is meant to be a safe place, a safe haven for our children to learn and develop. Instead, for Jayden, it became a place where he was bullied, tormented, tortured, hunted and preyed upon like an animal.

Madam Speaker, that experience for four years cost Jayden Lalchan his life. I spent three hours yesterday listening to the glowing tributes his wonderful parents heaped on their model child. A child that was gifted academically, award winning, respectful, ambitious, but a child who is dead. I cannot stand here today, Madam Speaker, and tell you that I do not know what that feels like. I cannot tell you that I too have not experienced what Jayden endured. I cannot tell you that when I enter these hallowed walls, that I too expected that this would be a safe place. Instead, from our nation's schools to the nation's Parliament bullying, torment and torture has been normalized, and I make no apologies for saying that.

I have seen it happen with my colleague from Chaguanas East, I have seen it happened with my colleague from Barataria/San Juan. Every single colleague on this side of the Bench has faced that torment and that bullying and I will make no apologies for pointing out my colleagues across the Floor. Madam Speaker, what has occurred in our nation's schools are direct result of what is being mirrored in the highest offices in our land. Bravado, toxicity, vulgarity. I can never imagine the endless pain losing a child brings with it, but I know what contemplating suicide is.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have one more minute original time left. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to wrap up your contribution.

Mr. B. Padarath: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Okay so you may proceed. Thank you.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, it is when you find yourself in a place where you feel defenceless, where you feel cornered, where you feel the bully had won and is in control of who others perceive you to be. The school system failed Jayden; the TTPS failed Jayden; the laws of Trinidad and Tobago have failed Jayden; the \$66 billion spent in education over the past this 10 years has failed Jayden; the over \$100 billion in national security has failed Jayden. Nothing that we do here today, Madam Speaker, nothing that we do here today will bring back this child of our nation.

Why have the policies failed? Why has the school failed? Why has the Child Protection Unit failed? Why has the legislative framework failed? Why have the billions of the dollars spent in the last number of years failed to yield results? The most important thing to any of us, Madam Speaker, are our children. I have one, many of us have one, Jayden's parents had one child. Madam Speaker, when they bleed, we bleed; when they cry, we cry; when they hurt, we hurt. I called the Minister of Education, got no response. A while after I received a text message saying, "text me". I did. Understanding the trauma, anguish and the tragedy of the situation, hours later I got a reply saying, "oh, how tragic, I will look into it, I will ask for a report".

I subsequently tried to reach out to the Minister of Education over the weekend, but in the most callous, flippant and uncaring manner no response. You know I am seeing many people making the comment, they are saying, well, why you are doing all these vigils and all these awareness programmes after the fact the child has died. It is because we have Ministers of Education like that who refuse to accept responsibility for programmes, plans and policies that are meant to prevent

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bullying in our nation's schools.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: If you do not have the compassion, if you do not have the care as a mother, far less for being a Minister of Education, Madam Speaker, no wonder our country is going to hell in hand basket. Madam Speaker, you look at today's newspaper, I will not display, I did not seek permission. It says:

“Cops Probe Schoolboy's Death”

“Bullies must...”—answer.

I want to thank the Leader of the Opposition for her support on this issue. I will tell you, when I endured bullying in this Parliament, and many of us we still go through it you know, I tell people many times you do not hear what is said to us across the floor, you only hear how we respond. But if those are the role models and those are the persons who expound government policy, then do you expect anything different in our nation's schools.

Madam Speaker, I just want to read a few headlines for you over the past year because I heard my colleague from Tobago East speak about all that is happening with respect to children. And there was an article in today's *Newsday* and the headline says:

Webster-Roy: Government looking after Tobago, children.

And while we have no problems with all the help that Tobago is receiving because they are part of Trinidad and Tobago, this summed up exactly what the Minister spoke about when the Minister spoke. All the Minister did was a swan song, an extempo. The Minister was auditioning to reclaim the seat of Tobago East and she spent all of her time speaking about Tobago's children. What about the children of Trinidad and Tobago?

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: What about those children. You see, Madam Speaker, February 2023, *Trinidad Guardian*, headline:

“Children’s Authority understaffed: Low salaries, burnout”

“Consistency”—*Trinidad Express*, April 04, 2023:

“Consistently failing the children.”

Children abuse:

“...Over 10,000 reports of child sex abuse in eight years”

“Boy, 12, accused of abusing 11 children, 2 animals at Home”

“Couva Children’s Home manager suspended...”—that is the front page of today’s papers—“after revealing abuse allegations.”

Critical new roles for Children’s Authority.

“Children’s Authority falling short”

The Minister told us of all the things that are happening, but Minister it is yielding no results. This week alone, we saw children having to be extracted from homes. You saw the collapse of several institutions in terms of children’s homes.

Madam Speaker, do you know today when you look at the budget estimates, the Children’s Authority, the most critical component to the protection of children, has been cut by \$5 million—

Dr. Moonilal: What!

Mr. B. Padarath:—under the Office of the Prime Minister.

Dr. Moonilal: Shame.

Mr. B. Padarath: Under the Office of the Prime Minister. And she sits there, the hon. Minister that is, sits there sheepishly, trying to disguise themselves that they are doing all this wonderful things to protect our nation’s children when the

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Children's Authority, the Child Protection Unit continues to be under resource and understaffed and you juxtapose that against the expenditure of \$50 million for fete—

Dr. Moonilal: Entertainment

Mr. B. Padarath:—at the Prime Minister's residence, Madam Speaker.

And you juxtapose that against the expenditure of \$50million for fete.

3.20 p.m.

Dr. Moonilal: Entertainment.

Mr. B. Padarath: For fete at the Prime Minister's residence, Madam Speaker. You juxtapose that against a \$5million cut, where you say, the devil is in the details, Madam Speaker. St. Mary's Children Home, a cut of \$300,000. St. Dominic's home, a cut of \$200,000. We were told that there would be an agency that would have been created, a security apparatus through the Children's Authority to monitor all these children's homes. Then therefore, why does the abuse continue? And I will tell you why the abuse continues, Madam Speaker. Ministries, state enterprises, and Government requires leadership, it requires management.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And if in nine years you have failed at leadership, and they have failed at management, there will be no effective change in the Children's Authority. And that is why children like Jayden Lalchan will continue to be forgotten, because they do not have a conscience, Madam Speaker. They do not have political will to resource the Children's Authority to resource critical components like WASA, T&TEC, et cetera, to make the effective changes to redound to the benefit of the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

You know, Madam Speaker, I heard the response of the hon. Prime Minister on the news to some of the issues that Member for Siparia raised, and I have this to say in my closing. The hon. Prime Minister referred to some of the things the hon. Member for Siparia spoke, but the hon. Member for Siparia, when she stood here, she gave plans, she gave policies, she gave solutions to every critical sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: It will take a sick, sick mind that lives in the sewer to focus on “nighties, panties and titties”—as the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member. Member, Member, I am speaking to you. I want you to withdraw those last words. Okay. I want you to withdraw them.

Mr. B. Padarath: I apologize—withdraw, Madam Speaker. But it is true. It is true.

Hon. Member: It is true.

Madam Speaker: No. Member, Member. You just spoke about the nine years you have been here. You are too senior. An apology, and a withdrawal must be without any reservation. So, I ask and stand, I want you apologize to me, for repeating what you said, and I want you to withdraw those words without any conditionality.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, I withdraw.

Madam Speaker: What about the apologise?

Mr. B. Padarath: And apologize.

Madam Speaker: Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

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Madam Speaker: Thank you very much. Member for Tobago West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Sports and Community Development (Hon. Shamfa Cudjoe-Lewis): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to join in this debate. It is interesting that I would come after the Member of Parliament for—

Madam Speaker: Member for St. Augustine, I am hearing you. I have heard you. Okay. I would ask you now to stand up and apologize.

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: You stand up and apologize. I told you, I heard you.

Ms. Ameen: I apologize.

Madam Speaker: No, no. Not like that.

Ms. Ameen: I apologize. I do not know what it is for, but I apologize.

Madam Speaker: Thank you very much. Member for Tobago West.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, the nation looking in on, and they can see what each Member is made of. Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to join this debate after the Member of Parliament for Princes Town. Madam Speaker, it is interesting that I would join after the Member who raised matters relating to the Children's Authority and the care of children. It is not my background, Madam Speaker.

However, I was a Member of this Parliament, I was in Opposition at that time, a Senator in the Upper House when Member St. Rose Greaves brought the legislation, and it is so interesting because before the legislation everything was about lights, camera, and action for the UNC Government. Before the legislation was passed, Madam Speaker, we were in the Parliament at midnight still debating the legislation, 2.00 a.m., we were still there, "she was ringing bell and catching

power”, and when you look at the newspaper, Madam Speaker, the *Express* had already printed that the legislation was passed. Yes? And then the following day there was this convention or meeting of some sort and huge celebration that they had finally passed this Bill.

So, Madam Speaker, what the Member forget to tell you, is even though they passed the law, that is pretty much all they did. They did not set up the regulations or the different supporting frameworks and institutions to support the law that they had created. That was it. All that work had to then be done by this Member of Parliament for Tobago East, by this Government. And Members of the Opposition party went to court to sue and so on based on the same law that they had created that they knew fully well that they did not set up the regulations for. Madam Speaker, so to stand here and to witness this hypocrisy, it is really something to see.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: But that is how they operate, and that is not I have to spend any long time talking to the people of this nation about, because they know them fully well.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, I am pleased to join the debate on this 2024/2025 budget. I want to commend the Minister of Finance for delivering what we have described as a reasonable budget for the delivering something that is practical, and a blueprint to development that we can work with, Madam Speaker. I want to also salute the Member for Parliament for Arima, and the Minister of Planning and Development, because often times we forget to mention the Ministry of Planning and Development and we forget the hard work that goes into the

making sure—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—that we have the allocations that can actually work in some way, form or fashion. I want to commend every Member of this Government, every supporter of this Government. It is not easy, as the Member of Parliament for Tobago East said. It is not easy to lead our people, especially at this very, very difficult and sensitive time. So, I would like to say, I think it is a good budget, it is realistic, it is practical, it progressive.

Madam Speaker, it provides measures to improve the life of people from all walks of life, people who are from the bustling streets of Port of Spain, all the way to the clean, green, serene villages of Tobago. The Chamber said that it a reasonable budget, and many of the Tobagonians with whom I come into contact on my weekly walkabout and so on, have said, nothing to jump and scream or write home about, but certainly something that we can work with. Madam Speaker, for me what really stands out is that we are doing the best we can with what we have, catering to the most urgent needs of our citizens and making sure that there is a robust safety-net for the vulnerable, while not sabotaging the quality of life for the children of tomorrow. It is all about sustainability. It is about building on a firm foundation, protecting our legacy and implementing measures that promote greater success and productivity. Strategies that will facilitate more fruitful and rewarding opportunities for the children of our country. As I said, it is a blue print for growth, for resilience, I would say productivity and equity. So, I salute our Government as it relate to that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: I listened to the contributions of those opposite, and it is

interesting for me to point out—I must point out that many of them are saying to the nation, “hurry up and vote the UNC back in power”. I am saying, we have delivered this budget, we are focused on the next generation and not so much the next election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, at the end of the day we have to take hard decisions, we have to make difficult steps, as it relates to building this nation, having the right resources, and the right framework, so that we can truly support our people.

3.30 p.m.

We have to close off some things, start some things new to ensure that our children and our children’s children can be happy. At the end of the day, yes we want to satisfy the needs of everybody. Today, we the adults who have benefited over the years from all that Trinidad and Tobago has to give, but we also have to be mindful that we have little ones to provide for who are depending on us to make the right decision and to leave something in the kitty for them.

Madam Speaker, I will not spend too much time on those opposite, but I want to point out there are two contributions that really piqued my interest. I listened to Member for Mayaro the UNC B team and he was talking about—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Mr. Al-Rawi SC: UNC independent bench.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: He was talking—yes, there is an independent—Madam Speaker, so interesting is they talk about they are ready to unite the nation and have a new—and they cannot even unite themselves, Madam Speaker.

Mrs. Beckles: They do not even pound for each other.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, the UNC A team not “pongin on de desk for UNC B team”.

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

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, UNC B team, it seems like “dey caucusing on dey own, dey coming in dey own time”. Madam Speaker, and I think that the UNC B team really made some real solid points—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—over the last couple of days. And they cannot even find it in their little hearts and heads to say, “you know what, that is a good point on behalf of the development of the people of Trinidad and Tobago”. All they know is “dey vex and dey not ponging for dem”. If it is only—

Hon. Member: “And dey face hard, hard.”

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Yes, exactly, if it is only 18 and 19 of you, and you cannot pull it together—

Mr. Gonzales: “Dey bad mind, wicked.”

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—how are you going to pull 1.5 million people together—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—in a time like this? So, “I doh really have dem to study”. But I recognize that Member for Princes Town, Member for Mayaro, and Oropouche West—I think it is Oropouche West, spoke about the PNM being filled with corruption and all these things, and I am saying, is this the same UNC? Because they are new Members, Madam Speaker. And I want to say, Madam Speaker, I may be relatively young in parliamentary terms, but “I in town long”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: “I in town long”, Madam Speaker. I heard you caution

Member from Princes Town, and you told him, “you are nine years old here and you are a senior”. Madam Speaker, this is my 15th year in this Parliament, so I know very well what they represent, Madam Speaker. We as a country suffered bitterly under their watch, yes? So for them to come now to tell us, come into their arms, they represent the land or the entity of milk and honey, I say, Madam Speaker, we know exactly who they are, and we know exactly what they give. Madam Speaker, we know what they gave when they were in Government. Old people say, “don’t take boule-dife and look in de night, for wha yuh could see clear ah day”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, I was here in Opposition from 2010 to 2015. I was here when the same UNC used \$6.5 million to wreck a \$2.2 million firetruck. I was here, Madam Speaker, when—I was here and witnessed the \$40 million NP contract to the Gopaul family with whom the Member for Siparia had spent three months as reported, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: I was here for section 64, we were here late at night thinking.

Hon Members: Thirty-four.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Section 34, we were thinking we were doing something good for the country, Madam Speaker, and all of us were hoodwinked, not knowing that they were doing underhanded stuff with their friends and family. I was here, Madam Speaker, 28 years old, 29 years old. Madam Speaker, I was young, but I was able to see what they were doing. I was here, Madam Speaker, when UNC workers used to have to show up for work outside the Parliament and

sign the time book outside the Parliament. They had to strike in order to be able to get paid. And when the reporters asked them, “What are you supporting in front of the Parliament today”? “Well, I here, I working for Ms. Awai.” Whoever she is.

Hon. Member: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Member: Might do it again.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: I was here, Madam Speaker. So we the people of Trinidad and Tobago know exactly what they did.

Somebody spoke about—it was the Member for Oropouche West who spoke about, “PNM bigwigs living off of the backs of taxpayers”. Madam Speaker, I was here when the Member for Siparia, then Prime Minister, took a planeload of persons to India at \$15 million of taxpayers’ dollars, and there is no foreign direct investment to show for it, Madam Speaker. I was here also, Madam Speaker, when she was taking her sister up and down as personal nurse and doctor on the backs of taxpayers.

So, Madam Speaker, and the Member of Parliament for Lopinot/Bon Air West reminded us of EFCL. It is interesting today to hear the Member from Mayaro raised—because they like to quote for us, “Transparency International”. Madam Speaker, I did not know about Transparency International before I became an Opposition Senator, but that is all they would sing and cry to us about Transparency International. Madam Speaker, they brought “Ms. Transparency International” herself into their Government as a Minister of Planning. Yes, and before she could make a good year she was fired for not being transparent. Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: For corruption, corruption in my Irish accent, Madam Speaker. And she was accused of participating in a tendering process to award

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis (cont'd)

herself, award a company owned by herself and her husband, a contract, and on top of that, she had put her secretary on the evaluation committee, and she did not declare that she was a member or an owner of the company. “Ms Transparency International” herself. So for the Member for Mayaro today to raise Transparency International, they love to quote Transparency International, but we were here, live and direct, up close and personal, and we know exactly what the UNC is made of. So if Trinidad and Tobago want to play around with them, that would be up to them. But at the end of the day—

Hon. Member: Therese Baptiste.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: That is a whole story on its own. Madam Speaker, I want to say, as the young people say, “They’re not like us”. There is no other way to say it. They are not like us. There are some people who try to paint a broad brush and say, “well, okay, all politicians are the same”. But I would say today, and the records would show, they are not like us. I want to take this opportunity to thank the Prime Minister for his intelligent leadership.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, I want to thank the Prime Minister for raising up a standard in government, in politics, maintaining order, maintaining decency, maintaining dignity, maintaining discipline, because if he was not that kind of leader, God alone knows all that might have happened. Yes, but we are the PNM, and we are held by a certain standard. There are things that people would criticize us for and beat on us for that they would not even blink twice if somebody else or another side were to do it.

Citizens hold us to a higher standard. Sometimes we may think it is unreasonable. Sometimes we may think it is unfair, but I do not think we will have

it any other way because we are the People's National Movement. We are the PNM of Dr. Eric Williams, George Chambers, Patrick Manning and Dr. the hon. Keith Christopher Rowley, and we stand by that. I am pleased to be a Member of this Cabinet, and I am humbled by the opportunity to serve the good people of Tobago. I came from the bowels, the belly, the gut, of the mighty people of the majestic Tobago West constituency, and it is a real privilege for me to represent and serve the people who nurtured and raised me, the villagers whom I owe all that I am.

I thank the villagers, I thank my people for taking the time to know me like they have, and to trust me like they do because there are many from all little corners opposite that go to their homes behind my back to try to tell them all sorts of stories about me. To try to get them to think and act differently, but they call me up and say, "hey, come, ah have something tuh tell yuh, dis is what dey say". And I am pleased to know that those who know me, know me.

3.40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, as I walk my constituency each and every month, I want to thank my constituents warmly for welcoming me into their homes and for the time that they take to advise me, to encourage me and some of them even to school me. I am grateful. I owe them a debt of gratitude and I vow, as my motto says, "To always be right there with you."

We have come a long way together from training and mentorship programmes for youths; empowerment of our men; skills development for our women; Roving Public Day; monthly walks; house visits; monthly school engagements or human library sessions that the women enjoy so much; the legal clinics; home refurbishments; church refurbishments; food support; Easter and

Christmas bazaars; school uniform, textbooks and supplies support each year for children—for hundreds of children. As a matter of fact, this year, we supported over 240 children. We offer support to the needy, the unwell, to athletes, to youths, to groups, you name it, Madam Speaker, and the list goes on. It has been and it continues to be a true privilege to journey with them and to serve them.

This budget will allow us to redouble our efforts as we embark on a next chapter, stronger together: Increased minimum wage, continued support for children's education and education literacy support for adults who have missed the opportunity at school. You check the length and breadth or front and back of our budgetary statement and the package, there is something in there for each and every one to better themselves.

Now, the Tobago House of Assembly, Madam Speaker, received an allocation—well, they asked for \$3.956 billion and they received an allocation of \$2.599 billion. The Tobago House of Assembly, it is clear to all now that they are displeased and they did not get what they requested. They said, “It is a budget of wickedness, they did not get enough,” and so on. Interestingly, Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Sport and Community Development did not get even half of what it requested. Madam Speaker, I could join the chorus and say that “I did not get enough, things bad, we cyah do nothing, we cyah move,” and all that is being said. And I know for sure that there are many other colleagues—I know nobody got what they asked for. I can safely say that as a Member of the Cabinet. I can safely say that not one Minister got what they asked for. And for the time that I have been here, five years in Opposition and nine, going on 10 years in Government, I do not know Ministers to get exactly what they asked for.

Of course, we have dreams and aspirations and plans that we have for the

upcoming year, but we have to remain mindful that we are working with a set revenue, and the budget is an exercise based on revenue versus expenditure. Of course, you have limitless expenditure and expectations, but your revenue is what it is, and in order to get more or be allocated more, we have to make more. And then we have to also be honest and frank with ourselves that in a primarily energy-based economy, we are price takers, not price makers. The price of oil and gas does not depend on us. We are kind of the small fries in the business, Madam Speaker, so we have to wait on the others and listen for what price the world market is going to carry. So sometimes you start the year off thinking that the oil and gas price is going to be at this—

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Oh gosh man, Couva South. You are seasoned. You are in here long enough. Madam Speaker, talk to Couva South, please.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Tobago West, continue. I think he is all right now.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: “Yuh know dais meh lil friend”, Madam Speaker. I doh know why he behaving like that today.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, interestingly, I listened to—and as much as I say, we have to look at revenue versus expenditure, we also have to remember—let us say for me, Minister of Sport and Community Development, I would love to do all the sporting facilities in Trinidad and wherever I am allowed to in Tobago—

Mr. Al Rawi: In San Fernando West.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—in San Fernando. I would love to fix all the playgrounds.

And even stuff that I am not responsible for, I wish I could have fixed because “dey does blame” me anyway, but we cannot. Yes, we have hopes and aspirations and dreams and desires to fix all these things, but you have to be mindful of what—and in the Ministry of Education, they have schools to fix; at the Children’s Authority, they have people to pay; in Toco, they have their own facility to deal with. Every different Ministry has different priorities, so we have to be mindful of each other. Yes? We have to—in the same way when you look at constituencies, we have to be mindful of each other.

I remembered when Tobago East was getting—being honest, Madam Speaker, that is the only thing I know how to be. Madam Speaker, there was a time when Tobago East was getting: Roxborough Administrative Complex, Roxborough Fire Station, Roxborough Police Station—

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Hospital.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—hospital. Madam Speaker, and I am here down in the west—

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Moriah Health Centre.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—Moriah Health Centre, Scarborough Health Centre. I felt like, okay, what is happening for us down in the west? And then, Madam Speaker, you know, the people in Tobago East still “vote we out” anyway. So, you know, Madam Speaker, you understand how I am feeling?

Mr. Al-Rawi: The THA.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Right, in the THA—but I am saying they did not give the numbers they were supposed to be giving for that kind of—in my humble opinion. Anyway, Madam Speaker, as Member of Parliament for Tobago West, I was feeling, as the young people say, “Some type of way.” But, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Member: “Ah how”.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: I was feeling “ah how”.

Madam Speaker, you look from constituency to constituency, and everybody has needs and everybody wants more for their constituency. Yes? So we have to be mindful of each other. And I know when I say that, I hear some Tobagonians say—the Tobagonians that usually call Radio Tambrin in the morning, or the Tobagonians that call the other one—is it 89.5? The other one. The Tobagonians that call these stations, they would say, “Well, my concern is development in Tobago. I am not concerned about what is going on in Trinidad.” But for as long as we are a part of this nation, for as long as we all have to eat from this national pie, we have to be mindful of each other. So no matter the size of the national pie, everybody wants a decent piece and we have to remember to be mindful of each other. So each and every one of us—I am sure Faris wants to join the chorus too, I am sure—

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Member for San Fernando West.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Sorry, Member for San Fernando West—my apologies, Madam Speaker—he would like to get his carpark going in Skinner Park. Oh my gosh, that Cocorite Community Centre. The Member of Parliament for that area “tired call me and text me” about that, Madam Speaker. Everybody—so many, I do not want to call them out because then it would be a scene.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, Barataria Community Centre—you know, so many different projects. We can all cry out and say we want more, but we just have to really remember to be mindful of each other.

At the end of the day, Madam Speaker, we have to—when we receive the

allocation, when you see what you really get—Madam Speaker, if I am allowed to share my figures, yes? I requested \$1.6 billion, Madam Speaker, hopeful to do all the grand things, run the programmes, fix the fields and so on, give Couva his swimming pool and so on. Those are my plans, right?

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Those were my plans. So imagine asking for \$1.6 billion, you are ready to go, you have your team ready to go as soon as the budget is passed and you got \$400 million dollars.

3.50 p.m.

When you compare, Madam Speaker, that is Zoomers and Bongo money, when you think about what you really want to do. Yes? So, Madam Speaker, you just have to reprioritize and reprioritize, try your very best to manage prudently, practice accountability and transparency in the conduct of the State affairs. You see, I am not sure if the Tobago House of Assembly could say that that is exactly what they do after they have received the figures. Because Madam Speaker, back then, the House of Assembly used to state in the month of June, what they hope for and then when they find out what the allocation is going to be, they go to like a retreat and then come back to the House and debate and let the people of Tobago know what their priorities are. That has not happened, I think, for the last two, three years.

So, whatever decisions the Assembly makes, whether they change their priority or decide to spend the money on x, y or z, we do not know. I got to learn that the monthly report to the House to be tabled in the House, that is not being done either. So we do not know, as Tobagonians, what was spent, what was not spent, what the money was spent on, how much in unspent balances and

interestingly, the Tobago House of Assembly, what we do not spend in recurrent expenditure, we can hold for the next year and put it with development monies. Yeah? We, we call that unspent balances.

We do not know over the last couple years what the unspent balances were. You would note last year, Madam Speaker, \$100 million was given to the Tobago House of Assembly at mid-year and I hear them say: Well, when we came in, we saw bills, we had bills. We all have bills when we come into Government, because we are running a country so of course, the previous Government, whether UNC or whatever, would have bills. Yes? They requested \$100 million from the Parliament, the Parliament gave the \$100 million but we do not know whether they paid the bills, if they paid some, if there is a residual balance, what is happening, Madam Speaker, the same could be said for the oil spill money.

Madam Speaker, I went to buy fish in Lambeau last week and as “I go to” walk away, there is one girl working on that specific spot and she was looking at me, hands akimbo, and I said: Why are you looking unhappy? She said: I am unhappy because I “eh geh meh” oil spill money. And she said: “yuh cud find out wah goin on with meh oil spill money”? And I said: I will find out. But then, I thought to myself, if the House of Assembly received \$50 million towards paying people and treating with the bills, the first set of people—

Mrs. Beckles-Robinson: Who should have been paid.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: —who should have been paid, should be Lambeau Fisherfolk, because they were directly impacted. So, in your prioritizing and reprioritizing and shifting around your \$50 million, the first set of people that should have received monies are the people on the ground, Lambeau Fisherfolk, especially.

In addition to that, Madam Speaker, the bulk of the cleanup expenses were also handled by Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, also handled by Heritage Petroleum and Ministry of Works also had a hand to play. So for the House of Assembly to be giving the impression like it is this one \$50 million and nobody else “eh” help them anyway, Madam Speaker, that is wrong, that is untrue, Madam Speaker, and that is fooling the people to highest degree. So, I hope the House of Assembly would consider or the current Administration in the House of Assembly would consider and at least, at least offer some support before anybody anywhere else, yes, it should really be Lambeau Fisherfolk.

Madam Speaker, I also hear the cry coming out from the House of Assembly that, okay, the 4.03 per cent—you know, interestingly, Madam Speaker, the Dispute Resolution Committee, we came up with 4.03 per cent to 6.9 per cent. Over the years, governments have been giving the Tobago House of Assembly, 4.03 per cent flat, to the coin. Yes. Under the UNC Government, it was to the coin that even if they ended up with .33333 of a cent that is what was recorded. I do not know if they rounded up or down after but when you did the multiplication, it was 4.03 per cent flat. I must say, I am pleased that the Minister of Finance, has been going a little above the 4.03 per cent, Madam Speaker, but just like everybody else, we would all say, more is needed to do what we want to do and to realize our aspiration. But interestingly, Madam Speaker, over the years, we have seen the Tobago House of Assembly, under the leadership of persons like Mr. Orville London and Kelvin Charles and so on, do a lot with 4.03 per cent.

Just because we did not get what we wanted, it does not mean that the whole programme just stops. We still have to produce, we still have to serve, we still have to deliver to the people of Tobago. Madam Speaker, over that period, with

that same 4.03 per cent we delivered community centres from Bethesda Community Centre, Buccoo Community Centre, John Dial, Parlatuvier, Lowlands Community Centre. We invested in upgrading equipment at the quarry in Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Infrastructural programmes: Northside Connector Road, Black Rock Katzenjammers steelpan facility, all of that was delivered under that same 4.03 per cent. Gave land to Buccoo Buccaneers, land to the Hindu community in Tobago, land to the Spiritual Baptist community in Tobago. We built the Scarborough Health Centre. We did Enterprise Assistance grants for the small businesses in Tobago, solar lighting system at Cove, lit playing fields, new primary and secondary school.

When I was a young girl, Madam Speaker, we only had Bishops, Scarborough Secondary Comprehensive, had Harmons there too. It is the THA under Mr. Orville London, who built Speyside High, Goodwood High, Mason Hall Government and so on, at the same 4.03 per cent. We even went on to build an RC primary school, and there were those who were saying, it is too much money to spend on a primary school, and it looks like a university. Those little children do not deserve that, but now everybody want their child to go to Scarborough RC School. Kendal swimming pool, YMCA swimming pool, so many things that I can list, Madam Speaker—send children to school under the Division of Education.

I remember, Madam Speaker, in around 2010—2011, the hospital in Tobago was sending its laundry to Trinidad, because we did not have a working laundry in Tobago. So, we had to send our stuff down to Trinidad to be washed with Mount Hope, Madam Speaker, and we had to wait in line. Madam Speaker, it is with that

same 4.03 per cent that the then Chief Secretary, Orville London decide to make that investment to build for Tobago our Scarborough laundry in order to service the Scarborough Hospital.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Same 4.03 per cent so the programme does not stop, and you do not tell people, well, you cannot submit your application for business development grants because we “doh have no money”. Everybody you are telling, hold up, because we do not have any money. You cannot stop the programme and the development of people because one thing that is sure, your allocation, you got your allocation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: You got your allocation. I think the people of Tobago deserve to know what happened to their moneys. What happened to the allocations that were meant to develop them? Yes? Yes, we can rally around a road leading to nowhere and a roundabout at Shirvan. We could also rally around the stage in the sea. But after that, what do you really have to show for it? So we as Tobagonians these are the questions we are asking, Madam Speaker.

Interestingly, the people in Tobago who are crying this cry, the present Administration, interestingly, they are not making mention of the additional funding spent by central government. That is not something new. That is something that has been happening over the years. Whether it is moneys spent on the same Roxborough Police Station, Roxborough Fire Station, Shirvan Police Station, the Inter-Island Ferry Service, inter-island travel cargo boat arrangement, and we are getting ready to procure another cargo boat to serve the inter-island— for the business people and so on.

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The \$885 million that is going to be spent on the airport. Nobody is—all of that—nobody is making mention of this funding to go towards the development of Tobago.

4.00 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: This is money developing Tobago, also. So it is one thing to say, they did not get enough and you would like more and so, all well and good. But to give the impression that what the Tobago House of Assembly got is for Tobago, and the rest of the money is going to be spent in Trinidad, and Trinidad, only, that is a boldfaced untruth, Madam Speaker. The records would show where we built Cove in 2009 at a \$100 million. The records would show where we upgraded the electricity at Cove at \$139 million. The gas pipeline at Cove, where, Madam Speaker, the Hillsborough dam that was delivered by the Minister of Public Utilities, at \$64 million.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: I remember when the Member for Laventille, now Minister of National Security, was Minister of Public Utilities, when he delivered the \$125 million wastewater treatment plant to Tobago, Madam Speaker. We spoke about the \$8 million well. A brilliant and very successful project. An \$8 million well dug in Bad Hill, serving Tobago West, with water, booster stations and pipe-laying projects.

Madam Speaker, I can go on, and on, and on, and as we speak to—I remembered lighting in Piggott Trace in Carnbee. Those people received light for the first time when the Minister of Public Utilities and I went there and delivered lights.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Big Stick Gully in Bethel, Madam Speaker. And now we are speaking about delivering a marina, and doing more for Magdalena and so on. So, Madam Speaker, I am just saying to give the impression that the central government does not spend additional money on developing Tobago that would not be so. And separate and apart from that in every single Ministry, almost every single Ministry, I would say 90 per cent of the Ministries, there are projects and programmes run by central government, run by those Ministries, that the Tobago people benefit from also. I saw last year the Minister of Planning and Development deliver solar lights into Main Ridge in Tobago. I saw the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service—I was there with the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, last week delivering grants to young people who are setting up their businesses in Tobago.

Madam Speaker, what the Children's Authority is doing, none of that money is coming from the Tobago House of Assembly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: We recently delivered home improvement and home construction grants from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. That did not come out of the Tobago House of Assembly budget. We hear the Minister of Social Development spending billions on pensions and social assistance grants, Public Assistance Grants, Disability Assistance Grants. Not one cent of that is coming out from the Tobago House of Assembly allocation. And I see the Minister of Agriculture delivering grants in Tobago, helping our farmers to modernize their farms. Not a cent of that coming out of the Tobago House of Assembly budget, Madam Speaker. The Ministry of Trade delivered grants and

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technical training and so on, to persons in Tobago, Madam Speaker. That is not coming out of the Tobago House of Assembly budget. So if we could just at least be honest with the people of Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—and stop trying to create a situation of “we and them” and trying to raise and cause animosity between Trinidad and Tobago. For as long as we have existed, it has been a budget for the Tobago House of Assembly, and then the rest of it is spent nationally.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Nationally. Under my own Ministry, the Ministry of Sport and Community Development. The National Commission for Self-Help is delivering grants in Tobago. Programmes: we have MPowerTT, being delivered in Tobago, assisting young men who have problems and who have challenges in charting their future and so on. The Boss Lady Project, all of that is being delivered in Tobago. Not a cent, Madam Speaker, not one cent—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—out of the Tobago House of Assembly budget. Training programmes, the refurbishment of Dwight Yorke Stadium. Not a cent—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—coming out of the Tobago. So, Madam Speaker, I really think that I provide support to the athletes—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—that are in Tobago, Madam Speaker. Half of them cannot access the Lalonde Gordon Sports Fund that the Tobago House of Assembly has. They do not even know where to find the application form. We do

not even know if an application form exists, Madam Speaker. They all find their way at the doorstep of the Ministry of Sport and Community Development and we do assist them. “We doh say, ‘Oh, sport in Tobago is under the division of the THA’.”. No, once you come we consider your application. We provide support to their dragon boat teams—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—provide support to their sporting events, Madam Speaker, you name it. The central government, when they submit their applications from Tobago, we consider, we do not turn them back. We offer the assistance, Madam Speaker. And it is interesting because some of the same—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two more minutes left of original speaking time. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to wind up your contribution, if you wish. Yes?

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Good.

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Wow, that time went fast.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, I want to touch on my Ministry, and I hope I get the opportunity. I will get the opportunity to go to radio stations and so on to continue doing my talking. I do not have any regret as they blame Minister Webster-Roy for talking about Tobago while she was here. It is the people of Tobago that have me here.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: You understand. So, Madam Speaker, I would not be a Minister or a Member of Cabinet, if the people of Tobago did not vote for me, so I have a duty—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis:—to report to them first and make sure that “their business in order”. Madam Speaker, as it relates to the Ministry, for which I have responsibility, Sports, it has been a rough year for sports. There are many who are saddened that okay we did not medal at this Olympics, Madam Speaker, but there are some other exciting things that happened in sport this year. We have to remember that we focus on more than athletics. The Olympics’ focus is primarily athletics. We have some swimming, and so ongoing on there, but we are responsible for 54 different sport in disciplines. So you have rugby taking place, you have hockey teams going overseas to represent Trinidad and Tobago and doing quite well.

We have had the opportunity to sees at least, like new athletes because although some people have become frustrated with the older seasoned athletes, there are some new ones, who are on the scene now really making waves. You have Akil Campbell doing outstanding work in cycling. You have Daniel Dasent-Thomson, placing third at the 87 kg event in Taekwondo. You have boxer Tianna Guy, doing extremely well in boxing. Akeem Stewart of course, the usual, brought home a medal—the silver medal—for us from the Paralympics. And, of course, Madam Speaker, you have young Makaira Wallace, cyclist.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: I think she is about 14 years old, very, very young, blazing a trail out there. You have new 12 year old, Makeda Bain, from Tobago.

We recently supported her to the tune of \$100,000 to assist her in her training and getting her work done and so on. So, Madam Speaker, we have been doing work in supporting the athletes, supporting the national governing bodies. But national governing bodies have to remember that it is not only about the financial support. You have your role to play in developing your plans, making sure you have the right coaching systems and so on. Making sure that you do your talent identification and talent searches, that you have units and persons who work on athletes' welfare and so on.

We continue to develop our facilities; swimming pools. The swimming pool in Laventille, the swimming pool in Maloney, the swimming pool in Morvant, we have been able to build. We have done one in D'Abadie also.

4.10 p.m.

Madam Speaker, we have already started refurbishment at the Ato Boldon facility. We also did some fieldwork recently at Hasely Crawford Stadium, and we are currently evaluating tenders for the track at Hasely Crawford Stadium. UDeCOTT is responsible for the replacement of the track in the Dwight Yorke Stadium and they are going to be doing a similar process, Madam Speaker. UDeCOTT is also doing work at the Jean Pierre Complex. They have already started with that work. Madam Speaker, we have also been hosting a lot of international events, whether it is in cricket, CPL, ICC cricket.

Madam Speaker, we hosted the Summer of Tennis here in Trinidad and Tobago, really promoting sport tourism in the Ministry. We have the Pink Reign campaign, promoting women and girls in sport. We have the April Pools where we trained over 900 persons in how to swim and how to save others while swimming, and so on. We have done the adaptive classes to help people who are

physically—who are special needs, teaching teachers, teaching coaches, and so on, so that they can properly manage these athletes, Madam Speaker.

We have capacity building for coaches, administrators and managers. We continue to develop facilities across Trinidad in the different communities. We did Bourg Mulatresse. We did work throughout Trinidad, Madam Speaker, as it relates to sport. The Brian Lara Cricket Academy, we did Moruga facility, Mahaica facility, National Racquet Sport Centre. We just put down the turf at the Hockey Centre. We are having some challenges there but we are doing some testing for two months and then we will know if we have to do more.

As it relates to community development, you know, we have over 300 community centres, we have been able to deliver Chickland, San Fernando north, Bagatelle, Diego Martin central, Diego Martin north, Indian Trail, Quarry Road, Tarodale, Techier, Lisas Gardens, Maitagual, Maraval, and the list goes on and on, and on. We have been working with YTEPP, the Ministry of Digital Transformation to run programmes through these different community centers. What I am pleased about is the IT centres that the Ministry of Digital Transformation has been delivering and building throughout these community centres. We have about six community centres with gyms operating in order to promote healthy living.

We have the Empower TT Programme working with young men who have dropped out of school, giving them a new start. Boss Lady project, teaching women life skills and handicraft, and so on, helping them to develop skills so they can be entrepreneurs. Madam Speaker, Grow It Yourself, promoting a culture of agriculture in communities so you can build your own kitchen gardens and you can nourish yourself, and so on, Madam Speaker. We have a very robust mediation

programme in order to ensure that conflicts at the community level do not escalate into criminal activity, and we handle over 2,000 cases per year.

The system in Trinidad and Tobago is used as the template throughout the entire Caribbean.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: Madam Speaker, on the Prime Minister's Best Village Trophy Competition, we are in our 61st year, and I am pleased to announce that the numbers have grown over the years as it relates to community groups. We have 224 community groups that came out this year. Miss La Reine Rive is from Tobago. The numbers in Tobago have increased tremendously to the point that we have to go to Tobago now to give them their own preliminaries, Madam Speaker.

We have been developing new policy in community development where we work with private sector to deliver to communities, so the crab farm that was delivered in Tobago. You have dirt oven delivered in Beausejour. You have Digicel working and have delivered Internet cafes in different communities, like Perseverance, and so on. Madam Speaker, so the list goes on and on, and on. We are doing tremendous work with our women, our youth and our men, Madam Speaker. It is about building resilient communities, helping people to recognize their talent and develop their skills at the end of the day towards building Trinidad and Tobago community by community, assisting our athletes and our community groups.

We spend over \$52 million each year providing support directly into the hands of athletes, national governing bodies and community groups, and we are going to continue to invest in that way, Madam Speaker. And that is separate and apart to the \$20 million that over the years provided by the Prime Minister's Sport

and Culture Fund, and the over \$20 million provided by the NLCB. So athletes have options, Madam Speaker. So we continue to do our work. We continue to focus on developing the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I want to thank you for the opportunity to let Tobagonians and Trinidadians know. You have seen the People's National Movement buckle down and get the work done. Madam Speaker, we have made the hard decisions. We have taken the difficult steps, the unpopular steps, because it is all about looking at the welfare of the next generation and not necessarily the next election, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Cudjoe-Lewis: So it has been a privilege to present to you today, Madam Speaker, and I will continue to do my talking as I go from place to place. I am pleased that I was able to deliver and speak on Tobago, and the rest we will talk elsewhere. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Arnold Ram (*Caroni Central*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the recognition and the opportunity to address this august Chamber in respect of the financial package delivered last Monday by the hon. Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East. A few rebuttal points, Madam Speaker, in respect of the speaker before me. Had I not been in this Parliament today, Madam Speaker, and I was just hearing a voice, for at least the first 45 minutes, I would have thought that the person speaking was an Opposition Member of the Tobago House of Assembly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Whilst the Member spent some time speaking about what is happening in “UNC A” and “UNC B”, I thought the Member was auditioning or at least screening for the seat of Tobago West, but, Madam Speaker, I have news for the Member. The Member spoke about “UNC A, UNC B, who clapping, who ponging desk”, I want the Member to look at who was appointed to serve in the Senate of this—under the leadership of the Prime Minister, in the person of Ancil Dennis, who is coming to be the next candidate for Tobago West.

So, Madam Speaker, when you look at what was presented, the Member knows everything that is happening in the UNC, but the Member did not know about how to turn off her cell phone and go on roaming—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram:—throughout the Caribbean with her cell phone on roaming. The Member failed to indicate, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. A. Ram: Madam Speaker, the Member “didn’t” tell “yuh” all those Ministers who have keys to Victoria Keyes via HDC. The Minister failed to tell us that, but the Minister knows everything that happens under the sun.

So, Madam Speaker, as I move on, firstly, I would like to applaud the hon. Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Siparia—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram:—for her contribution, and I thank her for being a voice of reason, a voice of leadership, a voice of truth and hope for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Madam Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition has set the tone and stage for all of us to demonstrate the absolute destruction brought on by yet another PNM Government. They like to boast and take credit for everything that they have nothing to do with.

The PNM has spent almost a decade destroying this country—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram:—destroying the economy, Madam Speaker, destroying the social systems and destroying our democracy. What else can you expect from a party that has crashed our economy twice since independence? Perhaps some form of delusion the PNM actually thinks, “third time’s a charm”. What else can you expect, Madam Speaker, from a party that is led by a jet set Prime Minister, a callous Minister of Finance and a lackluster energy Minister, and the infamous 1 per cent friends and financiers?

What can we expect, Madam Speaker? It makes the choice of the UNC so much more easier at the next general elections.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: The UNC and the Member for Siparia, we are a party and we are a leader with a proven track record of leadership and delivery. We keep our promises on this side, Madam Speaker, and after a decade of destruction, promise, hope and strength are what we need most right now.

Madam Speaker, last Monday was the tenth time that the hon. Minister of Finance came to this honourable House and presented and bluffed his way through the government’s fiscal policy, the budget, throwing out figures for growth and straining to pat his own self on the back, Madam Speaker, for what was deliberately constructive delusion.

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Hon. Member: What?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

4.20 p.m.

Mr. A. Ram: The Minister of Finance began his presentation highlighting the fact that this is his tenth budget in the course of nine years. And let me assure him that this will be his last.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: The dethroned Acting Prime Minister, the dethroned party Chairman—

Hon Member: Oh gosh.

Mr. A. Ram:—and the soon-to-be dethroned Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East.

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

Mr. A. Ram: Yet, quite cowardly, his calculation of growth, Madam Speaker— and I know this hon. Member has had some difficulty with growth for a long time—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. A. Ram:—for expansion, Madam Speaker, focused only on the post-2020 period. That is what his presentation was, Madam Speaker. He only considered— the hon. Member that is, Madam Speaker, considered and rolled out figures, which gave figures from the post-2020 period. Nothing back to 2015, when they assumed office. But that is what we are here to do this afternoon, to remind the population of what the PNM met when say assumed office in 2015, and what they have brought it to today.

On that, Madam Speaker, let me make it clear, the only ones that are fooled

by this PNM budget, is the PNM, because the fact is that Trinidad and Tobago has declined drastically when measured against what they assumed and what they got in 2015—what they met in 2015; it is when we looked at the performance of the PNM from 2015 and found the level of failure, the level of incompetence that they used to disguise the reality by using the post-COVID-19 pandemic as the benchmark. That is what the hon. Minister of Finance did. In fact, the PNM has everything to feel ashamed of.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: But the Minister of Finance has found a convenient opportunity to use the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global shutdown as the baseline for the PNM's past performance.

Madam Speaker, let us say someone asked the hon. Minister of Finance to borrow his car, and he gave them it with a full tank of gas and they returned it with a quarter tank full, he will go and put a half tank of gas—put it up to a half-tank of gas and say, “When I got my car back, it was almost empty, the car nearly shut down on quarter tank of gas but I turned it around. Because of my intervention, the tank is now 100 per cent fuller than when I got it back.” That is the metric that this Minister of Finance will use.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: That is the kind of math that this Minister of Finance will use. This is what the PNM is well known for, conveniently switching between numbers and percentages whenever they find an opportunity to distort and to hide their failure. Again, it is no surprise to anyone that when the PNM took office, that the country was in a much better place. Again, it is no surprise to anyone when we look at the dire state of our nation because that is the very best that the PNM can do.

Madam Speaker, almost every economy in the world, post-COVID-19, when restrictions were lifted, experienced a surge in economic activity because everything had went to almost zero, in terms of—it halted almost to zero. But in more serious countries, Madam Speaker, with a serious government place, there was no sly attempt to change benchmarks for the sake of political “wantmanship”. The Leader of the Opposition dealt with those facts extensively and I fully endorse her assessment.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: This budget, Madam Speaker, was a farce. It was devised purely to disguise how weak our economy has become. It has nothing to do with sustainability. And a mediocre performance at attempting to rally troops, as the Minister of Finance did last Monday, did nothing but expose the fact that the PNM has no performance to account for.

Madam Speaker, I wonder if you are aware that in the 10 budgets since 2015, the Minister of Finance has spoken for almost 34 hours in this House and to be clear, last Monday was not about delivering a budget, it was a filibuster performance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Do you know what it is like to speak for almost a day and a half and say nothing?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. A. Ram: Do you know what it is to speak a day and a half on the budget alone, and not only say nothing truthful but leave everyone more confused than when you started?

Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), the “nothing truthful”.

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Hon. Members: What?

Madam Speaker: That is okay. Please continue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Madam Speaker, the effect of crime on this country is showing up in many forms and fashion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: This Minister of Finance reminds me of a newspaper article, at least, where some company is claiming to be the number one in the number two business. That is what this budget and this Minister of Finance gave, in terms of, you know, what is an analogy, so to speak, Madam Speaker. So there it is, \$500 billion spent, Madam Speaker; half a trillion dollars; 10 years later; 34 long, wrenching hours, and the PNM has absolutely nothing, no positive effect whatsoever. No positive effect on the people, on crime and violence, on our roads, on education, on health, on sports and community, on diversification, no positive effect whatsoever, Madam Speaker. We have wasted an entire decade in allowing a small group of people to ruin what could be a real victory for all of us.

Even the Prime Minister has turned to appealing to the population to look for achievements of his Government, not failures. What achievements, Madam Speaker? What achievements do the hon. Prime Minister speak of? The Prime Minister has even warned about hardship until 2027. It makes you wonder which leader of the PNM is in charge this month because the hon. Minister of Finance is saying something else. And whilst the Prime Minister wants us to tighten our belts till 2027, we have had in this House, in the last session, Madam Speaker, a Salaries Review Commission report, which I think the hon. Members on that side wish to bring to the House in this session. So if the Prime Minister is saying to tighten

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your belt—

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Madam Speaker: So I just ask all Members, you know, if we could contain the level of our noise. I would really like to hear the contribution of the hon. Member for Caroni Central. Member.

Mr. A. Ram: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. A. Ram: Madam Speaker, I was making the point, the Prime Minister is telling the nation to tighten our belts and in the last session, this Government laid—

Mr. Imbert: Madam Speaker, with reluctance on a point of order, because this may continue for a next couple days, 55(1)(b). We have heard this so many times.

Hon. Member: What?

Mr. Imbert: I really do not want to hear it another set “ah” times.

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Diego Martin North/East, thank you for inviting me to consider 55(1)(b). I think it is a bit early in the day for that.

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

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central.

Mr. A. Ram: Yes, Madam Speaker, so—

Mr. Indarsingh: Caroni Central is ruffling Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. A. Ram:—let us see whether the Government, and whether I preclude them in bringing the recommendations of the Salaries Review Commission to this House in this session. Because the Prime Minister might not be aware that even his most ardent supporters, who have benefited handsomely from his tenure, are unable to

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identify any real, actual achievements. Ignoring needs in infrastructure in nine years and suddenly looking busy, that is not performance, Madam Speaker, that is distortion, and this is what the PNM produces. They keep failing and keep failing.

That is why when you look at the bridge in Chaguanas—and this is something that, you know—in Perseverance, Chaguanas, the bridge that collapsed. There was a reopening about a month ago, in time for school, it caused tremendous traffic in the entire central region, from Couva to Chaguanas. Madam Speaker, when you type it in, in Waze, sometimes two hours—a 15-minute drive was taking two hours. You know that bridge collapsed up to last week Wednesday?

Mr. Indarsingh: They put—

Mr. A. Ram: Oh, they put up—Madam Speaker, I think they put up a—

Mr. Indarsingh: They put up a bar.

Mr. A. Ram:—a bar, so that they could restrict certain heavy vehicles from passing—

Mr. Indarsingh: For vehicles to do the limbo.

Mr. A. Ram:—and then that bar broke down, Madam Speaker. It went back all the way to square one, numerous hours spent, unproductive time in traffic. That is after they had a ribbon-cutting exercise in the week leading up to—the Friday before school opened—

Dr. Seecheran: Shame, shame.

Hon. Member: “De ribbon stronger than de bridge”.

Mr. A. Ram: That is distortion.

4.30 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Now we have to question the quality of projects that are being

delivered and other projects that are being rushed because the general election is close, Madam Speaker.

So ignoring the crime and violence that has damaged thousands of families and ended the lives of almost 5,000 people since they assumed office, Madam Speaker, after over \$60 billion that was spent in the Ministry of National Security, it is not performance, it is failure. And that is why the hon. Member who came before me spoke for almost 45 minutes about Tobago and not concentrating on the issue, or not concentrating on the Ministry in which that Member is tasked with. I would have thought, Madam Speaker, or a reasonable person would have thought, Madam Speaker, when you are prosecuting your case for re-election that you will say what you have done. The hon. Member for Tobago West spoke for 45 minutes as an Opposition Member of the THA in my respectful view, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: And that is failure. That is failure. Ignoring the increased levels of poverty, hardship, homelessness, unemployment, and underperformance in our nation's schools, it is not performance. It is failure again, Madam Speaker and with ten years of PNM holding power and still blaming Governments before them that existed 10 years before, that is failure PNM style.

For context, Madam Speaker, and please indulge me so that I will make clear the basis of the issues I am raising, when the previous Government led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, hon. Member for Siparia—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram:—came into office in 2010, they found a staggering level of domestic

debt, outstanding wage negotiations, unpaid VAT refunds, over budget and

incomplete projects to the tune of millions. This was despite, Madam Speaker, unprecedented energy earnings during the period of 2001 to 2010 when the PNM demitted office. They came into office and found a \$13.4 billion budget and left behind a \$44 billion budget when they left or as the “Prime Minister of Finance” or as the Minister of Finance likes to say an almost 250 per cent increase. But having taken office in 2010, the Member for Siparia immediately went to work. The highest level of foreign direct investment in our economic history was achieved in two years. We brought home the most Olympic Medals in our history—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram:—in just two years, Madam Speaker. We have experienced the lowest level of crime in 33 years, just three years after the hon. Member for Siparia assumed office. All secondary schools from Form 1 to Form 5 had access to a laptop computer.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: And there was now access to 100 new schools, with 100 more almost completed after just five years. Foreign direct investment was at its highest, Madam Speaker, and the Heritage Stabilisation Fund had grown to a staggering \$5.6 billion by 2015. In five years, it grew by almost \$2 billion.

A strong road network, highways and drainage network, was achieved between the period 2010 to 2015.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: An expanding health care system, expanding small business sector, low unemployment, food prices that were comfortably within the reach of all income groups. A social welfare system that was working with people to get out of poverty not exist in it, Madam Speaker. Five years, and the end of it is we are left

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with a debt to GDP ratio of 42.5 per cent. It is now a staggering 75 per cent, Madam Speaker, or thereabout, that is what we have grown to. The debt to GDP ratio under this current Administration for the last 10 years, in which there has been a decade of destruction.

Today, with 10 years and \$500 billion spent, what do we have to show for it? Madam Speaker, here is an—

Mr. Imbert: Madam Speaker, point of order, 55(1)(b). The Member is actually tediously repeating himself, 55(1)(b).

Madam Speaker: Again, I thank you for inviting me to consider. I am not as yet there. Member for Caroni Central.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Thank you.

Mr. Indarsingh: Deeply disturbed by your contribution.

Mr. A. Ram: Madam Speaker, that is what happens when you speak the truth.

Mr. Indarsingh: Yes.

Mr. A. Ram: They cannot accept the truth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: So they rise up on irrelevant Standing Orders, that is what happens, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I will now turn my attention in this context to one of the core areas of my responsibility in terms of which I shadow, is the area of sports, youth and community development. And yet it has been a long and difficult decade for this sector or depending on the side of the House you sit, Madam Speaker, it might be rewarding for some. Madam Speaker, this year's allocation for sport and community development is estimated at \$390 million which when

combined with *Development Programme* comes to a total estimate of \$431 million.

The Minister of Finance boasted that the PNM Government has promoted sports and has given strong support to national teams and athletes. He also talked about making sufficient or significant investments in maintaining existing infrastructure. They confuse free hand spending with investment in sport, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: That is what it is, free hand spending with investment in sport. Because the PNM investment has left the Mannie Ramjohn Stadium still closed located in the constituency of Pointe-a-Pierre despite it being listed in the *Public Sector Investment Programme* since 2021 for upgrade along with the Hasely Crawford Stadium, Larry Gomes Stadium and Ato Boldon Stadium. Madam Speaker, they will not tell you that right now the Dwight Yorke Stadium and the Hasely Crawford Stadium have lost its certification as professional facilities.

Hon. Member: Shame.

Mr. A. Ram: So now there are no professional facilities and up to standard stadiums in Trinidad and Tobago, and this affects our track and field opportunities because no senior athlete can make a national team from here. We lost our accreditation, Madam Speaker, in December 2023. So that is what this PNM is about investment in sport. When they say they make significant investments in sports. Now in PSIP 2025, this is what we find in *Development Programme* of a master plan for sports and youth facilities.

So what, the PNM has a plan for a plan. So they developed a master plan to include policies and procedures for the upkeep and maintenance of the physical structures of facilities, the engineering components, the sport specific component

and all aspects relating to the facility usage. So, Madam Speaker, how are we to trust the integrity of these PNM-generated documents? These are the same people who produced the Vision 2030 aka a re-edited version of the Vision 2020, which had cataract, by the way. As was for Dollar-for-Dollar what the PNM called GATE and called it their own. As was the Revenue Stabilisation Fund, which the PNM called the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and they called it their own. This is how easy misappropriation is for this Government. With a track record like theirs and the threat of property tax, what should we expect next?

They say, Madam Speaker, your house is not your home anymore. It has been designated a structure for habitation and it now belongs to the PNM. We know that we cannot take the PNM's word for anything, but now, one must wonder whether we can take as fact the information contained in what should be Government documents.

But that is not all, Madam Speaker. The PSIP of 2021,'22, '23 and '24 we saw upgrades of community swimming pools in Diego Martin, La Horquetta, and Couva. We saw the upgrade and rehabilitation of the Sevilla Club. We saw the upgrade of the recreation grounds at Todds Road, Caparo, Park Street, Morvant, Grand Riviere in Sangre Grande, and Marac. We saw the upgrade of the Mahaica Oval. That is what we saw in this PSIP 2021,'22, '23, '24. Upgrade of the Dwight Yorke Stadium, and refurbishment of the now infamous Skinner Park Stadium, which cannot house or cannot host a secondary school's football game anymore. You now have to drive down to Mahaica Oval for the hosting of these games.

Hon. Member: Shame.

Madam Speaker, I grew up playing—

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Hon. Member: We played intercol there.

Mr. A. Ram: Played championship football or football for Naparima College—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram:—and most of our games we were playing at the Skinner Park. Now, you cannot host the secondary schools' football matches there. When you look at what the ground has become, it is much smaller than the regulation size, Madam Speaker. Every year since these same programmes were repeated.

In the PSIP of 2025 what do you find? Well, if you look a few years down the road, Madam Speaker, the PNM has finally—they have finally completed one of these projects here, Madam Speaker. It is called the Todd's Road Recreation Ground. At this rate, Madam Speaker, it would take another 15 to 20 years for all of these projects to be completed and for them to repeat promises after promises. Remember, Madam Speaker, PNM: promises never materialized.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: And not just that, Madam Speaker, they keep budgeting, spending and achieving nothing—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram:—and their plan is to bring it under PSIP every year. In PSIP for 2025, I see that the D'Abadie/Malabar swimming pool was completed and handed over since December 2023. What about the others? What about the Couva swimming pool? It took the PNM four years to upgrade a recreation ground, but how long does it take them for a pool to start working? And they have the gall to talk about performance in this House, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance also boasted with numbers about the successful hosting of international sporting tournaments, but here is what he

had to say about the Mannie Ramjohn Stadium. I want to find out about the Mannie Ramjohn Stadium that still remains closed to date, the Ato Boldon Stadium that cannot be accessed by the public. It is not accessible, Madam Speaker. I remember in the years 2013, 2014, on my way from work we would stop off at the Ato Boldon Stadium, Madam Speaker, and there would be hundreds—

Hon. Member: You sure?

Mr. A. Ram: There would be hundreds of persons who were exercising on an afternoon. They have shut out the entire public from the use of the Ato Boldon Stadium for no particular reason, Madam Speaker.

The T20 World Cup hosted in June this year, Madam Speaker, created a traffic and parking nightmare that a little planning could have prevented with actual planning.

Mr. Indarsingh: Well said. Well said.

Mr. A. Ram: We debated in this House the Bill for the ICC Bill, and I warned them, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Member: Yes.

Mr. A. Ram:—about proper planning for the traffic situation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: I asked them, what was the plan they had for traffic management? The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts came in this House, responded and indicated that all the plans were in place to ensure that traffic gridlock would be a thing of the past. They cannot implement. They do not have the willpower, Madam Speaker, to lead this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. A. Ram: That, Madam Speaker, did not just stop there. You would have thought a responsible Government would have learnt, at least, from the ICC T20 World Cup. It did not stop there. In the CPL game, Madam Speaker, even a team which had police escort, one team arrived late to start the game on the Friday evening because of poor traffic management and access, Madam Speaker, and we want to call ourselves—

Hon. Member: Shame.

Mr. A. Ram:—a competitive sporting designation and talk about sport tourism and so forth, and we cannot even manage traffic, parking and the ease of access. Madam Speaker, it does not stop there, you know.

Hon. Member: What? What? What?

Mr. A. Ram: This one made BBC News and ESPN sports news. The:

“ICC deems Tarouba pitch ‘unsatisfactory’”

Much like the performance of this Government, Madam Speaker, unsatisfactory.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Unsatisfactory.

Hon. Members: Repeat that. Repeat that.

Mr. A. Ram: The:

“ICC deems Tarouba pitch ‘unsatisfactory’.

The International Cricket Council...has deemed the pitch prepared for the 2024 T20 World Cup semi-finals at Tarouba ‘unsatisfactory’.”

Hon. Member: That is not Preysal, you know.

Mr. A. Ram:

“The bounce during the match against South Africa was unpredictable with deliveries squatting or rearing up from similar lengths.”

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This was said by Afghan coach—an Afghanistan coach—Madam Speaker, Jonathan Trott after the game.

“Pitches at Brian Lara...Academy were difficult throughout the tournament.”

This Government which started off—the previous PNM Administration which started the construction of the Tarouba stadium at \$250 million went to \$1.2 billion and yet there are so many issues still at the Brian Lara Stadium. Madam Speaker, there was an article by AZP news Prior Beharry on the 2nd of October, 2024:

“...UDeCOTT”—promises—“to fix issues with media”—box—“at Brian Lara Cricket Academy.

The Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago...”—

And I read from the article dated 2nd of October, 2024:

“...is promising to fix issues with media facilities at the Brian Lara Cricket Academy.”

This follows:

“Last June during the World Cup game between West Indies and New Zealand...”—where their—“...park and ride system...”—caused—“major chaos...”

—as I indicated before, massive traffic jams at the CPL games. But what is interesting, Madam Speaker, I hope I do not get my words mixed up there. It says:

“The viewing glass in the media wing fogged up during a game between West Indies and South Africa in August.”

Hon. Members: What?

Dr. Secheran: They have to use the TV.

Mr. A. Ram: F-O-G-G-E-D, fogged up, Madam Speaker, during a game between

the West Indies and South Africa in August.

Dr. Moonilal: The media?

Mr. A. Ram: The media room.

Hon. Member: I heard that.

Mr. A. Ram: So AZP news contacted one Ms. Stapleton-Whyms from UDeCOTT and she indicated they:

“...will be looking into other issues in the media wings identified...such as blockage of the 30 % of the field while journalists are sitting”—there to report.

It has a blockage of almost 30 per cent, Madam Speaker. That is the status, Madam Speaker, of the Brian Lara Cricket Academy.

So as I continue, the Minister went on about hosting of the 2025 CARIFTA Games which he estimated will attract 840 athletes from around the world. He even called this country a sports leader, making hollow and misled claims about tourism and job creation. But the hon. Minister was silent on the fact that our last participation at the Olympic games saw a return of zero medals and the Olympics before that of zero medals. We cannot even win a single medal, Madam Speaker, and that is certainly not down to the athletes, but rather a lack of support from the Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Madam Speaker, by contract and for context, I wish to remind hon. Members that in fiscal 2015, under the Member for Siparia, the Development Programme in sports received an allocation of \$122.3 million, and that is some of the work that was undertaken by the UNC Government.

Madam Speaker, there have been a lot of other programmes which were

highlighted by the hon. Member, Minister of Finance, when he spoke in the budget. He indicated that they had established and would complete a number of upgrade works. They had, you know, dealt with something called the National Secondary Schools' Track and Field Championship, and this was discussed, Madam Speaker, in the budget. The hon. Minister of Finance said the programme:

“...serves as a platform for identifying and nurturing young athletic talent. This has benefited 600 student athletes from across the nation.”

This is what the hon. Minister said. I have some questions for the hon. Minister, Madam Speaker, which must be answered. How exactly has this programme, this is the National Secondary Schools' Track and Field Championship, how exactly has this programme benefited these 650 athletes? At what level were they performing prior to this programme being implemented? What benchmark were they working towards? What monitors and measurements are in place to ensure the continued progress of these 600 athletes that you have identified? Given the Government's poor handling of Olympics preparations, how exactly will identified talent be directed and supported to ensure a balance in education as well as athletic development?

4.50 p.m.

Those questions are some burning questions based on the announcements upon announcements of the Minister of Finance. The hon. Minister also spoke about the iChooseSport Programme. Madam Speaker, they have these action oriented names for everything.

Mr. Moonilal: And do nothing.

Mr. A. Ram: But with everything else that the PNM touches nothing works.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. A. Ram: Because everything is done for favours and publicity not sustainability.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Well said, well said.

Mr. A. Ram: Notwithstanding that, it was stated that this programme has successfully engaged almost 2,000 students across 52 schools to date.

Hon. Member: “That not sounding like Moonilal.”

Mr. A. Ram: Madam Speaker, what does this mean? I am engaging the House right now, does this mean that the Members of the Government Bench will understand and take heed of everything, or be guided to do better in their portfolios?

Hon. Member: No.

Mr. A. Ram: I could say to the hon. Members that last Monday the Minister of Finance engaged 40 Members in this budget.

Mr. Indarsingh: With your rapt attention.

Mr. A. Ram: That statement does not speak of the fact that all those Members expect himself believe his entire budget to be a publicity stunt and a bold demonstration of distortion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: So, with that explanation, I would like the Government to answer these questions with respect to the iChooseSport Programme. What were the terms of engagement of these 2,000 students? Which are—or where are these 52 schools located? How were these schools selected? I am not aware of any of these schools, 52, chosen in the constituency of Caroni Central. What was the skills level of the students at the start as compared to end of the engagement? And what

are the next steps for the high performing students to show their talent and want to make a choice in pursuing athletics? Those are some questions that we require from the Minister of Sport and Community Development or the Minister of Finance when he wraps up this debate.

So, Madam Speaker, all of this tell us that sport is still being treated by this Government, as a publicity stunt as a channel for their closest financiers. It has nothing to do with a vision for producing top athletes, providing superior facilities to attract sport tourism or creating sustainable opportunities for young men and women of this country. So, Madam Speaker, that is some of the issues with respect of the portfolio of Sport and Community Development.

I want to move quickly to youth development, this is the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. In any environment where every day there are new innovations and the evolution of current innovations, the Minister of Finance seems proud of the fact that he had numbers to quote. Madam Speaker, the young people of this country are not numbers to be quoted, they are not stats to use conveniently and if the hon. Member wants to use stats, I have some stats for him. I have some stats for him and I will share those shortly.

Madam Speaker, the youngest people in this country are the men and women who will one day be doing the jobs we do today, but in an environment that is completely different. Madam Speaker, our every effort must be to ensure that they are prepared to adapt to continuously changing and evolving sectors, technologies, standards and best practice. Our young generation are being compromised. Our unemployment rate among the youth stands at a staggering 19.2 per cent. This is disproportionate and higher than a 5.4 per cent national average. This means one in every five young people, they are looking and cannot find a job. And while the

Government boasts about developing youth with new plans every year, let me tell you what they actually do by way of example.

Last year in this Parliament they approved the sum of \$1 million to spend on Youth Employment Policy. Do you know how much was spent on that, Madam Speaker, on that Youth Employment Policy? Zero.

Hon. Member: What? Shame.

Mr. A. Ram: In fiscal 2024, \$5 million was approved for the implementation of a National Youth Policy, Actual spent from \$5 million, \$800,000 or 16 per cent of what was approved.

Dr. Moonilal: The Minister is preoccupied, leadership.

Mr. A. Ram: Dr. Ramkissoon, a leading economist highlighted this in an article, youth employment.

Hon. Member: Stuart Young.

Mr. A. Ram: “Youth unemployment”—sorry, “a significant social challenge”, that failing to engage youths in meaningful work is a major barrier to economic growth and contributes to a dysfunctional society, allowing gang leaders to exploit the situation.

Mr. Indarsingh: Shame.

Mr. A. Ram: That is what we are seeing and saying now, Madam Speaker, because of the high unemployment rate which now stands at 19.2 per cent, one in every five young people is now unemployed. Last year and this year in the budget the hon. Minister of Finance boasted about the support they were providing via the Elite Athlete Assistance Programme, to our young aspiring athletes who are seeking to represent our nation. Yet, for fiscal 2024, the year just gone, a year that included the Olympics, the Minister slashed the allocation to this programme by

almost 36 per cent, chopping \$2 million off the initial allocation to the programme.

The upgrading of corporation grounds was slashed by almost 80 per cent last year, with an allocation for development and upgrading of recreational grounds parks and spaces hacked by a massive 98 per cent. Madam Speaker, as we are speaking about the upgrading of corporation grounds, in this financial year the Minister of Finance has allocated a measly \$75,000 to the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation for the maintenance of grounds, \$75,000. Madam Speaker, there are 103 grounds which fall under the remit of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, a 103; \$75,000 allocated for the maintenance of those grounds. This Government is clearly not serious about promotion of sports and youth development in this nation.

Mr. Indarsingh: No it is a 114 grounds.

Mr. A. Ram: I stand corrected by the Member for Couva South, it is a 114 grounds, \$75,000 allocated, Madam Speaker. This is how the Government basically is sabotaging the development of sports and youth in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: When you look at under the programmes and initiatives funded by the PSIP, the development and upgrading of recreational grounds, parks and spaces estimated \$10 million in 2024, Actual spend \$167,000, Madam Speaker. Development, I repeat, development upgrading of recreational grounds, parks and spaces estimated \$10 million last financial year, Actual spend, \$167,000 this year.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member of Caroni Central, you have two more minute of original speaking time. You have an additional 10 minutes extended time, if you wish to avail yourself of that to complete your contribution.

Mr. A. Ram: Madam Speaker, I avail myself, thank you very much.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: The upgrading of corporation grounds again, \$10 million last financial year Actual spend, \$2 million, Estimate for 2025, \$5 million. So, this is how the Government, they are sabotaging the development of the sporting community. The professional state-of-the-art stadia constructed by the Member of Siparia's Government, to promote swimming and cycling as a sport development has been allowed to deteriorate in favour of repairing fete venues. So, Madam Speaker, nothing this Government has done shows any evidence that their policies are based on assessment of future needs, re-innovation, and preparing young people for an accelerated future.

Madam Speaker, the Drilling Rig Operations Training Programme, they are boasting about the Drilling Rig Operations Programme, which was started under the UNC. It was shut down by the Government and last year they trained 80 persons. So, when they shut down the—and you know, they decimated the energy sector, shut down Petrotrin and so forth, they are now rushing to do and to graduate 80 persons in the Drilling Rig Operations. It was the Kamla Persad-Bissessar Administration that instituted the drilling programme through the NESC, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.00 p.m.

Mr. A. Ram: That is the vision that the UNC has for this country, Madam Speaker. So, this Government has, you know, basically failed the youth of this nation. We have the numbers of people who graduated but no significant number of people who are really accessing some of these training programmes and so forth.

So, Madam Speaker, I just want to move to one additional thing before I

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move to some constituency issues, and it deals with the shade programme.

Hon. Member: Shade?

Mr. A. Ram: Yes, Madam Speaker, the shade, and I think that is a fitting name under the Ministry of—

Hon. Member: Shady.

Mr. A. Ram: Shade—well, shade, the shade programme under the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. Madam Speaker, I have a very serious concern that I call on the Government and the hon. Member for La Horquetta/Talparo to answer—which I hope he comes—during the course of this debate with evidence to support the information. I will like to ask the Government if it is true that it was the Government of Guyana that donated the shade houses to the Shade programme, whether those Shade houses were received and also, whether they have been distributed and where?

Madam Speaker, I am advised that the Shade programme started with 100 students; 60 participants graduated, only 35 joined the relevant corporative which has not been registered to date. A total of 20 Shade houses were promised for cohort one, but only four were delivered. No deadline on when the next 16 will be delivered. It is my understanding—I would like the Government to corroborate this and provide clarity on this because I am further advised, there has been quite a number of changes on coordinators post-cohort one. It was brought up during the meeting that the Shade houses were delivered from Guyana and were just sitting. They need assembling.

Mr. Indarsingh: Shady business.

Mr. A. Ram: Shady business, Madam Speaker, in the shade programme.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Our sources indicate and confirmed that the four Shade houses that were built in Chaguaramas, they were not built using the material provided by Guyana. If this is true, it will mean that notwithstanding the donation from the Government of Guyana, an understanding was made to construct these houses locally but not with the material from Guyana. Because whoever built these Shade houses at the cost of some \$5 million, when the actual cost is about \$400,000 for one, they did not do a proper job, they disregarded ventilation.

So, Madam Speaker, the irony of it, the course itself taught the proper construction of the Shade programme—the Shade houses, and the proper construction and the method by which they should do it. But whoever got the contract to do it, built it and they got it wrong. That is what is happening in the Shade programme.

Dr. Seecheran: Shady.

Mr. A. Ram: It is shady business down there, Madam Speaker. So those are some of the questions I ask of the Minister of Youth Development and National Service.

Madam Speaker, with my couple minutes remaining, there are couple issues—constituency issues—which I would like to highlight, and one which I always do is the Preysal Government Primary School.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. A. Ram: Madam Speaker, the Preysal Government Primary School has been housed in a community centre for the last 10 years. Persons have graduated from this school—just like Ramai Trace, Member for Oropouche West. They have graduated with the certificate saying, “Preysal Government Primary School” and have attended a community centre all their lives. We have had some very

prominent sporting persons and Members of Parliament who have attended the Preysal Government Primary School, persons like the late Kelvin Ramnath, former Member of Parliament for Couva South; former Member of Parliament for Caroni Central, Dr. Hamza Rafeeq, attended the Preysal Government Primary School. We had quite a number of cricketers, members of the cricketing fraternity, prominent members, Rangy Nanan, Denesh Ramdin—

Mr. Indarsingh: Inshan Ali.

Mr. A. Ram:—Inshan Ali, Ravi Rampaul. They all attended this school. And they are now housed in a community centre. It is more than shameful, especially when there was an allocation to complete this school, which was almost—I would say, almost 70 per cent completed in 2015, when the Member for Siparia demitted office; 70 per cent completed. There was an allocation sometime in 2017/2018 for the completion of the school. Where has the money gone, Madam Speaker? It was reallocated and these students are still housed in a community centre.

Madam Speaker, it then brings me to the other school, which is also housed in a community centre right now, which is the Palmiste Government Primary School. When I asked the hon. Minister—this school was gutted by fire, parts of it. On Thursday, 07 December, 2023, under Urgent Question, I asked the hon. Minister:

“...what urgent steps will be taken to relocate the school?”

The Ministry of Education told this honourable House that:

They—“...are working with the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation to have the affected”—areas and—“portion demolished and the rubble removed to allow for possible occupation of the usable portion of the school.”

That plan was shelved and they moved to the Edinburgh 500 Community Centre. So I have two schools in Caroni Central which are now housed in community centres. So when they boast about building community centres, it is because they are building community centres to house schools and students.

Anyhow, Madam Speaker, there was an undertaking or at least a response by the hon. Minister to say that they are working with the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation for demolition and so forth. And I asked her, the hon. Member that is, when the demolition will take place? The hon. Member's response was that:

“...discussion we are having now and we are working out the arrangements for when they will come to do it.”

This was in December at a parliamentary Sitting—13 December, 2023.

Madam Speaker, the corporation, together with the corporate citizens and persons in that area, mobilized and went onto the school compound on at least 10 occasions. When they went, there was always some reason why the demolition cannot take place. I am being told reliably that the Ministry has indicated to the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation that they will get a contractor to do the demolition and they do not require their services anymore. So whilst the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation is willing to do it, together with the good men and women from the area, the small businesses and so forth, to demolish and to assist with the reopening of the school as fast as possible, the Ministry's response was that they will get a contractor to do it. So that is what is happening at Palmiste Government Primary School.

Madam Speaker, despite the best promises of the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air, water is an issue in the constituency of Caroni Central. We have—my own

water supply, 24/7 water supply, has moved to one in 12 days. And we hear this afternoon, the hon. Minister boasting about projects and millions of dollars being spent on wells, all within the constituency of Caroni Central. In fact, he indicated—the hon. Member that is—that the new well is being drilled in Rixon Trace, off Arena Road, Freeport. Madam Speaker, they are taking the raw material out of Caroni Central and pumping it elsewhere, their own constituencies. And in my own constituency of Caroni Central, we receive water once in every 12 days.

Madam Speaker, there are a number of bridges that remain almost impassable and they have been gazetted, in terms of their tonnage weight. The amount of tonnes which can pass over those bridges have been compromised. We speak about the Batchasingh Road bridge, we speak about the bridge in Fazal Trace and very soon, the bridge in Arena Road. The road infrastructure in the constituency of Caroni Central is about the worst. In particular, the Edinburgh Road, the Freeport Mission Road, Siewdass Road, La Cuesa Road and environs, they remain almost impassable and have led to destruction, much alike the destruction that we have to endure over the last decade by this Government.

So, Madam Speaker, those are some of the burning issues within the constituency of Caroni Central, and I wish to thank the honourable constituents for the trust and confidence they have imposed in me in being their Member of Parliament. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5. 10 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Lisa Morris-Julian): Madam

Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity—

Hon. Member: Deal with him.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian:—to contribute to this budget debate, and as much I would like to deal with some of the glaring inaccuracies from the Member for Caroni Central, unfortunately, I have far more important things to speak about.

Madam Speaker, it pains me to address a matter of great gravity before delivering my contribution to this very important debate. Last week Trinidad and Tobago faced a tragedy with the untimely passing of 15-year-old Jayden Lalchan, a Form 4 student of St. Stephen's College in Princes Town. On behalf of the Ministry of Education I offer my deepest condolences to Jayden's family, classmates, friends and everyone who knew him and cherished him. This certainly rocked the nation, and as a mother, I want to say it should have never happened.

Madam Speaker, the circumstances surrounding this very tragic loss are complex, and discussing the personal and sensitive details in the public domain would not be very responsible of me. However, I have seen children, adults, targeted by other persons who seem to think two wrongs will make a right. We at the Ministry of Education must honour the privacy of Jayden's family and recognize that there are layers in this situation that deserve our careful consideration. We as adults in this House must not use tragedy as a tool.

Madam Speaker, the Student Support Services Division did reach out to the grieving family, as well as the school to offer support during this profoundly difficult time. As a former form teacher I can tell you having lost a student to similar circumstances, there are children that are hurting right now. We at the Ministry will wholeheartedly respect the parents' wishes and will allow them the time and space they need at this particular hour. The Minister of Education has

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instructed the Senior Guidance Officer, mobilized the entire team, to ensure that ongoing support and monitoring are provided to the entire St. Stephen's College community—parents, children, teachers. In addition, the Student Support Services Division will continue its effort to speak with students of the school today as this tragedy is a challenging situation for everyone involved to cope with.

Madam Speaker, we must recognize that a range of underlying issues can contribute to a child's distress and it is vital that approach the matter with the utmost sensitivity and empathy at this time. We do not need to make death a political tool.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: I take this opportunity to remind all parents that they can request counselling for their children. These services are not only available in schools but also at the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, their mediation centres. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services sent her team out this morning to visit the family. Madam Speaker, this is the Government contributing what they must.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: In addition, to that, Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has established a National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 800-COPE, C-O-P-E, 800-2673. I urge anyone who may need to use that number to go ahead and you will get immediate assistance and support for individuals and families who may be struggling with depression, anxiety.

There are consequences for bullying and other forms of school violence. Madam Speaker, I can emphasize the Ministry of Education's zero tolerance on bullying. I can tell you because I am very familiar with our discipline matrix system. There

are established procedures for addressing such behaviours and, Madam Speaker, I am going through this so that someone out there who needs to hear this message will get this message, and it is very telling to me that some of the biggest bullies would walk out during this message.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Bullying and intimidation is a major offence listed by the Ministry of Education's National Discipline Matrix and it carries severe consequences. In addition to bullying, other major offences include, and some of you may recognize it on the other side, disrespect and defiance in authority, assault without a weapon, cyberbullying, extortion, fighting without a weapon. You would particularly like this—forgery, gambling, as well as lewd and inappropriate behaviour, possession or use of alcohol, all these things, Madam Speaker, are frowned upon under the disciplinary matrix.

For each student committing these major infractions, we have a structured response. For the first offence, referral to the Student Support Services for intervention. For the second offence, Madam Speaker, a mandatory parent/guardian conference. We also want to teach the children for any wrongdoing, they must make amends. We have in-school detentions, suspension and for the second offence, we also have further Student Support Services intervention, three to five days out of school suspension, one to two days in-school suspension and for the third offence, Madam Speaker, continued referral to the Student Support Services Division for support. Madam Speaker, a seven-day out-of-school suspension, a referral to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, an escalation to the severe infraction level if the behaviour persists.

In fact, Madam Speaker, any infraction that involves violence against

another person and results in criminal charges that would be laid against a student will be treated as a severe third offence resulted in expulsion. Since we have been in the Ministry of Education, we have had no choice but to expel several students for this type of behaviour.

Madam Speaker, once again we offer sincere condolences to Jayden's family, and I want to urge parents to have these discussions with your children, talk to them about bullying and forms of school violence. Reach out to teachers, form teachers and school supervisors if you feel you are not being heard. And to the students who may engage in these acts, let me make myself very clear, it is never okay to hurt others. Hurting someone by your words and actions is not a sign of strength, it is a sign of weakness.

Madam Speaker, when I listened to the Member for Princes Town, I must confess I felt very touched. It is difficult to be bullied. It is difficult to be attacked for who you are or how you are perceived, but, Madam Speaker, that same Member bullies Members of his own side for simply doing what they thought was right.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: So miss me with the hypocrisy, you cannot pick and choose what is a bully. It is either you are or you are not and I have realized hurt people, hurt people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, speaking of being bullied, I have noticed that Members of the other side seem to pick on the Minister of Finance, who is a man that cannot be bullied.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, I must commend him and his team for their tireless work in crafting a budget that not only addresses the immediate needs of our citizens, but also lays the foundation for sustainable development in years to come. We are all familiar, at least those of us with a proper education, that when Alexander the Great wept, because there were no more worlds to conquer, the Member for Diego Martin North/East smiles because he is the man that bought us CDAP, GATE, UTT. He also bought in CT scan and MRI equipment, and fast ferries. He changed the Port of Spain skyline, water taxis, the Grand Bazaar Interchange and that is just a few, because when I asked him, he said there were far too many to mention. He is a man of great talent and this budget reflects that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.20 p.m.

This is a budget that is grounded in realism, not fantasy, not mamaguy. Madam Speaker, when I spoke about bullying I also wondered about the fascination with death, murder and mayhem. I thought of persons like Videsh, Andrea, Christopher. I thought what happens when the camera stop rolling, do they ever go back? Do they go back to these families? Do they reach out and make sure that they are okay? Do they ensure that these people have the support that they need or is it simply a political display?

Now, Madam Speaker, the Opposition Leader used the initialism PNM to rhetorically uncreatively add meanings other than the People's National Movement. I will not bore the House to attempt the same thing using the letters. Unlike the Member for Caroni Central, my degree was in English, however—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: No, I must say I am not bullying. I am simply pointing

out a fact. Madam Speaker, but listening to the Opposition Leader I decided that the “U” in UNC must stand for “unable”. Unable to deliver anything but rhetoric; unable to stand up for more than 10 minutes to deliver a response; unable to give the population an idea of what her real plans are; and unable to realize the brilliance that is the Member for Diego Martin West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: And if the tabanca was bad in 2015, Madam Speaker, and it was worse in 2020, Madam Speaker, you “ain’t” see nothing yet because they will get more of it in 2025 when we retrieve Moruga/Tableland, pick up Chaguanas East, as well as get some new Members.

Now, Madam Speaker, again as a mother I feel I have to address the Opposition Leader’s reckless statements about the PNM being involved in a paedophile ring. Every time I hear something like that I am disgusted because as a mother, as a grandmother, as an auntie, you are supposed to report it to the police. You are supposed to carry that information in. You are not supposed to play political games with it. If children are in danger, Madam Speaker, you have every right as a leader in this country to make sure something is done about it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: And if it is simply you like to play fast and loose with the truth, Madam Speaker, that is just as disgusting. Madam Speaker, you see they are more interested in theatrics than action. It is ironic to me that the same persons that stayed silent on child marriages and exploitation now want to act as the champions of child protection.

Madam Speaker, today I wore my blue heart for human trafficking. I wore it because, Madam Speaker, the same exact way children are being exploited from

Venezuela and Colombia and being brought to this country and other countries, our children could be heading in that direction. And if that beast exist in the bowels of any movement, they need to be removed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: And if you want to say that you care and you truly care about people, and you truly care about children, you simply have to cut that cancer out.

Madam Speaker, the fake empathy, the fake sympathy, the pause for tears, miss me with the balderdash. The record speak for themselves. This Government has done more to protect the children of Trinidad and Tobago than the Opposition Leader ever did during her tenure.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Through our policies and interventions we have strengthened the child protection services, improve the legal frameworks and provided real support for our families, and I must commend my colleague, the Member of Parliament for Tobago East, for the outstanding work she has been doing—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian:—and she continues to do because, Madam Speaker, she is genuine and she truly cares.

You see this Government does not just talk we act. I want to make this very clear to everyone, when it comes to our children, leave them out of your politics.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Leave the politics out of education. Leave the—you want to make sure that you win you could do what you want, but you cannot say

what you want without being challenged because we know the truth and so do you. In this Government we have no time for games. In the Government we are here to serve the people. In this Government education is not just an investment in our children now, but for our children's children. Every single person here was supposed to have benefitted from a PNM education.

Madam Speaker, I just want to pause to state one more thing as I spoke about bullying. I want to tell my colleagues, the ones of decency, morality on the other side, you will always be challenged for speaking the truth, you will always be condemned for wanting to do the right thing, but we have an obligation to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morriss-Julian: Do the right thing, Couva South.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. L. Morriss-Julian: Madam Speaker, this year's national budget underscores our Government renewed commitment to education. Just over \$7.5 billion has been allocated to education and training, the second highest funding for the 2025 fiscal year. In addition to the substantial investment, the Government has allocated \$33.7 million across several initiatives aimed at fostering education, skill development and sustainable growth.

I have to commend the hon. Minister of Finance for this forward-thinking approach to building our nation's human capital. It is an investment. Some of the key allocations I particularly am impressed with. I was the first of seven children, Madam Speaker, in a very difficult time, my father having lost his job during the one love phenomena of the NAR of which the Member for Siparia was a member. Lessons were considered a luxury. My parents would have had to pick and choose

which child would get lessons for what, and because of that each one had to teach one and I must confess sometimes we missed one because we simply could not do it.

When I saw that \$3.2 million for the online numeracy programme for adults to address critical gaps in numeracy skills I felt very happy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: I felt happy because I remember being that child who could not get Math lessons. I felt happy because I remember being in a school where it was assumed that everybody bright. So if you were falling behind nobody would pull you up. The \$5 million for the national digital literacy project to bridge the digital divide in underserved communities and ensure that vulnerable groups can thrive, is also another investment to make this an even playing field. Madam Speaker, \$2.9 million for the digital literacy certification programme to make sure that they have the essential digital skills for success, also a brainchild of this Government.

Madam Speaker, \$2.6 million in a solar-powered sustainability project in secondary schools, promoting environmental awareness and education about renewable energy. I know that the Member for Mayaro will be extremely interested in that. Madam Speaker, \$20 million to continue the \$1,000 school supplies and book grants, supporting 20,000 disadvantaged students with schoolbooks and supplies for the next academic year. The Minister and I are deeply grateful to the Minister of Finance for recognizing education's critical role in our nation's development. A wise man once said, "The future of our nation is in our children's schoolbags", and when I bought that up I also talked about patriotism.

Recently, Madam Speaker, as you are well aware, we had the privileged to visit Cuba, and my colleague in Couva South will support me in this, the level of patriotism that I experienced, that I saw from children who did not have very much but were taught to love and respect their country. And I thought about how for this Independence Day for the first time I saw certain Members from the other side who in an election year all of a sudden discover what is like to be patriotic. And being patriotic, Madam Speaker, is not standing in a house to complain about the cricket results. Being a patriot is showing up every single time because that is the right thing to do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.30 p.m.

Mrs. L. Morris-Julien: You see, we want a good strong education system to decipher—we want our children to analyse, we want them to make wise decisions because we want the PNM to stay in government for a very long time and that is the only end when you are educated. You will vote for the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. L. Morris-Julien: But then we have individuals that seek to derail, distort, misinform and most grievous of all, relying on the miseducation of the Opposition Leader because to me, Madam Speaker, it must be done purposely. Madam Speaker, the “Kamla-matics”. Imagine speaking about the Prime Minister staying out of the country for any length of time. Understanding that that was not a vacation. Those were work trips for our country to support our country but I can do mathematics too—not very well, as I said, I am an English major so let me do some maths for my colleagues, Madam Speaker. Gary Griffith once said, “not one day in her five years as Prime Minister has that woman been to work on a Monday,

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Tuesday, Wednesday”—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: Let us—I know you are quoting but when you are quoting remember you are adopting it and if you are referring to a Member here, do not say—I do not think things like “dat woman” is the proper terminology. So, you know, withdraw it and you say it properly, thank you.

Mrs. L. Morris-Julien: Sorry. From Speak Out—withdrawn, Madam Speaker, withdrawn. I apologize and I withdraw. From Speak Out T&T June 17, 2015:

“Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,”—Saturday, Sunday, five-day weekend—
“You want to run the country and have a five day weekend?”

So I checked with the Minister in the Ministry of Finance for San Fernando East, five days by four is 20. Twenty days by 12 is 240 days, 240 days by five is 1200 days. We would like our money back.

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

Mrs. L. Morris-Julien: You see, education empowers individuals, enriches communities and enhances economic productivity but more than that, Madam Speaker, it is a tool that can break not just the cycle of poverty, but the mental poverty that exists. It is a ladder for upward mobility and also morality. I have taught children who simply did not know better and when they knew better, they did better because I was able to show them what was indeed the correct way.

We have paved the way for individuals to have a legitimate primary, secondary and tertiary education and they got legitimate certifications not from any mill, no degree mill at all. It does not stop there, Madam Speaker. Tech/voc is also available and very soon we are looking towards offering tech/voc courses online because we see the importance of digital literacy and education hand in

hand. We have so many inspiring stories of students rising from humble beginnings to achieve great things, not just for themselves but for their families. And to me, one of the greatest stories is the story of the hon. Member for Diego Martin West because he was the first in his family to benefit from an education that a PNM Government built.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. L. Morris-Julien: Equity in education: So Madam Speaker, the schools of focus initiative. I am particularly proud of the Ministry of Education's schools of focus initiative launched in 2022. The Minister of Education came up with this concept because we knew we had a problem and we were trying to make it right. We identified 106 schools, 80 primary schools and 26 secondary schools and we implemented a rigid remedial education plan reaching around 35,000 students with an investment of \$8 million. A significant component of the remedial education plan focuses on discipline. To enhance discipline, we have revised the National School Discipline Matrix. Madam Speaker, I want someone to go back to the records and show who was the Minister of Education that took discipline out of schools, and it will also show it is the PNM who put it back again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. L. Morris-Julien: We have learning support assistants who have been assigned to support of school operations, dedicated social workers, and guidance counsellors are present in each of these schools. As a result of these measures, Madam Speaker, I am happy to say we have witnessed a decrease in school violence over the period 2023 to 2024 at both primary and secondary school levels. The incidents of assault and fighting both with and without weapons have fallen from 1,116 in Term 1 to 786 in Term 2 and further down to 713 in Term 3. It is

working.

So far in this academic year we have recorded 147 incidents of assault and fighting in the first five weeks, which is a lower number when compared to the same period last year. To improve the students' performance we also had a Vacation Revision Programme for Standards 4 and 5 students along with selected Form 1 students benefiting over 1200 children. To me, Madam Speaker, what sets the Vacation Revision Programme apart is it is a holistic approach. It is going beyond remedial Math and English. It offers mentoring, counselling and parenting sessions. Imagine you are bringing your child to get help and as a parent, you are receiving help also, and you are also exposed to different youth development organizations like the Cadets Scouts, Girl Guides and the Red Cross.

Our ongoing volunteer youth mentorship programme is active in 20 schools. We have also introduced an after-school tuition programme for Standards 3-5 in 80 schools and it has helped over 7,000 students over the past two years. Our lower secondary proficiency examination for Form 2 students is contributing to a general increase in our performance. Of all these programmes, Madam Speaker, we want to promote equity in educational opportunities for our students. We are fully aware the field is not level and we are doing our best. Both Ministers of Education understand that.

The 2024 Schools of Focus Annual Report which was done by the Student Support Services Division has revealed, as a result of this programme:

The SEA-weighted composite scores for the schools of focus have steadily increased from 2022 to 2024. While those schools not in the programme saw a slight decline.

I am happy to say that those that we give the special focus to have consistently

improved their SEA composite scores. The 26 primary schools have consistently improved their SEA scores overall and a significant drop in the students scoring below 30 per cent. So what does this data tell us, Madam Speaker? It tells us that, one, our initiatives are working. Two, that our students cannot do it with our help alone. They need invested parents and guardians and I am happy to report they are stepping up to the challenge.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs L. Morris-Julien: These successes are not by chance. They are the direct results of a targeted strategic invention through the Ministry's remedial education programmes, which provide the critical support. We are not just talking about improving the education outcomes, Madam Speaker, we are taking action and we are seeing results.

Madam Speaker, something else that always tugs at my heartstrings is adult learners. Very often, you meet persons who just need one more CXC pass, and I always tell persons when they come to me that if you have one pass then you can get two. If you have two, you can get three and if you have three, you can get five, and if you have five, you can get your degree because I really believe all they need is the encouragement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. L. Morris-Julien: Madam Speaker, I knew a woman who started off as a tea maid in a Ministry and recently became a DPS.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. L. Morris-Julien: She worked her way up.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.40 p.m.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Because she knew if you have one, you could make it to two and she got her passes one by one, year by year, while handling her responsibilities and raising her family.

The programme was created by Cabinet Minute on May 29, 1981, and it was designed to provide a second chance for adults seeking to complete their Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate qualifications. Whether it is for employment opportunities, further education or personal development, the programme has long served as a lifeline for those committed to enhancing their skills.

I was once one of those tutors, Madam Speaker, and I can tell you that the satisfaction from helping someone finally get it, understand it, there is nothing like it in the world because they simply needed someone to show them the correct way. The programme is governed by the policy manual for evening school programme and we have a longstanding commitment to creating educational pathways for adults. Up to 2019, 24 centres were in operation, serving between 35 to 4,000 citizens annually and, Madam Speaker, of course, it was free, free, free.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: The COVID-19 pandemic brought this crucial service to a halt, with no classes offered in 2020 or 2021, but the Minister insisted and in 2022, the programme made a significant comeback. We relaunched it with online classes. Do you imagine the convenience, Madam Speaker, being at your own home, maybe perhaps taking a chance at work and learning to navigate MS Teams, the School Learning Management System and being able to learn without having to physically come into a space? In the academic year, the programme catered to 801 students across 12 centres, offering eight subjects and supported by the hard work of 78 tutors.

Madam Speaker, in the 2023/2024 academic year, we saw a remarkable increase, with 1,900 students benefiting from the programme, 130 per cent rise in participation, simply because we went online, and that is the PNM way.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: For this new cycle, we project over 3,000 applicants and we have 19 centres prepared to meet this increased interest. In addition to the increased enrolment, we also saw an expansion in the range of subjects. We introduced two new subjects, bringing the total number of subjects to 10. We have 70 tutors for the upcoming cycle and a curriculum that addresses both academic needs and market demands, because we understand that it is adults we are dealing. This programme is living proof that the Government has an ongoing commitment to providing quality, accessible education for all, irrespective of age.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: The MiLAT Programme is another programme that I have a special place in my heart for because I had many students who decided to go the MiLAT way and they all achieved five O'levels. I see many of them in various places. Some are police officers, some are working in private businesses and each one of them, I am proud of them, because they took that decision. They needed to focus and they went to a space that helped them achieved their CSEC passes, as well as turned them into disciplined young men.

Madam Speaker, being an at-risk youth simply means that we have to take the risk to make sure that they stay on the right path, a holistic approach to educate and rehabilitate, offering students a second chance to succeed academically, while fostering positive social behaviours.

Now, Madam Speaker, CVQs, TVET subjects, we believe this will also

minimize dropout rates. The introduction of the Trinidad and Tobago National Learning Assessment certification: This, coupled with our cultural transformation initiative that I know the Minister will speak about, will encourage greater student attendance at all secondary schools. Very often, you would have a student who may not be performing in math or English, but they could dance, they could play the drums and they could sew or they can cook, and simply because they excel in those subjects, they work even harder at the other subjects in order to do well. So CVQ, TVET is definitely another way we are going to keep our students engaged.

Madam Speaker, I do not agree with academically inclined. I think that we are all inclined to learn, and that is fine, but each student must have the basics of an education foundation: Reading, writing, arithmetic. We will continue to work with skills-based tertiary institutions like MIC and the National Training Agency to enrol students 16 years of age and over in full-time and evening classes, where they can get the certification that they need to obtain gainful employment.

Madam Speaker, I already spoke about the \$1,000 School Supplies and Book Grant. One of the things we have noticed is that through the means test and review process, some persons made mistakes in the uploading of the documents, and that is why I am very happy that the Ministry of Digital Transformation is placing these digital libraries in community centres everywhere where persons can get help so that they can apply, and they understand that everything is online now and there are ways to make sure that you do your application correctly. So some of the initially challenges will be no more and the persons who have experienced delays because of missing documents, because of incorrect information, we have taken these challenges very seriously and we are working diligently to resolve them for our future grant distribution. We have learnt from these early hurdles and

we are committed to ensuring greater efficiency in the upcoming school year.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry is a giant machine where there are many cogs in the wheel trying to get things done and I am very happy to be working with a Minister who is committed to education, lifelong learning and learners, because we care about all learners, children and adults. The Government's continued investment in education is not a thing of wonder, it is simply about survival for our country.

I must express, Madam Speaker, my bewilderment at some of our detractors' consistent criticism of the comprehensive budget. I even want to talk about the Minister of Finance's proposed 5 per cent wage increase. What is striking to me is that the persons who are against 5 per cent are not saying how is it the UNC can propose 10 per cent. It is highlighting bias and the agenda-driven nature of these criticism. This reminds me of a moment in history, when in 1986, Prime Minister George Chambers, fully aware—Member for Couva South, you would have been there. I think would you have been in university and I think I was in first year or something like that, so may you remember it a bit better than me. And Member for Tabaquite, you may not have been born. Right?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Former Prime Minister—and, Madam Speaker, I know you would have been in primary school.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: The former Prime Minister offered public servants a 9 per cent wage increase and the members of the unions said, “No way, we not accepting that. Dais it, we doh want the PNM.” They demanded a 15 per cent increase and all the NAR members said, “Yes, no problem, 15 per cent increase for

all, vote us in.” And they sang “One Love” all over the country.

5.50 p.m.

Prime Minister Chambers, fully aware of the economic downturn and fully aware that oil prices were now US \$9 per barrel, said that such an increase was unrealistic, but the National Alliance for Reconstruction promised to deliver 15 per cent if they won that election. I hope union members are listening to me now. My friends in TTUTA, I hope you are listening.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morriss-Julian: They said if they won the election, and everybody knows how that went, 33 for 3. But, Madam Speaker, history would show they could not keep that promise. Instead, what people received was a devastating 10 per cent salary cut for public servants. Instead, they got into bed with the IMF, and they removed COLA, the cost of living allowance, was removed forthwith, and persons like my father, may he rest in peace, lost his job. Are you willing to take that risk? And who came to the rescue? It was the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morriss-Julian: And we always have to rescue this country from the UNC and its agents.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morriss-Julian: We brought back good governance. We brought back stability, and we brought back COLA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morriss-Julian: But people like—whenever it is you have to make hard decisions, people tend to make foolish decisions. Madam Speaker, you ever went to your mother and you got vex because she said no, she could not afford it?

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Madam Speaker: Member, so I know it is style of speaking, but I think we have to be careful of how much I am being brought into the debate. Okay, so thank you.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: My apologies, Madam Speaker. So, when your mother has to make tough decisions, when your parents must do what is best for the household, sometimes it is difficult as a child to accept it. As a citizen, you must accept when the Government is making difficult decisions. The PNM has always provided the people with transparent, comprehensive manifestoes; meanwhile, our opponents like to cover manifestoes from fractured parties, like to use AI to send out press releases, and like to borrow other people's press releases.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Manning: Borrowed.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: I have yet to see a party that could truly beat the PNM on its own. Instead, they cobble together fractions—imagine, imagine, Madam Speaker, Couva South talked to the people about going with the man that only has 20 votes; and 20 votes nationwide. We now stand at a critical crossroads. Madam Speaker, I urge the people of Trinidad and Tobago to remember this: the PNM has consistently steered this country well. We have been there through tough times, and we will be there through good times. Every single time when I hear them speak, Madam Speaker, about the 100 schools—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have one more minute of original time left. You are entitled to 10 more minutes to wind up your contribution if you wish. Yes? So you may proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Thank you. One hundred schools that we did not find. One hundred schools, where you wonder, where did the money go? I could tell

you where the money went, Madam Speaker. When the hon. Member for Port-of-Spain North/St. Ann's West decided that it was time to change the currency, that is where the money went. Everything that was in a mattress, a water barrel, a water tank buried under a silo—that is where the money went. Madam Speaker, as someone who watched Arima Central sit down there, it was this Minister of Education that made sure it was finally done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morriss-Julian: The same Arima Central Secondary School they attempted to give to the Maha Sabha. And this same Ministry of Education made sure that the Maha Sabha got the Arima Hindu School with full support from us. Because we give support to all.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morriss-Julian: So let us reject the distractions, ignore the old noise, and focus on what truly matters, continued growth and upliftment as a nation. A commitment to the PNM is a commitment to this country. Every single thing in this country, the PNM built, every single thing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morriss-Julian: The education system, the roads, the bridges, all because of the PNM, and the other side could never come close to what it is we have offered this nation. With the Prime Minister at the helm, we would forge ahead, and we will continue to create pathways to a brighter future and prosperity for all. And with the quality of MPs we have on this side, Madam Speaker, all I would like to say to the five on the other side is that we are the greatest patriots in this particular House because we believe, let us put country first. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rishad Seecheran (*Caroni East*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to join the debate.

Thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me to join the Appropriation (Financial Year-2025) Bill, 2024. Madam Speaker, it is my fifth year, as a Member of Parliament and I would like to thank all the constituents of Caroni East for the faith that they have invested in me. Madam Speaker, on behalf of these constituents of Caroni East, I would like to commend my political leader on a very comprehensive and a very thorough reply to a very uninspiring budget speech by the Minister of Finance, Madam Speaker. I would like to commend my political leader, Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, as the next Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia has shown the path forward after a decade of destruction by this PNM Government, Madam Speaker. Crime is at historic levels. Jobs are very low. Many persons, many citizens, and many companies have severe issues accessing US currency, Madam Speaker. We also have the issue of the drop in natural gas, and of course, an increase in the cost of living.

So, Madam Speaker, on this side, I would like to congratulate my colleagues, the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, the Member for Chaguanas East, the Member for Oropouche West, the Member for Princes Town, and of course, the Member for Caroni Central.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Madam Speaker, I would like to commend their hard work and dedication to the United National Congress and their continued fight for equity and justice in Trinidad and Tobago. And it is a duty, Madam Speaker, that they take seriously, as patriotic citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. As well, Madam Speaker, I would also like to congratulate the Caroni East constituency staff. Mentions have to be made of my office manager, Fyze Alley, for the yeoman work that he has done over the last four years with me—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—and the entire staff, for that matter, Madam Speaker. They are there with me in floods. They are there with me on outreach field visits, as well as, constituent consultations, Madam Speaker. So it is another year of service that we have with the constituency of Caroni East.

Madam Speaker, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, she is my friend, and I thank her for her contribution, but I have some serious issues with some of the statements that she made, and one of the issues, Madam Speaker, was the fact that the Member for Siparia displays fake empathy. Madam Speaker, I take great, great umbrage at this comment. Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia, the Opposition leader, and the former Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago is a grandmother. She is also a wife and a sister, Madam Speaker, and she is the most caring person that I know.

6.00 p.m.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia, after topping her class at Hugh Wooding Law School, chose Madam Speaker, she chose to dedicate her professional life to serving the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Dr. R. Seecheran: So if that is not a caring person, Madam Speaker, I really do not know what is. No one has greater empathy than my political leader, and I say that without reservation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the speaker made these statements but I am asking the Member where is the baby grant that the Member for Siparia initiated when she was Prime Minister? The PNM Government has stopped that, where are the laptops for the children in secondary schools?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, it took a pandemic to open a \$2 billion hospital.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: It took a pandemic, right. And, the Member said everything in this country is built by the PNM. So if that is their attitude, I am asking her, is that why they did not open the Couva Hospital? Because it was built by the UNC Government?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, my leader created the Children's Life Fund and this was to help severely ill children to access tertiary level healthcare, you know, in any part of the world to save their life. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the PNM Government has used a tight interpretation of the law to restrict sick kids from accessing this fund, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Those with blood-borne diseases such as beta thalassemia major, they cannot access this fund and they have to rely upon barbecues and GoFundMe campaigns in order to fund their treatment. So,

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you know, I cannot explain where the Member was coming from with her logic. The Member spoke about equity in education, and when you speak about equity in education you are speaking about the Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: You are speaking about the Member for Siparia. She was the former Minister of Education. She built dozens of early childhood centres around this country, she built dozens of primary schools, she built dozens of secondary schools.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: This PNM Administration has dozens of schools rotting that were started under her Administration, Sir. So, you know, I just wanted to spend a little bit of time with regard to some of those statements made by the Member of D'Abadie/O'Meara.

Moving on with my contribution, the slogan for this year's budget is, Steadfast and Resolute. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am asking steadfast and resolute in exactly what? In exactly what? Chaos reigns in Trinidad and Tobago. It currently reigns north, east, west, south, central. Crime is out of control. You know, we recently had the case, and I would like to, you know, say condolences to the family of Sachel Kungebeharry. He was found in my constituency in Caroni East on Pokhor Road murdered, his body, you know, in a shallow grave there. And this has traumatized not only his family but the community around Pokhor Road, Longdenville. So, no nowhere, nowhere, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is safe in Trinidad and Tobago. We have had a recent incident in a very upscale area in Trinidad, a pharmacy, where a couple was accosted by a gunman, you know, in the carpark. And this is not a hotspot area, this is an upper-class area in Trinidad and

Tobago. So nowhere is safe. So, what exactly are we steadfast and resolute in?

Then he says, you know, he is forging pathways to prosperity, and no one believes that. No one believes that. Not the average citizen. And the question has to be asked, the Member for Oropouche West said it, “Are we better off now than we were nine years ago?” And very few can say that they are, very, very few can say that they are. So, to me, this slogan that they use for the Budget Statement is totally ridiculous and it shows that they are totally disconnected from citizens in Trinidad and Tobago, totally disconnected.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: The Minister of Finance used this budget statement to recant everything that he could think of that every Ministry possibly did over the last four years. And as we said on this side already, this is the Rowley Administration’s eulogy, and their bags are packed and they are in the departure lounge.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, please you know how we do it in this Chamber, titles—proper titles—constituency.

Dr. R. Seecheran: The Prime Minister sorry, the Prime Minister. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I myself, as the Member of Parliament for Caroni East, I believe in the values of the United National Congress, and I believe in the values of my Opposition Leader, my political leader.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: People centred development, building human capacity, those are our focuses and—you know, I would like to say good afternoon to my leader as she enters the Chamber here—fostering sustainable development—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: —and she will return to serve the people of Trinidad and

Tobago. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are faced here with another deficit budget. In total expenditure, \$59.7 billion. We have a fiscal deficit of \$5.5 billion and, \$7.5 billion has been allocated to the health sector. And this is the highest allocation among all Ministries, but I would have to say the Ministry of Health is probably the least efficient of all Ministries. So, my slogan for this budget would be, “Are we getting value for our money as citizens of Trinidad and Tobago?” Healthcare is in shambles and nothing will change under this PNM Administration, and we have many, many examples over the last four years. And it is not the UNC that is saying so, patients are saying so, nurses are saying so, doctors are saying so, and many independent reports that we have access to, from parliamentary reports—We have the Seemungal report, we have the Special Auditor’s Report. We even have a recent PAHO report, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So, this \$7.5 billion is an obscene amount of money that will be wasted again by this Ministry of Health. And, you know, we have to look at some of the infrastructural projects that they have entered into, some with no public consultations. We have the Ministry of Health Administrative Building. \You know, over the next 15 years the Government of Trinidad and Tobago will have to pay \$480 million for that building. We have the South-West Regional Health Authority Parkade at \$132 million. How is that going to help citizens with their health in the southwest region, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

This Ministry of Health, they are contracting out their clinical obligations. They have the facilities, they have the equipment available, but they do not have specialist doctors in enough quantity. They do not have nurses and they do not have technicians in order to fulfil their mandate. I am coming to the External Patient Programme now. The External Patient Programme was started in 2014

under the UNC/People's Partnership Government, and it was intended to be a public-private initiative. And in 2014, that was the first year of the programme, and Cabinet approved \$10 million for this programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$10 million. The aim of this programme was to reduce the clinical backlog and not to replace the State's obligations.

They have contracted out healthcare, right. They are mismanaging the sector and the External Patient Programme is currently putting a strain on the Treasury of Trinidad and Tobago. Clinical excellence has moved out of our state institutions and into private institutions and it will take a Kamla Persad-Bissessar Administration to restore credibility and confidence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again, proper titles.

Dr. R. Seecheran: The Member for Siparia.

Mr. Hosein: A Siparia-led Administration.

Dr. R. Seecheran: A Siparia led-Administration—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—into state institutions with astute healthcare management and people-centred development.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to start with one of the first major accomplishments or achievements that the Minister of Finance had in his Budget Statement with regard to health. And it was \$380 million for 3,400 renal dialysis patients. And my question is, why has the State not done most of these dialysis procedures, right? Now, according to the Public Sector Investment Programme—and I have gone back to 2014—in 2014 \$10 million was spent on this programme. In 2016, \$15 million.

6.10 p.m.

Going to 2022, \$90 million for 1,115 patients, and that works out to be \$80,000 per patient. In 2023, it was \$160 million for 1,187 patients. That works out to be \$134,000 per patient. And in 2024, it is \$150 million again for 1,173 patients, and that works out to be \$127,000 per patient. So this is an obscene amount of money. My question is, in 2022, we are doing dialysis roughly at \$80,000 per patient, per year, and now we are jumping forward currently to \$127,000 per patient, per year. So I am asking the Minister to please help me with those figures. And it is at 12 contracted private medical institutions, and I am asking the Minister to please tell the nation; list the 12 private medical institutions as well as their geographic location. We would like to have an idea of the geographic spread of these facilities that are getting the larger sum of our state resources here.

So, the thing is I went back in the PSIP as well and dialysis equipment was procured by each regional health authority since 2015. In 2018, dialysis equipment, a substantial sum, was procured for the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex. In 2019, the Point Fortin Hospital moved to a 24-hour rotation in order to do dialysis. In 2020, 30 dialysis stations were procured for the Couva Hospital. In 2022, six dialysis stations for the Port of Spain General Hospital.

So, if private institutions are doing it, why can we not do it in the state institutions? I was trying to figure this out. The Government has built hospitals in every corner of this country, but in my respectful view they are white elephants. They are not doing what they are supposed to be doing. Patients have to go to a private facility in order, in this case, to get dialysis. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you work it out, over the last four years that is \$.4 billion of state resources that should

be done within our state hospitals. When you calculate what has gone on, because we did a Private Members' Motion earlier this year, what is lacking in the health industry is human resources. Human resources is absent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: We lack the specialist doctors. We lack the specialist nurses, and we lack the specialist technicians, and we lack the Minister, the appropriate Minister. So, we are unable to attract the best talent into our state industry and it is not cheaper to send it out. In fact, it is more expensive. Why are doctors not coming into the state sector? Many feel, because it is the fear of victimization. They have seen what has happened in many cases to many of their seniors. I can make mention of the fact of the doctors that were transferred during COVID. The statement at that time is that they were rotated out, but they were never rotated back in.

So many are also cautious about very, very poor working conditions, contracts, remuneration as well as career mobility. So, safety is also a major consideration in these situations. We have seen gang violence spill over into many of our state hospitals. We have on record murder of patients on stretchers, just recently at the Port of Spain General Hospital. We have a murder at the Arima Hospital, of an employee there in the parking lot, as well as we had a recent murder at the St. James Medical Complex, of an employee there.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, to put this into context, this Administration has spent \$1.6 billion on the Arima Hospital. They have spent \$1.26 billion on the Point Fortin Hospital. They have spent \$1.1 billion on the Sangre Grande Hospital and they are spending \$1.26 billion thus far on the Port of Spain General Hospital. But we are sending thousands of dialysis patients out per year because, for some

reason, we cannot do it at these hospitals.

So, the Opposition Leader and the next Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago will introduce First World health care and build state-of-the-art dialysis clinics in all of our major hospitals in Trinidad and Tobago and she will attract the relevant technical staff and we will do this under extended work hours. It could be two shifts and we will get the job done and have everyone dialyzed in our state hospitals. We will absorb the State's obligation with regard to the external patient programme.

With regard to emergency dialysis, of course a provision will be made for that to be continued to be done at a private institution, should it be an emergency procedure. But also significantly, my leader plans to build a national dialysis center at an expanded Couva medical complex, and it will be a centre of excellence and a centre of learning, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So the second achievement the Minister of Finance had in his budget presentation was \$160 million for 2,000 patients with regard to cancer treatment; and this was achievement No. 2. I make note of the cancer equipment donations by Phoenix Park Gas Processors Limited. It is commendable and we thank them for that, but it does not confront the core issues, and the core issues being human resources. It is not me saying this alone. We actually have an article dated the 21st of March, 2024 from the Trinidad *Express*.

“Patients ‘pay privately or die’”

This was roughly six months ago, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is based on a Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. What we learnt in this joint select committee was that antiquated drugs, antiquated cancer drugs were given to many patients in our health sector and inefficiencies are plaguing

cancer care. These are the words of a very patriotic doctor, a very brave and fearless doctor and she was the head of the T&T Cancer Society, Dr. Asante Le Blanc.

She went on to say there is non-cohesion with the Ministry of Health. There is non-cohesion with the Minister of Health. All talk, all talk and no approach to policy on healthier lifestyles; all talk and patients are getting antiquated drugs, if any at all, if any, and there are shortages reported due to lack of funding. The issue is drugs not equipment.

We also had at this joint select committee the Diabetes Association of Trinidad and Tobago as well as the T&T Heart Foundation. The conclusion of this joint select committee was not favourable to the Ministry of Health. It was not favourable at all. Dr. Le Blanc went on to say that the number one female cancer was breast cancer, the number one male cancer was prostate cancer. The specialist oncologist at the St. James Medical Complex was having major issues in treating both those cancers due to a lack of funding. She went on to say:

“...new drugs had been approved but were...unavailable...”—and—“we are giving antiquated drugs, if at all, to patients’...”

The Minister of Finance boasted about this in his budget speech. He should have left that out. This was sending some patients into private care. Patients sometimes must “pay privately or die”, “pay privately or die”. Dr. Le Blanc was asked by the *Express* what were the problems and she said there was:

““never proper reasoning”, “a lack of funds”.

But we have \$480 million for the Ministry of Health administrative building for the Minister of Health to sit down in. Offers of free drugs are being ignored, she went on to say. Minister, please explain why we are ignoring offers of free drugs when

we do not have the drugs. Patients are being misinformed on treatment planning. These are her words; lack of specialist supervision. This would have never happened if this PNM Government had allowed the national oncology centre to be built. This is the main cause of cancer chaos in this country.

6.20 p.m.

And I admit, the national oncology centre was a Patrick Manning initiative. In 2016, it was carded to be completed. I went back in the PSIP and there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$200 million was budgeted for the National Oncology Centre. So, the question has to be asked, who shelved this project, and why was it shelved? Look at the situation cancer patients have right now. I am not taking what the Minister of Finance is saying, I am taking what was said at the Joint Select Committee by special stakeholders.

The national oncology centre was supposed to be the Caribbean's premiere cancer treatment facility: Specialists, technology, teaching, increasing expertise, increasing patient survival, but they did not want that. The Member for Siparia would introduce First World health care by consulting with oncologist specialists and making modern oncology drugs available to cancer patients.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And we will invest—we will invest in training cancer specialists in Trinidad and Tobago.

Then we go on to achievement number three: \$50 million for 4,000 cardiac procedures. Again, the Minister of Finance was boasting about what was not done within a state facility and by private institutions. The WHO has said that the number one cause of death in Trinidad and Tobago is, of course, heart disease and there are roughly 106 deaths per 100,000 persons in Trinidad and Tobago. And no

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matter what myself and the Member—my teacher, my mentor, the Member for Fyzabad has done here in this Parliament, they will not build the South-West Regional Health Authority cath lab at the San Fernando General Hospital. They will just not do that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And this cath lab would save lives. But it is not the UNC saying so—it is not only the UNC saying so. In 2020—

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Excuse, Member for Oropouche East, I am hearing you, man.

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Deputy Speaker: I am hearing you. No, but I am hearing you. So, please contain.

Dr. R. Seecheran: So, we have Dr. Anand Chattergoon, a very prominent southern lawyer in 2020—

Hon. Member: A southern doctor.

Dr. R. Seecheran:—a southern doctor, sorry, saying that:

It is:—“...‘a great idea’”—to build the cath lab.

“...there’s a lot heart diseases...in San Fernando.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And he went on to say:

It—“...would benefit...”—over—“...(600,000 citizens)...”

Dr. Ronald Henry, another prominent cardiologist, went on to say:

This would assist persons in—“...accessing advanced cardiac care services.”

And Dr. Pravinde Ramoutar went on to say as well:

It—“...would bring T&T close to first world status.”

But they do not want that, they want a carpark in the San Fernando General Hospital at \$137 million. That would have built roughly three cath labs. Right?

So, in 2021, I went back into the PSIP—sorry, in 2020, \$70 million was budgeted for the San Fernando General Hospital cath lab. In 2021, tenders and packages were opened. In 2022, in the *Social Sector Investment Programme*, the cath lab was listed at the San Fernando General Hospital.

Hon. Member: Where is it?

Dr. R. Seecheran: Exactly. And in 2023, Dr. Lackram Bodoie, the Member for Fyzabad, asked the Minister of Health a question on notice. And we were told that the cath lab would be built with a memorandum of understanding between the Austrian Government and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. That was in 2023, leader, right? That was just last year. To date, we have no cath lab. He gave us the assurance that 600,000 persons in southern Trinidad would have access to a cath lab. Right? There is none.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you go online, you can actually find the RFP with regard to the cath lab. It was advertised by UDeCOTT for a bi-plane catheterization lab on the third floor at the San Fernando General Hospital, 4800 square feet, all the specs, procedure room, control room, four doctors, conference room and a recovery area. So, I am asking the Minister, who shelved this project? Why was a Parkade built at the San Fernando General Hospital instead of the cath lab? Both projects were supposed to be done by UDeCOTT. Right? The Member of Siparia, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would introduce First World

health care by building a national cardiac centre.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And we will build it at the expanded Couva Medical Complex, a state-of-the-art facility—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—with all associated expert resources, angiograms, PCIs, bypass surgeries. We have so many local specialists doctors that want to return to Trinidad, but the positions are not there. They are not there. My brother is an interventional cardiologist and we know a number of interventional cardiologists that have graduated in the United States, but they have not returned to Trinidad and Tobago because there are not enough jobs. They want to come back to their home country.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, right now, we do bypass surgeries in batches. We bring down a team, they do a bunch and then they go back to where they are from, Italy, and then they come back in a few months. So, patients here have to wait an extended period of time, you know, when they are in a critical condition, if they are suffering from severe heart disease. And I make mention of the fact that this national cardiac centre, you will be able to access a bypass surgery almost immediately. And that is our intention, to bring First World care to Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: My leader also intends to build a cardiac catheterization lab at all major hospitals in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: What this means is that patients would have access to cardiac

stenting on a 24-hour basis throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: So, if you are suffering from a myocardial infarction—and that is a heart attack, Minister of Health.

Mr. Ram: A real doctor—a real doctor is telling you that.

Dr. R. Seecheran: If you are suffering from a mild cardiac infarction, within minutes of arriving at the hospital, you will be admitted into the cath lab and the specialist doctors there can stent you and prevent severe heart damage, as well as save your life in many cases. But to do this—this will, of course, prevent disability and save lives. But to do this, you will also have to expand the ambulance service, and what we will have to do, we will have to expand the ambulance service in the east, in the central areas, as well as south. And to facilitate this process, we will be building hubs in east Trinidad, central Trinidad and southern Trinidad and thus, cutting down the emergency response time we currently have here in Trinidad and Tobago. So we will be giving you value for money and trust the UNC to take health to the next level.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this will save many, many lives.

Achievement number four by the Minister of Finance in health is 3,000 retinal surgeries. But according to a newspaper report dated the 30 January, 2024, patients are having the indignity of lining up as early as 4.00 a.m., in order to access eye care at the St. James Medical Complex. So, this is the indignity elderly persons have to go through under this Government in order to access care at the Ophthalmology Outpatient Clinic. And you know, these persons, they are elderly persons, they have to stand in line for hours, they are subjected to the elements, as

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well as they are subjected to criminal activity, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They do not have access to the compound, the facility and they have no access to washrooms. And my leader will introduce First World health care in this regard, by focusing on the patient's experience. From registration to recovery, we will treat people with dignity, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: If the issue is the fact that there are too many patients for a clinic, we will put that clinic on extended hours and run two shifts—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—allowing more patients to be seen per day. We did it before and my leader will do it again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we also have major achievement number five by the Minister of Finance in health: 265,000 persons accessing CDAP at a cost of roughly \$190 million. And truth be told, patients are not getting value for money in CDAP, and the CDAP programme needs to be reformed.

6.30 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: CDAP was introduced in 2003, and you know, this programme involves prescription drugs being given free of charge to patients. And the mandate of the programme was to reduce the burden on public dispensaries and minimize patients' waiting time, and also to provide a support for those in need. But that is not happening—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: I read it. But there have been many, many complaints, Mr.

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Deputy Speaker, about CDAP. I am referring to the Joint Select Committee of the 30th of November, 2023, and the newspaper report by the *Trinidad Newsday* in which they said:

“Public healthcare system slammed at JSC...meeting”

The *Express*, Mr. Deputy Speaker, labelled it:

“Horrors in healthcare”

Horrors in healthcare. We had a meeting in Port of Spain, we had a meeting in San Fernando, we had a meeting in Chaguanas. In fact, we have the Member for Chaguanas East was on that Committee as well, I believe, yes. And one of the major complaints we had at that Joint Select Committee, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was complaints about CDAP and the fact that persons are given incorrect prescriptions, the fact that when they go to these dispensaries no drugs are available, and patients are being advised to pay privately. So CDAP is not serving its function. The citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are not getting value for their money. My leader, the Member for Siparia, will introduce First World country healthcare by updating that CDAP listing and adding superior pharmaceuticals to that list.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, after consultation with many prominent medical consultants, I have been told that some of the drugs that they wish to be added to the CDAP programme are: Firstly, a drug called Brilinta, and that is an anti-platelet drug. Vymada, that is a heart failure drug. Concor, another heart failure drug. Firalta, a chronic kidney disease drug. Jardiance, a type 2 diabetes drug, and Farxiga, another type 2 diabetes drug. And these are drugs that my leader will put on the CDAP programme for patients. And the reason being—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: —Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that patients become tolerant to certain drugs, and as they progress with their chronic disease, they need stronger medication that is not available on CDAP. And they have to go out of pocket for these very, very expensive drugs in order to control whatever condition that they may have. And we will increase service to rural communities. Rural communities are severely underserved and we will incentivize pharmacies in East, Central, South Trinidad and Tobago to join the CDAP programme.

But in addition to these programmes, we will also build the national laboratory centre at the expanded Couva medical complex.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And this national lab centre will be used to test drug efficacy as well as formulation. And it will help us identify counterfeit medication that may be on the market here in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as speed up the registration process that many persons are going through when they are trying to register new drugs through the Chemistry Food and Drug Division. As well as this lab will serve all clinical applications with regard to the public health care system, be it a dengue test, be it a COVID-19 test. Whatever we need, we will do it right here in Trinidad and Tobago. We do not have to send it out to any other lab in any foreign country.

So Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago we are having a serious issue accessing certain drugs, and I have spoken to many pharmacists and what they are saying is that there is an issue with the pharmacy legislation. During a period in 2023, the TTPS were performing a number of raids on pharmacies in an operation called “Windsor” in conjunction with Chemistry Food and Drug Inspectors, and in many of these cases, breaches were found from the Food and

Drug Act. But pharmacy owners have indicated to myself that they are feeling victimized by many of these instances. That is their personal feeling. They are saying that the drug Acts that currently control our drug legislation here in Trinidad and Tobago are archaic, that being the Pharmacy Act and the Food and Drug Act. For example, these Acts were written in 1962 and are not really applicable to modern-day society. We have a stakeholder of the Private Pharmacy Business Chamber, President Suchit, and what he is saying that many pharmacies were targeted for over-the-counter drugs. You know, for the simple reason that the packaging was not registered.

And Mr. Deputy Speaker, what happened during COVID-19 is that many of these international companies, they reduced the sizes of many of the medications that they were selling. So before where you may get Dayquil at a certain size. Because of COVID-19, they reduced the sizes for more persons to access this medication in the foreign countries. So we cannot import that that smaller size of Dayquil. I am just using an example, because that size is not registered with the Chemistry Food and Drug Division of the Ministry of Health. And it is the exact same medication, and in many cases, these are what the pharmacists were being targeted for.

So what they went on to tell me it is a lengthy process of validation. It takes years to register a product. There is a lack of manpower at the Division at the Ministry of Health. That Division, the Chemistry Food and Drug Division, they lack laboratory equipment, and it is a dysfunctional unit within the Ministry of Health. A national laboratory centre would facilitate testing as well as the registration of many of these drugs that the pharmacies are trying to get on board here in Trinidad and Tobago.

But I would like to bring up a very significant issue that many of these pharmacies are facing, and that is the creeping monopoly within the pharmaceutical industry. And what they are telling me is that there is a process whereby competition is being frustrated within this industry. They are trying to push out the small and medium operators and what the pharmacies must do is they must buy from the mega-pharmaceutical giants, the 1 per cent owners. You know who I am speaking about. And this is leading to significant, significant price increases.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And many of the pharmacy owners are subjected to price gouging as well as predatory marketing.

So a little birdie, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a little birdie dropped a very disturbing document for me in my mailbox. I did not even know I had a mailbox.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And what we have here is a possible abuse of authority by a public official, possible misbehaviour in public office.

Mr. Indarsingh: “Who is dat?”

Dr. R. Seecheran: So what I am asking the Minister of Health: Does the Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, you care to quote your source please. Quote your source, your documentation.

Dr. R. Seecheran: It is an Inspector from the Ministry of Health, from within the bowels of the grand \$480 million building at the Ministry of Health.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You know—okay. Members, we know the procedure with regard to quoting from documentation. We must give the date and the necessary

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source. So proceed.

Dr. R. Seecheran: So I am asking the question. I am asking the question. Does the Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I did not get the date. Quote your source.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Listen, listen. Members, please. I need no assistance. Member, again, quote your source. You said you are quoting from a particular document.

Dr. R. Seecheran: I got an email from an anonymous person. The date would be roughly one week ago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: One week ago.

Hon. Member: The 1st of October.

Dr. R. Seecheran: The 1st of October, 2024. Okay. So does the Minister of Health request information on stock inventory taken from private pharmacies by Chemistry Food and Drug inspectors? Has the Minister of Health ever instructed staff from Chemistry Food and Drug to perform inspections without written documentation of the request?

Hon. Member: What?

Dr. R. Seecheran: And has the Minister of Health instructed Chemistry Food and Drug Inspectors to report directly to him only, and to disregard the Director of the Chemistry Food and Drug Division?

Mr. Deyalsingh: Standing Order, 48(6).

Dr. R. Seecheran: I would like the Minister—

Mr. Imbert: Imputing improper motives.

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Mr. Deyalsingh: Standing Order, 48(6).

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

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

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: He is entitled to ask questions.

Alright, so again—

6.40 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister of Finance and the Opposition Leader, are you all finished?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Alright. So again, Member—yes, Chief Whip, you were saying 46(1)?

Mr. Deyalsingh: 48(6). I never asked any food and drug inspector to report to me directly.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Nice. Again, Member you said you are quoting from your document? You own the particular—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. So again, you own the particular statement you are making. Proceed.

Dr. R. Seecheran: So—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Dr. R. Seecheran: The Member will have an opportunity to reply when he—

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And on behalf of pharmacy owners, we are looking forward to the reply.

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: So, what this inspector was saying to me is that he is afraid to be complicit in a possible illegal act and this has never ever been done before by any Minister prior to this Minister. This inspector is saying that certain pharmacies are being targeted. And that this Minister possibly is trying to influence their duties and they are refusing to do so. So, Minister, you will clarify that for us, please.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6).

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: You would have a chance to speak, Sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Again, Member—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Alright. So again, I heard you Member for St. Joseph. The Member stands by his statement. You will have the opportunity as we go along. So again, proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed please, I rule.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wanted to speak about dengue but I may not have enough time. I may have to do that at another Opportunity. but I

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wanted to speak quickly—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You just have—well, your time has expired, but you have an additional 10 minutes. Do you wish to avail yourself?

Dr. R. Seecheran: Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right. Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Go with the dengue? So, Deputy Speaker, this Minister of Health, and the Ministry of Health have been sleeping on the job with regard to dengue in 2024.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: We have had 18 deaths of dengue thus far in 2024 and most of these deaths are preventable. And it is because of this Ministry of Health and this Minister of Health that so many persons died that did not have to die. Every time we bring up the issue of dengue, the Minister of Health wants to target us and say that we are being unpatriotic. Hotspots are being abandoned by the State. Doctors lack testing resources. The turnover time with regard to testing is too long, so doctors cannot get information on how to proceed with patient management, and then the disease process has gone too far and persons succumb to their illness. There is a whole-of-Government failure with regard to dengue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: I speak about the Carapichaima West Secondary School, and we have reports that the mosquito infestation was overwhelming. Imagine this at a public school while students were writing their exams public Health Department said they found larva, *Aedes Aegypti* larva at the school, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is what people have to put up with under this Ministry of Health and this

Minister of Health. But I just wanted to say here in Trinidad and Tobago, the Minister of Health chose to wave a big stick at people with the fixed penalty notices. What they are doing in Bangladesh is that they have a public health campaign called the 4S campaign; search and destroy, secure self-protection, seek early consultation, and say yes to fogging. So why we cannot do that in Trinidad and Tobago? Why we cannot teach our citizens what to do rather than wave a big stick at them? Down to Bangladesh is more advanced to us with regard to dengue—

Mr. Hosein: Prevention.

Dr. R. Seecheran:—prevention. The Member for Siparia will introduce first-world healthcare by building a national laboratory centre—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—which will reduce the testing time with regard to very advanced dengue testing. We can do viral RNA testing in less than 24 hours and get a definitive diagnosis on patients and know how to manage them during the dengue season. We will strengthen insect vector control. We will partner with PAHO so that they have to maintain the standards of the Insect Vector Control Division. The dengue mismanagement of 2024 must never ever occur again in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wanted to speak quickly about the Minister of Finance's statement that prevention and early intervention with regard to NCD preventable mortality of persons under 70 by 25 per cent by 2025. But this is a management issue. This is not a preventative issue. I have to tell the Minister that. A preventative issue would be to legislate front-of-packaging warning labels in order to reduce childhood obesity and prevent NCDs further down the line. This was

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done for tobacco packaging and we are taking too long here in Trinidad and Tobago in order to introduce these initiatives. We also need to limit the importation of foods with high trans-fat. We need to make every school a health-promoting school and we need to legislate—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—front-of-package warning systems in order for persons to learn about high sugar content, high sodium content, and high fat content so they can make the decisions for themselves whether they want to consume those foods for themselves and their family as my leader said. So Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am running out of time. I have so much more here but I would quickly like to say where we will get the money from. And we will get the money by eliminating course overruns.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: The Member for Oropouche West made mention of over \$500 million in course overruns but I have it in the last four years as over \$1 billion.

Hon. Members: Wow.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Over TT \$1 billion. The Arima Hospital at \$1.6 billion is \$450 million over budget.

Hon. Member: What?

Dr. R. Seecheran: The Point Fortin Hospital at \$1.3 billion is \$200 million over budget.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members, please. Alright, I am not going to

tolerate the cross-the-Chamber outbursts as the case may be. Alright, proceed.

Dr. R. Seecheran: Sangre Grande Hospital at \$1.1 billion is \$250 million over budget.

Hon. Member: What?

Dr. R. Seecheran: The Central Block at the Port of Spain General Hospital is not finished yet but currently it is \$1.267 billion and it is at least \$167 million over budget.

Hon. Member: What?

Dr. R. Seecheran: We have the Parkade; they built a carpark to park cars at the San Fernando General Hospital—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: —for the patients to park to not get stented at a cath. lab for \$132 million.

Dr. R. Seecheran: And they have the Ministry of Health Administrative Building. It was built for \$280 million but we, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, will pay over \$200 million in interest on that building. So—

Mr. Indarsingh: The building was leaking.

Dr. R. Seecheran: The building was leaking. We have the South-West Regional Health Authority Deputy Chairman speaking about the San Fernando General Hospital Parkade saying that this is a step in the right direction. A step in the right direction for PNM financiers.

Hon. Member: Oh yeah.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: And you have to pay to park there. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I

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have very little time. I wanted to touch on a few things in my constituency. I also shadow the Ministry of Planning and Development but I do not have time to touch on that.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: I would like to speak very quickly on the fact that this Government is instituting a whole-of-taxpayer approach with regard to the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. They are rolling out property tax. First-world level tax regime but third-world infrastructure.

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: We have in Caroni probably one of the worst roads in Trinidad and Tobago; Welcome Road, and it is affecting the quality—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: Welcome Road, it is not welcoming at all—

Hon. Member: It is under the Government.

Dr. R. Seecheran:—and it is affecting the quality of life of constituents. It is reducing the real estate value of the houses in these areas and it is destroying the suspension of vehicles. Taxi drivers are charging excessively in order for persons to get into this area and it is creating traffic congestion. It is a general hardship on the whole. I am asking for the Administration on that side to pay some—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You have two minutes Member.

Dr. R. Seecheran:—thank you—heed to Welcome Road. We really need that fixed. Also, we have the fact that there is a very poor enforcement of law. We have a WASA contractor that dug up the road in front of persons' houses, and their garages, and they could not access their houses because of this WASA contractor

digging up the road in front of their house.

6.50 p.m.

We have a contractor that is possibly using very heavy machinery in order—and it is destroying the road in that area, and we have excessive flooding in this area as well.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wanted to just quickly say to the Minister of Education, we would like the Longdenville Presbyterian School to be built, because like the Member for Caroni Central, the students of that school have been in a community centre for the last nine years, right. The Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara is speaking about caring and empathy—have some empathy for the students of the Longdenville Presbyterian School.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: In my closing minutes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, every budget year I speak about—I am asking the Minister, even though I may have hit him a little hard during this contribution—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—to please amend and update the Dental Profession Act. I ask it every year. You know, we are asking that on behalf of the Dental Association of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Seecheran: I am a dentist. I am a dentist. Hundreds of unregistered dentists practice in Trinidad and Tobago and they practice on unsuspecting citizens. There is the risk of blood borne disease. There is the risk of negligent procedures. These unregistered dentists cannot clean their instruments because

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they do not have the equipment to do so. So we are asking, you know, Minister, please amend the legislation in consultation with us.

My leader, you know, I would like to stand with her and say that Trinidad and Tobago, we had one of the worst responses to COVID-19 in the world and we will do a clinical audit, as well as a financial audit—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Seecheran:—of what happened during those COVID-19 years. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you very much and I appreciate it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Point Fortin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Kennedy Richards (*Point Fortin*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. First, allow me to thank the almighty Father, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for waking me up this morning. I also recognize the greatness of my political leader and Prime Minister, Dr. the hon. Keith Rowley.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Mr. Deputy Speaker, while the Opposition wants to paint him as lackluster and slack, we see vision, we see an astute leader, we see a caring leader. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we see the current and next Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance has done it time and time again, and he has managed to become the best Minister of Finance this country has ever experienced—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. K. Richards:—albeit being an engineer, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Member: The best ever.

Ms. Ameen: The best ever.

Mr. K. Richards: The best ever. This budget as well as the previous ones has shown vision—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. K. Richards:—and provides the country with the ability to be steadfast—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, Members please, Point Fortin, go ahead, yeah.

Mr. K. Richards:—and resolute while forging our pathway to prosperity and as a Member of this Government, the onus is on me to dissect the details and ensure that the country understands how these measures affect us. Some may want to forget, and I heard the hon. Member from Caroni East just mention it. The first two years of this Government was kept maintaining the lives of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and before I dive totally into my contribution, allow me a few minutes to rebut some of the statements made by the previous speaker. One of the statements by Dr. Asante Le Blanc, I have here a circular from the Office of the Chief Medical Officer, dated 16th April, 2024—

Mr. Deyalsingh: Caroni East.

Mr. K. Richards:—to Dr. George Laquis, Chairman Emeritus, Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society, 69 Dundonald Street, Port of Spain:

Dear Dr. Laquis,

I hereby seek to bring to your attention statements offered by Dr. Asante Le Blanc in a public space—and these statements are as quoted—Le Blanc was strong in criticizing the lack of cohesion in the Ministry of Health NCDs

committee and said Trinidad had to be serious about NCDs public awareness and lifestyle change. She said, NGOs were still fighting independently to fulfill their missions and called on the point lead of the NCD committee to meet more frequently. She also said, meetings should not be called today for tomorrow and many people in NGOs were volunteers and busy. Le Blanc said she has missed some meetings, and she found the approach to be all talk and no action, as well as, she was tired of begging—went on to say—we take umbrage to the above mentioned statement made by Dr. Le Blanc, who is not a sitting member of the Ministry of Health’s National Non-Communicable Disease Steering Committee.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. K. Richards:

Our records show that Dr. Le Blanc is not a nominee chosen to represent Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Member: What?

Mr. K. Richards:

—Cancer Society on this committee. As such, she has neither been in attendance at any meetings—

Hon. Member: What?

Mr. K. Richards:

—nor privy to any of the matters discussed at these meetings. It should be noted that a member of our organization, Dr. Marlene Sookdeo, First Vice-Chairman and Medical Director of the Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society, was appointed and currently sits on the national Non-Communicable Disease Steering Committee.

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As a member of the committee, Dr. Sookdeo has been actively participating and attending meetings and has signed and returned the Ministry of Health's confidentiality conflict of interest agreement.

Hon. Member: "Hmmm."

Mr. K. Richards:

She has indicated that she has held true to this agreement, and has also distanced herself from the claims made by Dr. Le Blanc as per email communication attached. We are happy for Dr. Sookdeo to continue on this committee and as the only representative of Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society at this time. Additionally, by letter dated March 21, 2024—which we will see attached shortly—we hereby acknowledge Dr. Asante Le Blanc resignation from the Ministry of Health's Drug Advisory Committee.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Hon. Member: Wow.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Untruths.

Mr. Manning: Wow.

Mr. K. Richards: The confirmation of adherence to the confidentiality mandate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I read:

Dear Dr. Clapperton—on Tuesday, 26 March, 2024.

Further to our recent phone discussion, I would like to summarize the Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society's participation and involvement in the NCD Alliance. In 2017, Dr. George Laquis, the then Chairman of the TTCS Board had appointed me regarding involvement with the Alliance. I agreed to act as backup if needed and for Dr. Asante Le Blanc to represent the Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society. In April 2023, I volunteered to

represent the Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society on the NCD steering committee, and I attached the initial meeting in person and also subsequent meetings virtually.

Dr. Le Blanc never shared with me or the Board, any information about her meeting with the Alliance and I had erroneously believed that the Alliance and the steering committee to be two separately existing entities with different goals. Since becoming the Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society representative for the steering committee, I have not shared any details with respect to meetings or topics of discussion with Dr. Le Blanc or the Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society Board of Directors or its staff, either before or after signing the confidentiality documents. I do understand the current concerns, and confirm that I have always maintained confidentiality with regard to this committee and to all my previous interactions with the Ministry of Health, when I had held the position of Chief Medical Officer for the Community Hospital.

Signed:

Sincerely,

Marlene Sookdeo.

And the confidentiality agreement.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Yeah, do not go into that.

Mr. K. Richards: We did not go into all of that.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. K. Richards: We did not go into all of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, right—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

7.00 p.m.

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Mr. K. Richards: But what we see here, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. All right. Okay. Again, Members, please, please. Okay?

Mr. K. Richards: But what we see—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Point Fortin, Member.

Mr. K. Richards: But what we see here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that one Dr. Asante VanWest-Charles-Le Blanc came out and gave untruths to the people of this country. All right?

Mrs. Morris-Julien: She must be a UNC.

Hon. Member: She was fired.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. K. Richards: Added to that—

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

Mr. Deyalsingh: She was fired from the—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, again, Member for St. Joseph.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members, please. Members, please. Member for St. Joseph, please, you will have the opportunity, again, when you speak to put additional information on the debate floor but for now, I will try and avoid the crosstalk over the Chamber, please. All right. So right now, I only recognize the Member for Point Fortin. Please proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we understand why the UNC relies on that type of information, to put misinformation into the public.

With respect to the cath lab, VAMED engineering, appointed subcontractor for the Government of Austria, has been, over the last six months, going through a restructure exercise, which is in the media, and as such, they have taken a different position with regard to the international projects. A decision has been made that they are not going to pursue any international projects, other than those that they are currently involved with in Trinidad, namely the Sangre Grande Hospital. But the cath lab, which forms part of the MOU with the Government of Australia, will likely be reassigned to another Austrian company inside or in due course. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you see where the Opposition is trying to label this Government as slack and uncaring, but you can definitely see from the response that we know what we are doing here on this side.

The Member also raised the situation of dengue. Being somebody who served in local government, dengue and its first responders are generally the regional corporations, the local government bodies and that is generally a public health matter. He also spoke about a carpark to park cars. I mean, carpark do not park airplanes. Carparks do not park boats. So, if they are building a carpark, it is generally for cars.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Richards: So, allow me to dive into my contribution now, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I dive into public utilities. Upon being elected Member of Parliament in August 2020, we faced an uphill and herculean task—

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, please, Oropouche East.

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Madam Speaker: So—all right, seeing that you are saying, it is not you, I am sure it is not going to happen again. All right?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Point Fortin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Morris-Julien: Do not let them bully you, Kennedy.

Mr. K. Richards: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

In 2020, we faced an uphill and herculean task with regard to the public utilities and the water situation in Point Fortin, where leaking pipes, no water was the order of the day. But I want to read this into existence here, Madam Speaker, where the heading says:

“Point gets improved water supply”

—and this came from the *Express*, September 04, 2013. I am not going to read the entire article. But I am going to read parts of the article. This part says:

“The desalination plant will service an estimated 29,000 persons living in communities between Point Fortin and La Brea, including Mahaica, Clifton Hill, Newlands, Fanny Village, Egypt Village, Reservoir Hill, Harriman Park, Salazar Trace, Cap-de-Ville, Gonzales, Parry lands, Lot 10, Cochrane, Vance River, Vessigny, Sobo and La Brea.”

It went to say how the plant was constructed, but it was to:

“...injection...4.6 million gallons into WASA’s”—daily—“transmission system”—which—“means that water from Caroni, Chatham and Techier treatment plants, which previously supplied to communities before the operation of the Seven Seas Plant, will now be directed to the communities of Erin, Bennett Village and environs, Quarry, Palo Seco, Techier, Santa

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Flora, Siparia and Fyzabad, thereby improving their water supply,' Singh said.”

Madam Speaker, while this report is filled with plenty untruths, it has some truth to it. But the truth in this matter, it is not that the UNC, in 2014, placed more water into the system in Point, it is that they took the water away from Point Fortin, leaving the same places, Madam Speaker, Fanny Village, Techier, New Village, Southern Gardens, Egypt, all those areas went from a daily supply of water to three in seven.

Hon. Members: Wow.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: That is what they did, Madam Speaker.

I specifically recalled showing videos to the Minister of Public Utilities, highlighting the carnage of vehicles being destroyed by the potholes. The average man was feeling the pinch, no end in sight. I recalled having a community meeting and not a single person wanted to talk about bad roads. Everybody wanted water. Madam Speaker, in the words of Iwer George, “The people want water.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Richards: And in 2023, under The Community Water Improvement Programme, we rolled out a plan to the community, with them not wanting to believe, and they did not want to believe, Madam Speaker, because of this. They highlighted this, Madam Speaker, with this programme here when they came to Point Fortin. The UNC came to Point Fortin and said, “We are going to get desalination water,” and what they actually did was took away the water. So we had to go into the community and make the people believe. I remembered that being on my birthday, February the 19th, and I remembered one lady by the name

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of Ms. Cozier, she stood up in the crowd, in front of the Minister and his staff—me and my staff and other members of the community, and said for 30 years in the village of Icacos, Madam Speaker, she did not have a reliable supply of water. Every day or every other day, she had to pay \$400—

Hon. Members: Wow.

Mr. K. Richards:—for a tank of water, and that is how bad the situation was. And the UNC is parading and saying that they had 70-something per cent of water while they were in power. Untrue. Very much untrue, Madam Speaker.

From then to now, we monitored the access of water in the various communities, Madam Speaker. And I recalled there being a WhatsApp group, and the WhatsApp group was lit, and everybody, on mornings and evenings, “Did you get water?” And everybody was, “No.” The WhatsApp group was active. But I could report to the Parliament today, Madam Speaker, that WhatsApp group is very dormant, other than people saying, good morning and good afternoon, and those who want to sell stuff there.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, we went in there with a plan and we produced in four years’ time—taking two years into account for COVID, so really in two years’ time—what was elusive by many people for 40 years in the south-western peninsula, Madam Speaker. We had a follow-up meeting last Thursday in the village of Icacos at the same venue where we had the first meeting, and one of the WASA operational officers said, in five weeks’ time people at Lalla Trace, people at Bilnah Trace—which is the far end, pass the Catholic church down in Icacos, next to Venezuela—in five weeks’ time, they would not have any issues with water. Water—there is daily supply, Madam Speaker.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: That is a PNM Government working for you. Madam Speaker, it may sound easy but it was a journey that started with the restoration of the La Fortune Water Treatment Plant in 2021, which was a total in-house project, where I saw the workers at WASA, the dedication, the vision and the utilized hard work to restore that plant.

We move to the Techier treatment plant, which was also restored. And if you remembered in the article, they said that they took the water from Techier treatment plant to send it out of Point. Madam Speaker, that water treatment plant was down. The Granville plant was also restored, Madam Speaker. The Bonasse booster station is a booster station that we do not need now. Because of the three wells that was drilled in Granville, there is no need to have a booster to it because a lot of water is now flowing on the system, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

7.10 p.m.

Mr. K. Richards: The culmination of all that, Madam Speaker, will be the Chatham Water Treatment Plant, which is due to start soon and would provide almost 3 million gallons of water daily for the people of the southwestern peninsula. Various sources of water were provided by new wells in Chatham and Granville, and the necessary piping infrastructure was done. What is very good about that necessary piping infrastructure, Madam Speaker, is that the Ministry of Public Utilities and the Minister of Public Utilities ensure that, because of the land situation that we have and the likelihood for a landslip to occur if there is a water leak in the line, in the village of Coromandel, from Granville to Coromandel, we are running some of the pipes above ground. So it is not going to damage the road

network in that area, Madam Speaker. So that is the vision that we have.

A refurbished well along the Southern Main Road is responsible for the uptick in water in many areas, which have gone from two to three-day supply, Madam Speaker, to a daily supply of water. Madam Speaker, water is life and the hon. Minister of Public Utilities has proven to be one of the best Ministers of Public Utilities ever.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Very action-oriented and purposeful. A man of his word. I recall, Madam Speaker, October 2023, where we would have gone into the constituency of Couva South. I was invited to a ceremony there and we also saw the upgrade of a water treatment plant in that area.

My good friend is smiling, Madam Speaker. It goes to show, Madam Speaker, that the PNM is not doing things in the PNM areas alone. The PNM is a government for all.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Just two weeks ago, Madam Speaker, we had a ceremony to distribute some much-needed assistance in the area of Point Fortin from the Ministry of Public Utilities. Some people were able to get some grants that they applied for, as well as some water tanks, Madam Speaker. But, most notably, on that same day we were able to light two recreation grounds, the Kennedy Richards Snr. Recreation Ground and the Guapo Recreation Ground.

Madam Speaker, and I could report today that at those lighting events there were more people present than a national football game. You see, Madam Speaker, we think, we consult and we execute in the PNM. Madam Speaker, I want to submit today to the Parliament that we have a caring leader and also a

caring government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: I turn to education, Madam Speaker. In the field of education, this country has been blessed and highly favoured to have, not one but two brilliant Ministers leading the charge.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Our wish list in Point Fortin for the Ministry of Education has been large but, thus far, were able to secure four primary schools and the refurbishment of many others, and some minor repairs to some of the schools.

I want to take the opportunity to give a little history on some of these schools. I want to start off by Fanny Village Government Primary School, and if you read the booklet, that costed the Government \$37.5 million to build. Fanny Village is a vibrant and active community just outside of Point Fortin's centre and people of that school lost the school on an Easter Sunday to fire in April 2014, and they spent a considerable amount of years housing the school in the community centre. The community never gave up and they kept lobbying for the school, Madam Speaker, but, most importantly, the PNM never gave up on the people of Point Fortin, and today we can sit and learn in a brand new building.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Chatham Government Primary School: Madam Speaker, in February 2014, the Chatham Government Primary School was vacated for safety reasons. The building was 103 years old and had served the community well, but at that time there was a need for a new school. Again, I journeyed with the people of Chatham and they waited for the new school.

On Monday 16 August, 2021, the new Chatham Government Primary

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School was officially opened by the hon. Prime Minister of this country. Again, the people expressed their faith in the present PNM Government and again we did not fail the people, Madam Speaker. We delivered the Chatham Government Primary School.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, the Southern Central Anglican Primary School, that is in Coromandel, it is a small remote village, Madam Speaker, but for us in the PNM, the size of the community does not matter, the population does not matter, the location does not matter. The only thing that matters to us is that it is a part of this country and people live there.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, this is how this Government works. This is how the PNM's education policy works. This is yet another example of how steadfast and resolute we are in the pursuit of social equity through education.

Madam Speaker, last but not least but the smallest of the bunch, the Cedros Anglican Primary School. The Cedros Anglican Primary School is yet another example of a caring PNM Government, driven by its unshakeable belief in education as one of the cornerstones for development. The old St. Peter's Anglican Primary School at the Southern Main Road, St. Mary's Village, Cedros, was an important community landmark but it has served its purpose well and are top to be torn down to make way for a school. Once again, we did not fail the people of Point Fortin, we delivered a brand new Cedros Anglican Primary School.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, and I had to do that because sometimes people take for granted what this PNM Government has accomplished over the last

four years, with the first two years of that being COVID.

Over the past four years we have had a programme in Point Fortin, Madam Speaker, and the programme is called, Adopt a Child. It is to adopt a child. It is an initiative that basically was a brainchild—

Hon. Member: Excellent work.

Mr. K. Richards:—of me and my team, Madam Speaker, or my team and I, and what we do is that we take the 20 primary and secondary schools, send a letter to the principal; the principal now has the opportunity to nominate 10 children from each one of these schools. That takes us to a total of 200. Notice I did not nominate anybody. So the idea behind that, Madam Speaker, is the principal will know those who are coming to school, who need the books, and who will utilize the books that we provide.

What we provide for these young people, Madam Speaker, is a book bag, all the textbooks, all the notebooks, all their stationery and everything surrounding school, outside of the school uniform. We managed to have that four years running, and this year we managed to do 250 students, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, but this is not done without consultation with the Ministers of Education, because we believe that education is important and it is necessary so that our programmes to align with the programmes that the Minister of Education have with respect to—executed in the schools, Madam Speaker.

The Father of the Nation said, the future is in the book bags, and together with the book grant, Madam Speaker, we are ensuring that the future of this nation is bright. The e-book platform, Madam Speaker, is a very good initiative and that would now drop the cost of books that change every year. When I grew up,

Madam Speaker, I grew up in a big home, so we had the pass-down system. So your job was to take care of the books so that you could pass it down to the next child. But over the years and how things develop, the publishers change the edition. Sometimes a couple of pages change. Might be one page changed and the edition changes, so leading to a new cost for the parents, and this Government has seen that, Madam Speaker, and we are taking action. With this e-book platform, Madam Speaker, it is going to provide cheaper access to books for people in this country. That is a top initiative.

Madam Speaker, we also have taken note of the Point Fortin East and West, the Cedros Secondary and Guapo Government Primary Schools and their need to be refurbished. As the representative, I will continue to push, and as the funds become available, we will execute. A caring leader, Madam Speaker, and a compassionate government. Madam Speaker, the Opposition claims that the Minister of Education is fostering failure, an egregious statement, Madam Speaker. The latest CXC or CSEC results in Point Fortin, both East and West, would show that we have improved and that we reject what the Opposition and their notions about the people of Point Fortin is, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I turn to health: \$1.5billion spent on the Point Fortin 100-bed hospital, I consider that money well spent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, today I want to thank God for the hon. Prime Minister and his persistence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: You see, Madam Speaker, in 2014 he journeyed all the way to Point Fortin and I remember in the sit-down session in the Point Fortin East, they

grilled him, and he said to them, “Put me to work for you and I will deliver two things. I will deliver to you the Point Fortin Hospital and a general hospital”. Because the Opposition, it was not a general hospital that they were building. “I will deliver to you a Point Fortin general hospital and I will deliver to you a highway from Point Fortin”, and he did that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, you see, the primary purpose of a hospital is to treat with sickness, people who are sick, and I remember during COVID, COVID happened rapidly—rapidly, and it was evolving, Madam Speaker, and we had just opened the hospital. The Minister of Health came down, the Prime Minister came down, and we cut the ribbon and it was a feel-good moment for the people of Point Fortin. Probably about 15 or 20 days later we had to put it on the COVID grid, and people were angry, but that was a tough decision, Madam Speaker.

7.20 p.m.

In hindsight, it was the best decision. It was the right decision because the same people who were angry, their family and even they, Madam Speaker, had the opportunity, and their lives were saved because of that tough decision made by the People’s National Movement’s leader, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Member: It is a white elephant.

Mr. K. Richards: That brings me to the point, I take umbrage to the statement from the Member for Caroni East, a very nice “fella”, Madam Speaker.

Mrs. Morris-Julian: I think so too.

Mr. K. Richards: Very nice “fella”, but he cannot come and call Point Fortin Hospital a white elephant, Madam Speaker. That is unbelievable, that statement—

to say something like that; built in a PNM constituency. Leave it up to him, Madam Speaker, he might “ah take the entire hospital pick it up” and put it somewhere else, but we are not allowing that, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I go back to some of the tough decisions that were made in hindsight. I remember when people of Point Fortin clamoured, “they want somewhere to go”. I remember a young lady made a baby in a car and that was a big talking point on the radio, Madam Speaker. You know that very same night when the hospital went on the grid, we started to make plans. I remember the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, I called him up, I said we need a spot, Madam Speaker; he got to work, the Minister of Health got to work and the Prime Minister got to work. The Prime Minister said make it happen, and in three weeks’ time, Madam Speaker, we had a temporary hospital for the people of Point Fortin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Three weeks’ time. You see, when it comes to health and well-being, and making tough decisions, Madam Speaker, the PNM is well known for making the right decision, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, we have a caring Government. The Point Fortin Hospital continues to roll out services, Madam Speaker, the latest being the cataract surgery. We also have dialysis; it is right in my notes here, the Member for Caroni East said that we do not have dialysis taking place at the hospital. That is untrue, Madam Speaker, dialysis takes place both in private and in the public hospitals, Madam Speaker, and we are rolling out these services in Point Fortin and we continue to roll out these services in Point Fortin.

Madam Speaker, as a father, I take my children to the Point Fortin Hospital if something happens. I remember a couple weeks ago, I carried my son to ride his

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bike and while he was riding, Madam Speaker, he was showing-off, he could ride the bike. “Daddy ah could ride meh bike”; handle flipped, fell down, teeth broke, blood everywhere, Madam Speaker. I took him to Point Fortin, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Deyalsingh: White elephant.

Mr. K. Richards: I took him to where the Member for Caroni East saying is a white elephant, Madam Speaker, and he got very good service, Madam Speaker, and not because I am the MP, everybody there got good service. I went, I sat, I waited my turn, just like everybody else and we got the service that we desired, and we got the service that was given to us by a People’s National Movement Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: So we are not here to pull wool over anybody’s eye or anything like that. I understand that as an Opposition you have to say something, but make sure what we say is the truth, right.

The maternal and mortality rate at the hospital, Madam Speaker. Recently, the Minister of Health came down to Point Fortin and the entire prenatal ward was lauded for their efforts, Madam Speaker. Today, I want to congratulate every, single person who works in the Point Fortin Hospital for their dedication and for all the hospitals, all of the southwest, from the chairman, Madam Speaker, all the way down to the cleaner, right.

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. K. Richards: Correct. From the Chairman all the way down to the cleaner, Madam Speaker. We take pride in the Point Fortin Hospital, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, I turn my energy now—

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Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*] congratulate the Minister of Health.

Mr. K. Richards: Yeah, of course, of course, I congratulate the Minister. He is the man driving this, Madam Speaker; very good Minister. A very good Minister of Health, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: The best Minister of Health, man.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Young SC: Longest serving.

Mr. K. Richards: Right. The longest serving Minister of Health in this country, Madam Speaker, and the best Minister of Health.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Richards: The best in the world, the best in the world. Right.

Madam Speaker, I turn my attention now to energy, right. Point Fortin is regarded as the town that Shell built, an oil town, Madam Speaker. In the mid-90s, after the Point Fortin Refinery—many people did not know that Point Fortin had a refinery, and that refinery was closed and a thinking PNM Government, Madam Speaker, provided impetus and economic growth with Atlantic LNG.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: The Point Fortin economy exploded rapidly, Madam Speaker, and we reaped the benefits of being a gas-based economy. Pushing into 2024, Atlantic has now been restructured. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries ensured that Trinidad and Tobago received its fair share and more important than that, Atlantic remains in business leaving room for further development in the Point Fortin constituency and the entire south-western peninsula, Madam Speaker, and it provides short-term and long-term employment

in the constituency of Point Fortin.

Madam Speaker, a caring and astute leader, and a compassionate Government, leading the charge in securing Trinidad and Tobago for decades to come. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries should be lauded as a national hero, Madam Speaker. We are hearing how he flew to Prague, he flew to here, he flew to there, he flew to everywhere, but everywhere he went, he brought back fruit. He brought fruit for this country, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister, the Opposition Leader said he flew for 391 days in a nine-year period. That is a limited thing, Madam Speaker. Those 391 days, Madam Speaker, were 391 days that we could say that he utilized to ensure that this country has a future, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: This country has a future in energy. Madam Speaker, I stand resolute in support of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and what he is doing and I heap praise on him and the Prime Minister—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards:—for ensuring that not just my future, but my children's future and their children's future are secured here in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I turn my attention to the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, mandated by the Prime Minister to seek out all young people and guide them to success. This Ministry is led by the energetic and dynamic Minister of Youth Development and National Service, the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo. While the Minister will be expansive on all the national success, I will take the opportunity to report on the Point Fortin sector of the

Ministry of Youth Development and National Service.

In 2020, in my first contribution in Parliament, Madam Speaker, I spoke about how we were to utilize fiscal appointments to develop places like the youth camp in Point Fortin, the NESC programmes, the YTEPP. All of these programmes were closed down between the years 2010 to 2015, under the People's Partnership Government, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, we moved on those initial requests by our constituents because I do not walk around asking for something just like that; we consult and then we execute, Madam Speaker. The constituents asked for this and I could report today, Madam Speaker, that the Chatham Youth Camp and the NESC will be ready in short order for intake, Madam Speaker.

The Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme is a life-changing initiative, Madam Speaker, and the first cohort would be placed in Chatham. The Government is presently developing not 10 acres, is developing 400 acres of land to give youth between the ages of 17 to 35 an opportunity to change their lives, and an opportunity to be productive, and an opportunity to inspire other young people, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Scotland SC: Criminality.

Mr. K. Richards: And an opportunity to stay away from criminality, Madam Speaker. Only in the PNM that happens, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: A vast measure of programmes are available to young people. I often joke with the Minister of Youth Development and National Service and I say to him, the only thing left for you to do is to give people a pilot's licence. Madam Speaker, in the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service: you

could learn to sing, you could learn plumbing, carpentry, you could learn to drive a backhoe, you could learn to drive a skid-steer, they have HOIST that deals with the operation of cranes, Madam Speaker. you could fix all those equipment, Madam Speaker. So there are opportunities here for every young person between the ages of 17 and 35 in that Ministry, Madam Speaker.

I thank the Prime Minister for his vision, I thank the Prime Minister for his compassion, I thank the Prime Minister for understanding what it is that the young people in this country need. The hon. Prime Minister, Madam Speaker, is responsible for thousands of young people achieving their goals and making dreams possible and that, Madam Speaker, is being done through the hon. Minister of Youth Development and National Service, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

7.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I turn to agriculture. Point Fortin is not a frontline agricultural community. However, in the next 5 years of PNM Government, Madam Speaker, we are going to turn that all the way around, we are going to be on the frontline in terms of agriculture, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: We are seeing the execution of many long-awaited projects under the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Madam Speaker. We can now marry the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries with the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service and we can identify 350 more acres in the same Chatham area due to the access roads that are now being built and developed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Madam Speaker. What does that mean to people in Chatham? It means to say that in a couple of

years we can have 750 acres which is over 325 new people living in Chatham. That is business for the average man who is on the road selling the pies, selling the “pholouri, de parlour man”, the gas station, the small grocery, that is development all around. And on top of that, we will have 750 acres that are producing agricultural items and other produce for the people of Point Fortin, for the people of this country and maybe even to export based on what they are producing, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, has always been a man who can execute and deliver and we look forward to working with him in Point Fortin, Madam Speaker, to continue that trend of deliverance in places like Buenos Ayres, in places like Chatham in further Cedros where fishing is a way of life, Icacos, Fullerton, and Bonasse. The other side, presently we are fixing the Erin Fishing Facility, Madam Speaker, and we are going to develop something like a “Fish Fry” there. We are going to do some things there to ensure that the community and the economic activity is boiling up, Madam Speaker. So I say thanks to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and I look forward to 2025 where he could continue to execute on behalf of the people of Point Fortin, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, rural development and local government. Madam Speaker, led by a champion of a Minister, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government. Two boroughs fall within the constituency, which is Point Fortin and the Borough of Siparia, Madam Speaker. The Point Fortin Borough functions way better than the Siparia Borough, Madam Speaker, and there is only one reason for that and that one reason that the Point Fortin Borough functions way better than the Siparia Borough is the People’s National

Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: One reason. Madam Speaker, and I take you back to that meeting I had last week Thursday. The meeting was primarily for water but as I said the Minister of Public Utilities came into the south-western peninsula and the water woes were almost non-existent so people stopped studying about water now. So at the meeting now, Madam Speaker, the residents were asking me to talk to the Deputy Mayor of Siparia who is UNC. “I tell dem I go talk to him, I cyah tell them I eh go talk to him.” I hope he answers his phone. But they were asking me to ask him to clean the drain, because when they ask him to clean the drain “he tell dem” go and tell the Prime Minister we want money to clean the drain, Madam Speaker. That is wrong in this day and age, Madam Speaker, and I know the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government has ensured that they have money, they have supplies and now with the advent of property tax, Madam Speaker, the people are not taking “no” excuse from the councillor. But the property tax will be used to bolster—

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards:—all the bodies allowing them greater opportunities to execute their work on behalf of their burgesses. The problems associated with no material, defunct equipment, no equipment will be a thing of the past. The PNM understands and are treating with those issues, Madam Speaker.

I turn to tourism. Madam Speaker, tourism has been enhanced locally to the extent that the Clifton Hill Beach is one of the best attractions on a weekend or a holiday for beachgoers and also for people who just want to relax on a holiday. This is an example of a public-private partnership. I remember the Member for

Chaguanas East would have given an example of that as well, but I think this is one of the best examples of a public-private partnership, Madam Speaker. This partnership is, there was a beach facility that was built and it is operated by a private owner and the borough corporation collects the rental and other fees associated with that business, Madam Speaker, and that is what the public—and we have the plans to do some expansion in that area and that will be done in this fiscal year.

I want to turn my attention now to the airport terminal and taxiways in Tobago. I think I am the only person in this Parliament, and I say that without fear of contradiction, I am the only person in this Parliament, Madam Speaker, to ever land a plane anywhere.

Mr. Imbert: That is not true.

Mr. K. Richards: In the Parliament? “You land ah plane?”

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. K. Richards: Alright. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Imbert: The second person.

Mr. K. Richards: The second person, Madam Speaker. The second person to land a plane, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. K. Richards: “Oh, well, ah takin dat.”

Madam Chairman: Member for Point Fortin, do not be distracted. The conversation is this way.

Mr. K. Richards: [*Laughter*]

Madam Speaker: Do not be distracted.

Mr. K. Richards: Alright, Madam Speaker, I will not be distracted. But, Madam

Speaker, I want to turn my attention to that. I flew on the air bridge for six and half years between Trinidad and Tobago and Tobago, we flew the ATR up and down and, you know, I was born a PNM, Madam Speaker, but I was trained as a pilot. But when we land on the runway sometimes we go to the end we have to go down to turn and come back up and I was very buoyed by the statement that the Minister of Finance made, that they are going to produce taxiways to the terminals. What the taxiway is going to do, is it is going to reduce time on the runway, Madam Speaker. It is going save the runway, make it have more life, more longevity on the runway, Madam Speaker, and it is going to ensure that if there are aircrafts coming behind it, is not going to create a—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you have one more minute of original speaking time left.

Mr. K. Richards: “Time gone so fast, boy?”

Madam Speaker: You are entitled to ten more minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: You are entitled to 10 more minutes to complete your contribution if you wish. Yes? You may proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, what that does is it gives you greater flow of traffic and also I want to touch on the part where he said there is space for three 830s, and two 747s. What that does is it gives the tarmac a little more room so you could have more aircraft on the ground, more service to those aircraft. It is necessary for Tobago, it is very much necessary for Tobago. I mean it is unfortunate that we missed out on Sandals. But I remember a couple of weeks ago I was on my way to New York and we had an in-transit stop in St. Vincent and I

was wondering why they were taking so long to board because I wanted to get out early because we wanted to land—“it had some” weather coming to New York, so we wanted to land before the weather came into New York. And they said that the Prime Minister of St. Vincent was coming on board, so I put on my hat and I went out and I met the Prime Minister.

My grandmother is a Vincentian so I introduced myself, I told him that “Ay”, I am the Member of Parliament for Point Fortin, right. He was happy that I was a PNM, that is one. But also, his first statement that came out, Madam Speaker, was “thank you for the Sandals”, Madam Speaker. And if he could enjoy and the people of St. Vincent could enjoy the Sandals that Tobago should have been enjoying, Madam Speaker, that goes to show what a right-thinking PNM Government could do, but not just for Trinidad but also for Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, I turn my attention to sport and community development. It would be remiss if I am from Point Fortin and “I ain’t” say something about sport and I know I am running out of time here.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. K. Richards: Correct. Sport. Wilfred “Bound to Score” Cave, Warren Archibald, Leroy De Leon, Leo Brewster, Douglas brothers, and other great sportsmen, Madam Speaker, laid the foundation for sport in Point Fortin, they laid the foundation. Point Fortin Civic Centre once ruled routes in football and cricket nationally. Mahaica Oval, rich and deep history, performance in top-class athletic performance including the national and the Trintoc games, the old Trintoc games, Madam Speaker.

7.40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, Jereem Richards, Machel Cedenio are the present international athletic trailblazers, not to leave out Mr. Alvin Daniel. The new Mahaica oval opened in 2021, setting the stage for sports, taking a different level in the future, Madam Speaker.

The current Point Fortin Civic FC was campaigning in the TT pro-league, Madam Speaker, and I want to take the opportunity to also, again, thank the Prime Minister and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries for ensuring that that team had a sponsorship, Madam Speaker, and they could compete, hold their head high. We did not win but the idea behind what we were trying to do, Madam Speaker, is get to the CONCACAF champions league.

Yet again, two weeks ago, on a Friday, I was going to Jamaica and I saw this team and I asked them, I said, “Where you coming from?” They came from Arnett Gardens and they played Police FC. Thank God, they lost, 2-1. But the idea behind that—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Richards: But the idea behind that, Madam Speaker, is that once Point Fortin Civic Centre gets into the CONCACAF champions league, in Point Fortin, we have an opportunity to receive visitors from various part of the Caribbean, visitors from Jamaica, visitors from Grenada, visitors from higher up the islands, Dominican Republic, from Panama, and they will be coming to Point Fortin with foreign currency. They will be coming to Point Fortin with their families, they will be coming to Point Fortin with their friends and they would not leave without buying local cuisine. They would not leave without a T-shirt. They would leave without buying memorabilia, some paraphernalia, and that is going to assist the people in Point Fortin with sports tourism and growing that economy there in Point

Fortin where sports is concerned, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the next thing we could look forward to in Point Fortin is the Coronation Park. That has started. I heap praise on the Minister of Sport and Community Development and the Prime Minister because at the opening of the Mahaica oval in 2021, he said, “Coronation Park next,” and it is so said, so done. In September 15th, we launched the Coronation Park, Madam Speaker. Last week, they did the soil testing and pretty soon, they will be coming up with the design and by December, we would have a stadium starting to be erected in Point Fortin.

But what we could look forward to is a state-of-the-art pool where we could hold national games, Madam Speaker; a track and field, which is a Mondotrack—and Jereem Richards has already messaged to know if it is a Mondotrack or if it is a grass track. We are getting a Mondotrack, Madam Speaker. The indoor facility will also be refurbished. The tennis centre on the other side will also be refurbished. And when we enclose that, Madam Speaker, we have a full regional complex right there in Point Fortin, something that the people could be proud about.

Madam Speaker, the highway named after Archibald De Leon: Warren Archibald lived right next to the Coronation Park, so that is a fitting tribute for some of our greats, Madam Speaker, right there in Point Fortin.

One of the things I must not leave out, Madam Speaker, is the sporting gear that is free, something that slips. The average child in the country could have the opportunity now, Madam Speaker, to wear a decent pair of boots and play football.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: The average child, a decent pair of boots to football, Madam Speaker, courtesy the People’s National Movement Government’s thinking.

Right?

Madam Speaker, before I go, the Point Fortin Heritage Administration, building, vision, vision, vision, vision, vision by the Prime Minister, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this is decentralization. Somebody was asking about what is the vision of People's National Movement? The vision is 2030. Right? This is going to provide a one-stop shop if you want to get a birth paper, Madam Speaker, and ID card, a driver's licence, ttconnect, district revenue office, the national insurance, social welfare, passport office, registrar for births and deaths. All in one spot, Madam Speaker.

The People's National Movement continues to work for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. Right? We are working to alleviate the stress and decentralize services so that people could be comfortable. You could park up there, Madam Speaker, walk from one floor to the next floor, to the top floor and back down, and when you go to your car, you have all the services that your Government offers, Madam Speaker. This is *Vision 2030*, Madam Speaker.

I thank the hon. Prime Minister, I thank the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries for allowing us to get the building that was the old Petrotrin building, and I also thank the Minister of Public Administration for following through and ensuring that this project has started, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, before the time expires, I want to take the opportunity to thank the constituents of Point Fortin for their support. I have spent the majority of my time doing the both things—the two things that I love to do, Madam Speaker, flying and representing the people of Point Fortin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Dreams could only happen, Madam Speaker, with a People's

National Movement Government, but I want to lay the foundation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: I want to put in just some of the projects, Madam Speaker, because I “cyah” call all. I do not have enough time. These are projects done by the PNM Government in this term. We have the Techier Community Centre; the Techier Wastewater Treatment Plant; Point Fortin Hospital—Madam Speaker, that probably should have been first, right?—the Point Fortin Fire Station; Mahaica oval; the refurbishment of the mental health facility; refurbishment of the local health office; the Buenos Ayres Community Centre; refurbishment of the Erin fishing facility; lighting of the recreation grounds in Guapo; the Kennedy Richards Senior Recreational Grounds and the Coronation Park, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, and I refer to the meeting last Thursday, nobody wanted to talk about water again. They wanted to know when next they are getting the lights in Icacos because that is the only ground in the constituency of Point Fortin that does not have flood lighting. I was advised by the Minister of Public Utilities that in three weeks' time, Madam Speaker, the people of Icacos will be getting their lights.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, Fanny Village Government School; Chatham Government School; Chatham Youth Camp; Southern Central Anglican School; Cedros Anglican School; the Chatham landslip, Madam Speaker, plus three other landslips in Point Fortin; the Youth Agricultural Homestead Programme; refurbishment of NESG; over 30 HVIP houses, Madam Speaker, very impactful, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. K. Richards:—over 30 HVIP houses; replacement of worn pipelines, Madam Speaker, over 4,300 metres along the thing; drilling of four wells.

Mrs. Morris-Julian: Point Fortin marginal?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, they are trying to distract “meh”, eh—the La Fortune Water Treatment Plant, Madam Speaker. In this fiscal, we are going to continue to push for the development of Point Fortin because as they do, I live in Point Fortin too.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, the paving of Warden Road, E Street, G Street, Buenos Ayres, Cap-de-Ville, we could look forward to some more of that.

Madam Speaker, I laud the minimum wage, the increase from \$20.50 to \$22.50 for those who are most vulnerable in our society, for some of our unsung heroes. That extra \$2 will go a long way for them

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, crime being a concern to all of us, the Government is going to invest in 2,000 more vehicles, Madam Speaker, to ensure that we are protected. By 2027, more boats for the crime fight, more boats for the patrolling. The small and medium businesses in the community look forward to a great Christmas and that VAT returns, Madam Speaker. Right?

Madam Speaker, as I close, I want to extend sincere gratitude to the hon. Minister of Finance for his diligent efforts in preparing this year’s budget, as well as the Minister of Planning and Development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Madam Speaker, I thank the Leader of the House for the

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opportunity to speak here today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, it is a monumental task and his leadership in navigating the complexities in this nation's—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Mr. K. Richards: Time?

Madam Speaker: Your time is now spent.

Mr. K. Richards: I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Moruga/Tableland.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me as I join this debate here tonight. Madam Speaker, I would have listened to my colleague for Point Fortin and it seems like the entire fiscal package was spent in Point Fortin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: I would have liked to stand here, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Continued desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin:—and say the same for Moruga/Tableland, Madam Speaker, but it shows the biasness of this Government.

Madam Speaker: I know it is quite late, you know, and people might need a little release but we are still sitting. So I will ask all Members to contain themselves and we will still abide by Standing Order 53, as late as it is. Member for Moruga/Tableland.

7.50 p.m.

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Ms. M. Benjamin: Thank you for your protection, Madam Speaker, I know they get excited when they hear Moruga/Tableland, but that excitement is noise exiting this august Chamber, because soon they would not be on that side anymore.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, as I was saying what was listed out by the Member for Point Fortin just shows the ideals of this PNM Administration. It shows that not every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago can enjoy that equal place we sing about in our National Anthem.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: What we see the true biasness and “geographical discrimination”, a term coined by all my colleagues on this side. Madam Speaker, I would have listened to the Member for Point Fortin, I am not going to waste too much time on my goodly friend, but I must rebut a couple of his statements. Beginning, with regard to the responsibility for dengue when he said it was the local government practitioners. And I was so disappointed in that Member, as he is a former councillor and mayor, and he would know that if you do not get releases from the Ministry or the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, Madam Speaker, then how can local practitioners be able to perform their duties? So I was disappointed in my colleague.

As I said, I am not going to waste too much time on my friend, I consider him such. As I join this debate as the proud Member of Parliament for Mourga/Tableland.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: I am honoured to stand here and contribute to this debate, as I lend my voice to represent my constituents. Madam Speaker, but unfortunately,

after nine years this Government has given budget presentations in this House that has been a disappointment after disappointment to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Let me begin by extending my heartfelt gratitude to the Member for Siparia—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: —who once, again, has shown remarkable clarity and decisiveness in her clinical rebuttal of this shallow and unimaginative budget statement. Her analysis exposed the hollow nature of the policies put forward by those on the opposite side. Madam Speaker, and they would not want to listen to this, but it is a truth. In fact, the Member for Siparia's contribution left little for me to add because she gave a detailed analysis, and she gave hope to Trinidad and Tobago, because she showed them a future, a future without the People's National Movement. She showed them that she has plans to retake our economy and to boost every sector in Trinidad and Tobago in our local economy.

However, I stand here, Madam Speaker, today deeply, well tonight, deeply frustrated as I witnessed yet another missed opportunity, by this Administration. But before I get into the Minister of Finance's statement, let me quickly address some issues of another previous speaker. I sometimes tired sitting in this Chamber and listening to Members for Tobago East and West. They speak in this Chamber, "they alone love Tobago", but that is not true. I love Tobago. We all love Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: So, Madam Speaker, one thing I will say before I get into my substantive contribution here. One thing I will say, we on this side will take no lectures from that Government—

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: —who among other things known in this Chamber and outside of this Chamber, crashed the sea-bridge for months on end and suffered Tobagonians. So how could they preach to us?

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: I am hearing noise, so—

Mr. Tancoo: Ignore them.

Hon Member: Small pin.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, I now move on to the statement of Minister of Finance. And something in the crosstalk with regard to when the Member for Point Fortin said he is the only one with regard to landing a plane and the Minister of Finance chimed in—Madam Speaker, I seek your protection because I know everyone on that side would have a chance.

Madam Speaker: Okay, so, again, I said I know it is late. Some people may a bit hungry, I think dinner is there. Some people may need to go drink a little water. Some people may take a little exercise, and certainly, if you do it quietly, you leave the Chamber with decorum, nobody is going to be disturbed, and you come back in with decorum. But if you are in here, we are going to abide by the Standing Orders and will give the Member for Moruga/Tableland her opportunity to make her contribution. We will give her our ears just like each of us would want, when our turn comes. Member for Moruga/Tableland.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Thank you, Madam Speaker. So, as I was saying I heard our esteemed finance Minister chime in and said “he landed a plane too”. Madam Speaker, it brought me back to when you are on board a plane and you are

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experiencing turbulence, and that is it exactly what we in Trinidad and Tobago is experiencing—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin:—with this Minister of Finance handling of the economy.

Hon. Member: Turbulence. Turbulence.

Ms. M. Benjamin: And we both know when turbulence sets in, the panic attack, that is every sector in Trinidad and Tobago, myself, included.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: The budget presented before us for the 10th consecutive year, reflects a chronic lack of vision, a total absence of innovation, and an entrenched failure to recognize the immense potential that exists within our tourism, arts and cultural sectors. For nearly a decade, we have been subjected to the same tired formula: empty promises, underwhelming policies, and half-hearted initiatives, Madam Speaker, regurgitation. If you would take the budget statement for 2024 and compare it to 2025, specifically when you are dealing with the tourism, culture and the arts sector, it is a cut and paste.

Budget 2025 is no different. It is once again, as I said a “missed opportunity” and the reason I have labelled my contribution a “missed opportunity”, it is because this Minister of Finance speaks of “diversification” but yet, again, he missed the opportunity to improve the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago through the tourism and cultural sector. I speak on behalf on my constituents in Mourga/Tableland. Madam Speaker, I say all of Trinidad and Tobago when I say that we are relieved that this will be the very last budget inflicted upon the people by that Administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. Member: “Relax yourself there”.

Ms. M. Benjamin: It is similar to when our hon. Prime Minister would have been, I do not want to use the terminology “the town crier for your budget statement” that was just the beginning. But as another colleague would have said, and I believe that was the Member for Tobago West that she is in town—well the Member is in town a long-time. Madam Speaker, one think I learn is the new kid on the block usually dictates the pace.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: And the fact that Mourga/Tableland was added to this side, two more seats. And I also heard the Member for Tobago West basically in her contribution—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: Swan song, swan song

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, [*Laughter*] another missed opportunity. But I know Tobago West, and Tobago East, and St. Joseph, San Fernando West, Madam Speaker, we have some seats on that side.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Shaking.

As I get in—Madam Speaker, the distraction. The distraction.

8.00 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: The distraction.

Madam Speaker: So I understand the banter and the camaraderie, and I think it is going both ways, but while Member for Moruga/Tableland, the speech is addressing me, I think if you are throwing banter, you are going to get it

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reciprocated, so let us keep it this way and hopefully all of the banter will die down. Proceed.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Hopefully, Madam Speaker. But one thing, I consider myself a well-behaved Member of this House and I will—

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

Ms. M. Benjamin: I will stay true—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

[*Mr. Scotland SC stands*]

Mr. Tancoo: Order, what is the Standing Order? Sit down!

Madam Speaker: So is it that, Member for Port of Spain South, do you want to rise on Standing Order 53?

Mr. Scotland SC: Madam Speaker, I do.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Scotland SC: I have to.

Madam Speaker: Can you cite the Standing Order?

Mr. Scotland SC: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1) as to the relevance of that comment, particularly, Madam Speaker, in light of the burning of tyres.

Madam Speaker: Okay, so let us get back now to serious business. All right? Member for Moruga/Tableland.

Ms. M. Benjamin: And I raise it in the context that I do not usually interfere with other Members' contribution so I expect the same respect.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, for those of us who work within the creative

and cultural industries, the word “legacy” carries profound significance. Trinidad and Tobago is home to a cultural wealth that few countries possess. Our music, our art, our festivals, our rich history are the foundation of our national identity. Cultural pioneers such as Lord Kitchener, Pat Bishop, Leroy Calliste, known affectionately as the Black Stalin, and the legendary Roy Cape who sadly left us last month, are just some of our cultural heroes who spoke about preserving our legacy for future generations.

This is why I am passionate about the cultural sector. This sector deals with our very essence of who we are as a people. This concept of legacy also applies to how governments are judged. Sadly, Madam Speaker, after nine years of neglect, this Government’s legacy will forever be remembered as one of missed opportunity after missed opportunity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, in preparation for this debate I decided to research a document which was sent to me a long time ago but I paid it no mind, which I am sure that no Member opposite has ever read since they took office. That document is none other than the PNM manifesto for 2020.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, I am sure you will agree with me that no one in the Government has ever read this document after—

Madam Speaker: Just remember—

Ms. M. Benjamin: “Hm mm”.

Madam Speaker:—not to bring me into the debate.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Excuse?

Madam Speaker: Not to bring me into the debate.

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Ms. M. Benjamin: Yes.

Madam Speaker: All right.

Ms. M. Benjamin: After I would have listed to some of the items that are detailed in that document, many of you seated here would agree with me that those on the opposite side have not read that document since they took office in 2020. And, Madam Speaker, in 2020, the PNM promised to grow the local fashion industry through partnership and involvement in trade shows. These are the promises that they gave to the tourism, culture and the arts sector. Madam Speaker, in 2020 the PNM promised to grow the local film industry by strengthening the rebate programme. The only local production state-owned media is specializing in showcasing PNM political rallies instead of showcasing local culture.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: In 2020, the PNM promised to establish cultural ambassadors, a programme for outstanding local artists, and this is supposed to be similar to our sports programme. But sadly the only ambassadors that this the Government have made ambassadors are for crime. Madam Speaker, in 2020—

Madam Speaker: You need to withdraw that—

Ms. M. Benjamin: Sorry.

Madam Speaker:—and find a way to say that otherwise, please. I find that offending Standing Order in terms of insulting. Please.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, I withdraw. In 2020, the PNM promised to focus on making Tobago a green destination, and focus on marine and coastal tourism.

Mr. Tancoo: They gave them oil spill.

Ms. M. Benjamin: That did not happen. Madam Speaker, this is the same

Government that wanted to build a mega hotel in No Man's Land, and when they were told they would be destroying the precious marine life they said no hairy crab is going to stop them. Well, it has been five years later and thankfully the hairy cab has won that battle.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: So, Madam Speaker, I strongly urge my colleagues on the opposite Bench to reread their manifesto, if only to remind themselves of what they promised to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is just the tourism and cultural section of that document. Explain what exactly they have been doing for the past five years, and I could list many more broken promises stated within that document but my time here to contribute to this debate is limited. Madam Speaker, we must be honest with the people of this nation. Over the past nine years, tourism in Trinidad and Tobago has become a shadow of its true potential. Year after year we hear the same tired lines, promises of development and diversification, economic transformation, yet what do we see? Absolutely precisely nothing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: The tourism industry has been left to stagnate as this Government continues to neglect this sector that could be the lifeline for so many in this country. Unlike the Government, those of us on this side of the House believe in telling the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago the truth. Unlike the Government, I would not mamaguy the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, after almost a decade of continuous PNM rule, our tourism sector accounts for little more than 2 percent of our GDP. What has this Government been doing? That is according to the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts' own national policy document, which was published in June 2021.

This document is available online. In that document, the Ministry also admits:

“Despite being one of the larger countries in the English-speaking Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago captures less than 2% of an estimated 27 million international tourists who visit the region.”

Let me repeat that shocking statistics, so of 27 million international tourists who visit the Caribbean less than 2 per cent decide to visit Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago is one of the largest most developed nations in the English-speaking Caribbean and we are struggling to get visitors to our shore. One will ask themselves, why is this? Why are tourists not coming to Trinidad and Tobago? Is it because other islands were not affected by COVID-19? Madam Speaker, we have to ask these questions. Is it because our Caribbean neighbours are so much more attractive than us? I defy anyone in this Chamber to argue with me when I say that Trinidad and Tobago has the best Carnival in the world. We put on the world's greatest show.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

8.10 p.m.

Madam Speaker, we have the best food, and there is no other island that could touch our sister isle, Tobago when it comes to beaches. We have the best music. We have the steelpan, Madam Speaker, something Members of that side just remembered recently. We have a cultural mix of people and religious festivities none of our neighbours can match.

Mr. Tancoo: Correct.

Ms. M. Benjamin: So no, Madam Speaker, our tourism sector is not suffering, because Trinidad and Tobago does not have anything special to offer. Madam Speaker, do you know why our tourism sector is suffering and why tourists are not

coming to our shores? Is because we possess what the rest of islands do not, Madam Speaker, a PNM Government—

Mr. Tancoo: Correct.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin:—a visionless government. Madam Speaker, and I have to put what I just said into context as to why tourists are not coming to our shores.

Madam Speaker, let me offer the Government some information which may explain why we are struggling to get visitors to our shores. This is a bulletin found on the website of the US State Department. It was published on July 2nd, 2024. It reads:

“Reconsider travel to Trinidad and Tobago due to crime...

U.S. government personnel are prohibited from travelling to the following areas...”—Madam Speaker—“in Port of Spain, Laventille, Beetham, Sea Lots, Cocorite...”—Madam Speaker, and for some reason all of this sounds like PNM stronghold—“interior of Queens’ Park, Savannah. After dark U.S. government personnel are prohibited from travelling to downtown Port of Spain, Fort George overlook, and all beaches. Violence and shooting occur regularly in some areas of Port of Spain.

...Violent crime, such as murder, robbery, assault, sexual assault, home invasion, and kidnapping is common.

Gang activity, such as narcotics trafficking, is common. A significant portion of violent crime is gang related.”

Madam Speaker, that was one travel advisory and we move to another. Here is what is written on the Government of Canada’s website. Madam Speaker, and this was updated on September 24th, 2024. It reads, visitors must:

“...Exercise a degree of caution in Trinidad and Tobago due to violent crime.

Gang-related attacks, gun violence and drug-related crimes occur in Trinidad and Tobago. Weapons have been used on victims who refuse to cooperate. There is a risk of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and becoming a victim of gun-related crossfire throughout the country, even during the day.”

Madam Speaker, as we say in local parlance, “broad daylight”.

“Emergency services’ response may vary.”

Something we as citizens know all too well.

Hon. Members: Except the Minister of Health.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, except, well, the Minister of Health, he—rapid response. And lastly, Madam Speaker, let me read another bulletin from the UK Foreign office, which you can also find on their website. It says:

“In Trinidad there’s a high level of violent crime. Gang-related attacks and shootings are increasing around the city centre of Port of Spain, including Laventille, Morvant and Barataria. There’s a risk of armed robbery”—

Madam Speaker, and this is so true.

Madam Speaker, because it is sad that a Member of this Chamber had to experience that. So anyone could experience that. So, Madam Speaker, let me ask, what tourists from the US, the UK or “Canayda” are going to feel compelled to visit Trinidad and Tobago?

Mr. Deyalsingh: Can-ah-da.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, and the reason when we say tolerance—and we are dealing with—so sad, a 15-year-old, because of the lack of tolerance,

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because not everyone went to Naparima or a Convent or we do not have a fake accent—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, I am a proud, a proud citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, so I speak my dialect.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, so I would restate that just for the Minister of Health who I thought would have taken those advisories a little more seriously given what he would have experienced—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin:—but I guess because he could call for rapid response, but the ordinary citizen does not have that privilege. So let me ask, what tourist from the US, the UK, “Canayda”, is going to feel compelled to come to Trinidad and “Tobaygo”—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin:—when it is advised that they can be a victim of a violent crime, Madam Speaker, in the heart of our capital “citay”.

Madam Speaker, in his statement, the Minister talks about refining our tourism product, offering a unique and enriching experience. Madam Speaker, being robbed at gunpoint—again, our Minister of Health experienced, but he did not—is the only experience this Government is enriching our nation in. And that is sad, Madam Speaker, but truth is. The Minister in his statement made mention of increasing airlift and plans to refurbish the Magdalena Resort, the Hilton Conference Centre, improving the branding of the Marriott Hotel in Tobago, as well as completing the Maracas Bay Hotel project. Madam Speaker, I do not have

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an issue with any of these things in principle, except that proper procurement legislation procedures are carried out.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, it is important that the Tobagonians feel reassured that the Magdalena is not being refurbished at taxpayers' expense for it to be simply sold to PNM friends and financiers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Tancoo: Correct, correct, correct.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, I hope that the THA will have an input in what happens to the Magdalena Resort. Right now when visitors do not decide to come to Trinidad and Tobago, it is not because they do not like the Hilton Conference Centre, it is because they do not want to end up at our morgue or return home to their families in a body bag, Madam Speaker, that is the reason why we cannot get visitors to our shore.

Madam Speaker, this Government's incompetent handling of our national security has not just led to the record high murder rate, Madam Speaker, it has led to the murder of every different sector across our economy, especially the tourism industry.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: And that is a fact, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance also spoke about the Government's target of increasing visitors' arrival to 500,000 by 2026. Madam Speaker, here is another fact that I would like to remind the people of Trinidad and Tobago of. Data on Trinidad and Tobago tourist arrivals from the World Tourist Organization

shows that the highest figures for tourist arrivals for over the past 15 years was in 2015.

Mr. Tancoo: Who was in charge?

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, who led the Government in 2015? None other than the Member for Siparia. So this Government is hoping to do by 2026, what a UNC government already did back in 2015.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: And that is a fact, Madam Speaker. Make it make sense. Madam Speaker, all the Minister of Finance basically said in that budget statement is that they are ready to pass the baton to persons, to people that are ready to hold office, Madam Speaker, and save our tourism industry. Despite this Government being in power for 10 years, they have never, either before COVID-19 pandemic, been able to attract the number of tourists to our island, Madam Speaker, that a UNC Government did.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: I want to provide the House with some context about how this Government is failing the tourism sector. Across the Caribbean, our neighbours, Madam Speaker, and they do not like us to compare, to other regions, other neighbours, but we have to look at Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, St. Lucia, Madam Speaker, for they have recognized the importance of the tourism, of their tourism industry and they have made it the cornerstone of their economies.

8.20 p.m.

We are yet to do so, Madam Speaker. We use the word in the budget statement but we have not taken on the steps to achieve that. They have embraced it, investing in genuine, long-term infrastructural projects, marketing and cultural preservation.

That is why across the Caribbean, tourism accounts for over 50 per cent of country's GDP. That is 98 per cent of the 27 million visitors to the Caribbean that choose our neighbours over us.

Madam Speaker, the tourism industry is not just about having a nice hotel or a nice beach. The tourism industry is about creating sustainable jobs for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: So do not come here to mamaguy the people of Trinidad and Tobago and say you are making tourism the cornerstone of our economy, when you cannot be bothered to move the industry beyond 2 per cent of our GDP. Where is the clear policy framework, Madam Speaker? Where is the vision for the future of tourism? Where is the plan that says, okay, we are here at 2 per cent of our GDP and then we will do what is necessary to get us to 3 per cent, then 4 per cent, 5 per cent? There is no plan, Madam Speaker. That is how developing a real and proper industry works.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: That is how the sector can expand and job opportunities can grow for our young people, Madam Speaker, but the truth is, there is no plan.

Once again, this Government has failed to articulate any cohesive strategy to develop the tourism and cultural sectors. The result is a sector that is starved of investment, plagued by underdevelopment and continuously overlooked when it comes to funding allocations. Let me highlight just one example that is close to my heart, Madam Speaker, ecotourism. Around the world, ecotourism has become a significant draw for travellers, especially those seeking to experience natural beauty and sustainable travel experiences.

Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has a jewel of ecotourism in the Caroni Bird Sanctuary. Visitors flock there to witness the beauty of the Scarlet Ibis and the mangroves. Earlier this year, Madam Speaker, the Government opened a boardwalk at the Bird Sanctuary. Here is what columnist, Paolo Kernahan, had to say during his recent visit to the boardwalk. A “boredwalk”, Madam Speaker, he calls it.

“If you’re in the market for a completely underwhelming tourist experience, then the Caroni Bird Sanctuary boardwalk might just tickle your fancy.

This projects appears conceptually flawed in so many ways it’s hard to imagine that people who had any proximity to or knowledge of the swamp and its wild inhabitants had anything to do with it.”

Madam Speaker, again, it hints of no consultation.

Mr. Kernahan adds:

“The possibility of witnessing...”—the roosting of the Scarlet Ibis from—
“...the boardwalk is, I’m going to say, quite slim.

The ‘boredwalk’ is emblematic of the Trini way – sink money in a bog, claim credit for innovative thinking, and repeat the process across the length and breadth of the apparatus of state cluelessness.”

Madam Speaker, only the PNM Government could go to a literal swamp and make it worse.

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

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, countries like Costa Rica and Belize have harnessed their natural resources to attract visitors. Why can we not do that here in Trinidad and Tobago? Why can we not do that?

Madam Speaker, in my constituency of Moruga/Tableland, we have some of

the most breathtaking beaches, the cocoa museum, the historic spring bridge. I would have listened again to the Member for Tobago East complain with regard to the THA ignoring them, and I could say the same with regard to the various Ministries and the Ministers seated before me. I would have written, Madam Speaker, for the refurbishment of the spring bridge. To date, not one response, but they come here to cry; “cry dem ah river”.

But where is the Government’s plan to develop ecotourism? Ecotourism could be a major job creator for Moruga/Tableland—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin:—hence, I advocate for it. I have young persons that need employment.

Madam Speaker, where are the programmes to promote these beautiful eco-friendly destinations? Where are their incentives for local entrepreneurs who want to develop ecotourism businesses? Where are their investments in eco-friendly accommodation, trails and tours, Madam Speaker? None, Madam Speaker. There is none.

Madam Speaker, sports tourism is also a sector that is ripe for us here in the Caribbean, in Trinidad and Tobago, if we do what is right. In a statement, the Minister boasted about the recent major sporting event, Madam Speaker—and I know my colleague would have raised this—that was held in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I presumed the Minister was talking about the World Cup and the matches held at the Tarouba stadium.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance is evidentially unaware that after the tournament, again, ICC, as my colleague said, put out a statement stating that the pitch is unsatisfactory. Madam Speaker, how could the pitch be unsatisfactory

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after so much money has been spent at that facility?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, if would appear the Minister of Finance knows as much about cricket as he does about economics.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, I turn now to our Carnival, the jewel of our cultural calendar. Carnival is undoubtedly one of the most significant contributors to our local economy. It joins visitors from all over the world and has the potential to do better, but despite its importance, this Government has failed to properly measure and manage its economic impact. Madam Speaker, how can we improve an event if we cannot measure its success?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, only this year, a concerned citizen, a taxpayer, who wanted to verify the finances of the National Carnival Commission and to find out how our taxpaying dollars were spent, had to file a freedom of information request to acquire this information. Madam Speaker, I had to do the same and I have gotten no answer to date.

This is necessary because the Chairman of NCC is on record in our daily news because he has made claims of generating over \$1 billion in revenue in Carnival 2024—that is this year—and all that is well and good. Madam Speaker, the NCC Chairman achieved this with an allocation of \$147 million. Madam Speaker, that is extravagant news—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. M. Benjamin:—because that is a whopping \$850 million profit. So if he can do that, Madam Speaker, with \$147 million, why does the Member for Diego

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Martin North/East not transfer his title of Minister of Finance to the Chairman of NCC?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, and I make that statement with no malice. We are in need in this country, Madam Speaker. The Prime Minister said that we have to tighten our belts, difficult days are ahead. And if we have someone that belongs to that side, that could do what he did with \$147 million, he deserves a chance.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance might want to contact him urgently because in his budget statement, he said that Carnival generated US \$93 million, and that is TT \$632 million give or take. So as the Member for Siparia always says, "The maths is not mathsing."

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, taxpayers have a right to know how their moneys are spent. No industry can seriously claim to be profitable if it is unwilling to show its receipts, Madam Speaker, if it is unwilling to show its financial statements. Let me repeat, there is no reliable data on the economic impact of Carnival.

8.30 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: How much money does it generate? How many jobs are created? What are the key areas of expenditure and how can we maximize our return on investments? Madam Speaker, if we do not get the answers in the Minister's winding up, I hope in the Standing Finance Committee we can see clearly.

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

Ms. M. Benjamin: Without this data, we are operating in the dark. If we cannot quantify Carnival's impact, we cannot effectually plan for its future.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Other countries, Madam Speaker, have already embraced data-driven approaches to managing their cultural events. Take Brazil's Carnival for example, every year detailed studies are conducted to assess the economic impact of Rio Carnival, looking at visitor numbers, spending patterns and broader economic benefits and with that data, Madam Speaker, they can make informed decisions about investments, marketing and infrastructure.

Trinidad and Tobago need to follow suit. We need to invest in proper research and data collection so that we can strategically grow Carnival and ensure its continued success for generations to come and I will tell you why this is needed. Madam Speaker, if we do not make steps now to improve our Carnival product, there may come a day when the Carnival that we put on may no longer be the greatest show in the world. But our neighbours—

Madam Speaker: Member, you have two minutes left of original speaking time. You are entitled to ten additional minutes to wind up if you so wish.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, it is—

Madam Speaker: So, I take it you are taking your additional time.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Yes, Madam Speaker, thank you. I will quickly close on this point, but it is needed because our neighbours are looking on and Jamaica, Barbados, and Grenada, their Carnival may soon be able to reckon with ours. Madam Speaker, the failure to promote Carnival—I had a lot.

Madam Speaker, but as the proud Member for Moruga/Tableland, I need to spend some time on the issues within my constituency. But I must deal with some issues raised by the stakeholders. If it is just to make mention with regard to the insufficient allocation, because tourism was allocated last year, just a little under .53 per cent of the total budget package and that figure has not increased significantly in this budget statement.

One of the biggest issues the stakeholders had was with regard to the merging of the Ministries that would have taken place in 2020. Madam Speaker, and that merging—what the stakeholders are saying—the stakeholders believe that the Ministry's focus has shifted more towards culture and arts leaving tourism on the back burner and I have to agree with the stakeholders.

Madam Speaker, I also would have liked to mention with regard with the lost opportunities within the creative industries because once we put focus there, it would open up avenues with regard to creating employment for the young persons, the graduates that are leaving our universities and schools on a yearly basis—

Mr. Tancoo: And earn foreign exchange.

Ms. M. Benjamin: —and earn foreign exchange. Madam Speaker, before I close, I want to address a very serious matter. As I said Madam Speaker, as I stated, I am a proud daughter of Moruga/Tableland and I am honoured with regard to being the Member for Moruga/Tableland representing the constituents of Moruga/Tableland in this House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, it is an opportunity I hold dear to my heart and I am humbled by the faith, the constituents of Moruga/Tableland put in me. No matter what tricks are tried on the other side, the people of Moruga/Tableland

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stand steadfast with me.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: They are resolute that I can chart the way forward for them, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Today, I am asking this Government to discontinue insulting the people of Moruga/Tableland. Every year over the past nine years this Government has promised the moon and the stars to the people of Moruga/Tableland and every year they would fail tremendously, Madam Speaker—disappointing the people.

Mr. Charles: The betrayal.

Ms. M. Benjamin: The betrayal that the PNM Government would have executed on the constituents of Moruga/Tableland, the burgesses in Lengua/Indian Walk, after coming with their hamper brigade. Madam Speaker, you would have seen the Ministers that would have been lost if not for our Waze map with regard to some of the roadways they would have traversed. Madam Speaker, and I sat and listened to that budget contribution and I am sad that I have to report to the burgesses of Lengua/Indian Walk that this Government yet again disappointed them. Rest assured that the Member for Siparia and her faith and the plans laid out will chart the way forward for the constituency of Moruga/Tableland.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, I sat and I listened to that budget statement and again the Minister of Finance came to promise a highway.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Mrs. Persad- SC: Again.

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Ms. M. Benjamin: A highway again and I am tempted to use the words of Princess Margaret, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: —when she said—and Princess Margaret is a local celebrity when she said “let dem put dat highway between dey leg” Madam Speaker.

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

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, let—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk and laughter*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Excuse me Madam Speaker, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk and laughter*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker my time—

Madam Speaker: Member, I just want you to be very careful with where you are going with that, okay.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Yes Madam Speaker. I will move on to the infamous Moruga agro-processing plant.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk and laughter*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Up until today, nobody knows if it is opened or closed. I invite all the media houses—

Madam Speaker: Okay, so let us have some order now.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, I would not let them waste my remaining 10 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk and laughter*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: I invite all media houses to do an investigation into this facility and not just rely on the Members on the opposite side coming to this House and making statements with regard to that facility. Madam Speaker, Moruga—

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Hon Members: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Okay Members, it is both sides now, alright and for all do not realize I am on my legs, it is both sides. I would like to hear the remainder of the contribution from Member for Moruga/Tableland and again, all those who cannot maintain their calm, maintain their silence, you can take a walk and come back. I am sure we will have enough time for them to come back and hear the rest of the Sitting.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Right, Madam Speaker, with regard to the agro-processing facility, approximately over \$90 million was spent. In the last year budget statement, we were promised 128 employment opportunities. We were told that five shells were occupied and two lots. Sadly, I will report to this House that only two shells Madam Speaker, are occupied with approximately two to 15 persons employed and I say that without fear of contradiction because I will live in Moruga/Tableland

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, the constituents of Moruga/Tableland are asking for the Government to make good on their promise but if they do not rest assured that myself and the Member for Siparia will operationalize that facility. I am asking with regard to the \$62 million that was spent on the Moruga fishing facility. I ask on behalf of the fisherfolk. In this august Chamber, Minister of Works and Transport sat and said that it would have been open on December 2023 or January 2024. Madam Speaker, we are in October 2024 and that facility is still closed after it claimed to be completed. Madam Speaker, I hope they are not waiting an election day to cut ribbon because I would be armed with every fisherfolk outside that facility.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

8.40 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I speak on behalf of the residents of Gomez Trace, Phase I, Phase II, the housing development. I ask the Minister of Housing to please hear the cry of the residents with regard to the sewer, the landslips. The units are caving. Persons are losing their investments.

With regard to the roads in Moruga/Tableland, I would have stood in the budget of 2023 and listed every road way in my constituency from Rochard Douglas to Glod Road to Tableland, the Naparima/Mayaro Road, Sixth Company, Third Company, Hindustan, Frederick, Fifth Company, Samuel Cooper. Madam Speaker, and I know they know Samuel Cooper, every house would have received hampers. Pooran Road, Penal Rock Road, Barrackpore, Platanite, Cumuto, Mantacool, Second Branch, Diamond, St. Cross and my constituents, forgive me but my time is limited. But every roadway and network in Moruga/Tableland, Madam Speaker, I raise it here because it is in need of repair. Do not show political biasness when you come into my constituency. When you come into Moruga/ Tableland, you fix, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin:—from Petit Café to Marac to Sukhan Trace to Rochard Douglas, the Naparima/Mayaro Road.

Madam Speaker, the pineapple farmers of Tableland. We do not want to hear promises from the Prime Minister with regard to he knows that canned pineapple can be produced. If you are going to do it, do it or the Member for Siparia will.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: Madam Speaker, water. I was so disappointed in the Minister of Public Utilities that he wasted his contribution here today when we as citizens in Trinidad and Tobago, myself included, go months without water. They will come here and list out projects but I tell you we still suffer for water.

With regard to the education system, I beg the Minister of Education to look into Moruga Composite that went from a seven-year to a remedial school. I am begging on behalf of my constituents. The crime situation with regard to Enrico and his daughter Anika. Madam Speaker, my heart burns for Hesper Ali when she cries every living day and would write posts on Facebook. I beg that the Minister of National Security hear a mother's cry and find the perpetrator.

The hope of Trinidad and Tobago is that the PNM would not be in office beyond August 2025 and on that glorious day, we would sing—

Hon. Member: Great is the PNM.

Hon. Members: Great is the PNM!

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

Ms. M. Benjamin: —with one voice: free at last, free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last! Free at last!

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

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, thank you very much. We are free at last from that contribution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the House do now adjourn to Tuesday the 8th day of October 2024 at 10.00 a.m.. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.44 p.m.