

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, October 17, 2025*

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2026) BILL, 2025**

[Second Day]

Question proposed.

Mr. Speaker: As is the custom, I shall now call—I propose to call upon the Leader of the Opposition. I am advised, Madam Leader, that your time is three hours and 16 minutes. No less than that.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: No more, sorry. No more, sorry. I beg your pardon. No more than that. But before we do that, can I please ask all Members that we do not, we endeavour our best not to have a repeat of the glorified shouting match that took place last week Friday. I am please asking everyone to exercise a measure of restraint. Thank you. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Penelope Beckles (Arima): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, today, I rise to present my first budget response as the Leader of the Opposition of Trinidad and Tobago, and the first female political leader of the People's National Movement—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—our great party founded by Dr. Eric Eustace Williams, our first Prime Minister and father of our nation. I want to thank all my colleagues in the Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament, my hard-working staff of the Leader of

the Opposition's office, my staff at my constituency office, my supportive family and the constituents of Arima, and each and every citizen who has expressed their gratitude, support and best wishes as we embark on this journey to rescue Trinidad and Tobago together.

Mr. Speaker, I am not speaking merely as the Leader of the Opposition but as the voice for the thousands left voiceless under this reckless experiment in governance that masquerades as the Government of our Republic.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: As Leader of the Opposition, I have a constitutional mandate to scrutinize and examine what this Government places before us as policies and plans. In my response to the budget of this UNC Government, I intend to do just that, cutting through the fluff, deceptive and flowery language, dissecting this fake and fraudulent budget, so as to expose the harsh, stark reality of this con job to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: A budget, Mr. Speaker, is more than a rhetorical document read out in Parliament. It is a plan for the future, a road map of how the Government intends to govern and manage this country. The 2026 Budget Statement achieved none of this. It was remarkable not only in what it said but what it did not say. It gave no rationale for its myriad of harsh and oppressive backward measures. It provided no analysis of the economy and gave no plans for job creation or economic stimulation, other than a pie in the sky, almost childish rhetoric. It provided no hope or blueprint for the future.

It dishonestly claimed credit for a number of projects and programmes conceptualized and implemented by the PNM. It made wild and scandalous statements without a shred of evidence. In fact, this Government, in only five

months, has caused our economy to collapse and has brought pain, grief, victimization and misery—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—to the bulk of our population. Only the favoured few have benefitted. When citizens ask themselves the fundamental question: Are we better off now than five months ago? The answer is a resounding and overwhelming, no.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: We are in a much worse position. Mr. Speaker, it only took a few months after the April 28th election for our citizens to realize that instead of winning, the vast majority of people lost.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Further, Mr. Speaker, when I look at the revenue-generating measures in this budget, I see no new sources of revenue, except new or increased taxes, fines and fees imposed on the people of Trinidad and Tobago. What is particularly astonishing is the Government's plan to raise over \$2 billion in fiscal 2026 from its draconian 100 per cent increase in taxes on alcohol, especially locally manufactured rum and beer. What has motivated this, Mr. Speaker? Could this ever be described by any sane person as a win for the people of Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Member: Never.

Ms. P. Beckles: I wonder whose idea was this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: No government in the history of Trinidad and Tobago has imposed this level of punishment on ordinary people whose only relaxation is often the occasional drink on a Friday night after a hard week's work, or a river lime, or at the beach on a weekend, or at a gathering at a friend's home. The UNC is also

expecting to manufacture an additional \$6 billion in revenue from the property income.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Madness. Madness.

Ms. P. Beckles: When we dig deeper under this item, we see the Government intends to increase its stake of profits from state enterprises from \$1.4 billion in 2015 to \$5.5 billion in 2026. Mr. Speaker, although this massive increase is not achievable, it is clear that they intend to raid and squander the hard-earned cash balances at NGC, Heritage Petroleum and other state enterprises once again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, one thing is clear. When it comes to the estimates of revenue for 2026, and that is that the Government will not meet its grossly overestimated revenue projections, and at the same time, it intends to tax, fine, squeeze and raid its way to make the population pay through its nose, the “small man”, Mr. Speaker, will feel the pinch. He will not win. He will lose.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I want to point to another deception of this fraudulent and fake budget. The Minister of Finance projected a deficit of \$3.865 billion and patted himself on the back. However, something does not add up. Mr. Speaker, when I look at page 67 of the *Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure, 2026*, produced by the Minister under Head 10, borrowing, this Government intends to borrow \$18.9 million—

Mr. Imbert: Billion.

Ms. P. Beckles:—\$18.9 billion; \$18.9 billion in fiscal 2026. This is \$8 billion more in borrowing than in 2025. More shocking is that \$10.8 billion out of this is foreign borrowing—

Hon. Member: Wow.

Ms. P. Beckles:—to be paid back with our precious foreign exchange.

10.10 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, the Government must explain to this country why the estimated budget deficit is only \$3.8 billion when the Minister of Finance is planning to borrow almost \$19 billion in 32 weeks—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—and to withdraw even more from the HSF. Mr. Speaker, another serious anomaly is seen in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* for 2026. If the Minister is planning to borrow almost a whopping \$19 billion in 2026, then how is it that our debt servicing is projected to decline from \$12.8 billion in 2025 to \$7.6 billion in 2026?

Hon. Member: Fraud.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: A \$5 billion—[*Inaudible*].

Mr. Imbert: Fraud.

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, with the wave of a magic wand, \$5 billion in the mandatory expenditure—debt service payments that must be made in 2026—have miraculously disappeared. No wonder the Minister could project such a small deficit.

Indeed when you put back in the \$5 billion in debt service payments that have been deceitfully removed from the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and cater for the \$1 billion over estimate of revenue from petroleum because of the inflated oil and gas prices, the true deficit in 2026 is likely to be closer to \$10 billion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: This does not include the money of the 10 per cent increase in

salary for public servants, which, if paid, will push the 2026 deficit to over \$11 billion with another \$5 billion looming in unpaid back pay. Mr. Speaker, the budget numbers simply do not add up.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: That is why we say this budget is fake and fraudulent. Additionally, under the UNC, the Public Sector Investment Programme, which is supposed to be the Government's flagship mechanism for driving national development, has become a shell of its intended purpose, underfunded, visionless, and lacking in innovation. The PSIP 2026, presented with much fanfare by the hon. Minister of Finance, is nothing more than a continuation of fiscal contraction, masquerading as development planning.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the numbers tell a grim story. The PSIP allocation for fiscal 2026 stands at \$4.1 billion, a drastic reduction of \$1.57 billion from the \$5.6 billion approved in 2025. That is, a 27 per cent cut to the nation's development budget, the very budget that determines how many roads are paved, how many schools are repaired, how many communities receive water, and how many lives are touched.

Mr. Speaker, I have no doubt that in the mid-term this Government will be back in this honourable House seeking to restore the said \$1.5 billion they recklessly stripped from the Public Sector Investment Programme. This deliberate reduction was not an act of prudence, but one of the deception designed to solely preserve the illusion of a \$3 billion deficit. In truth, Mr. Speaker, what they have done is to sacrifice national development for political optics.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The result is a country now forced to project less progress, less

growth, and less opportunity. Mr. Speaker, this is not responsible budgeting. This is a false and misleading budget. It is based on the false assumptions, untruths, imaginary scenarios and unachievable objectives. It is simply not based on reality. When closely examined, one third of the 2026 Budget Statement is made up of blaming the PNM for the UNC's incompetence.

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

Ms. P. Beckles: One third praises the Prime Minister while shamelessly shouting about wins—

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

Ms. P. Beckles:—that are really losses. And, the final third is made up of fantasy and blatant falseness. However, this budget will create the conditions of total economic and financial disaster in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, today I intend to do three things. One, to state the facts of the plight of the thousands of Trinidad and Tobago citizens who are suffering under the incompetence and dishonest rule of an insincere regime that never had and never will have the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago at hand.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Two, to expose the fiction, the hollow promises, the unrealistic estimates, the deception, the fluff and policy blunders that make up this budget. Three, to remind our people and this Government what responsible leadership looks like, what sober management means, and why the people of Trinidad and Tobago can and must demand better.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, this budget gave an opportunity for the country to

gain insight into the plans and policies of the UNC Government, and their strategies for charting a way forward in human and economic development. After listening to the hon. Minister of Finance's presentation of this budget, it is clear that this Government has absolutely no plan—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—and is simply making it up as they go along and making it up on the fly.

Mr. Speaker, they had 10 years to prepare for office while in Opposition, but this UNC can only offer vindictiveness, oppression, and mismanagement to the country. They came into office with a set of populist measures, soundbites, and promises, which their advisors told them would resonate with the population. Once it sounded good, they felt the population would support it. They deceived the electorate into believing that the PNM Government was deliberately punishing the population.

However, as all of us know, this country just went through a very difficult decade because of external financial and economic shocks, and a global pandemic as well as—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—domestic structural changes in our energy sector. Difficult decisions had to be made after wild and reckless spending of the UNC during the period 2010 to 2015. The economy had to be stabilized and put on a growth path. The disastrous effects of COVID-19 pandemic had to be contained and controlled to save lives and livelihoods, and the country's finances had to be prudently and properly managed.

Mr. Speaker, this Government would have you believe that all our economic problems and challenges disappeared on April 28th and now salt, mauby, milk, and

honey—

Mr. Imbert: Can flow.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: However, Mr. Speaker, it soon became clear to them that after April 28th their hollow campaign rhetoric would not work. Now that they were in Government, this country and economy is very difficult to manage. This is a very complex economy, not designed to be managed by inexperienced misfits or those who wish to use nuclear weapon against our closest neighbour—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—not understanding that if that actually occurs we would all die from nuclear fallout.

For years we told the country and the UNC that our financial position was delicate and very susceptible to changes in the global economy, global trade restraints, commodity price shocks, and external factors. They of course, did not listen. Now the panic has set in because they have realized that they made to the people of Trinidad and Tobago unrealistic promises—to the citizens of this country—just to win an election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: They are now faced with two options. Option one, they do the responsible thing and engage in conservative fiscal management which minimizes the deficit, does not inflate the debt excessively, and mitigates the economic risk. However, they are incapable of this, Mr. Speaker, and they are too busy being populist in their response.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Option two, which they have embarked upon, provides very short-term satisfaction, but would lead to severe pain for the people of this country

going forward. This Government has taken the irresponsible route, which is to go against every sensible economic advice available to them. They have put in place measures, which would severely inhibit and decrease revenue, while planning to spend record amounts, which the country simply cannot afford. As Dr. Eric Williams once said:

“The alternative to the PNM is chaos and confusion.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

10.20 a.m.

Ms. P. Beckles: Absolutely prophetic. Mr. Speaker, under the UNC 50,000 workers primarily at the lower income levels, the people who live from paycheck to paycheck, have cruelly and unfairly lost their jobs in the space of just five months. Under the UNC since April 28th, salary payments are routinely late and sometimes not paid at all. Contrast this to the very difficult COVID-19 period when government revenue dropped, Mr. Speaker, by some \$15 billion in one year, yet the PNM ensured that everyone, everyone including—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—all daily paid and monthly paid workers and recipients of social grants and many others were paid on time and we did for the entire nine and a half years we were in office. Not, Mr. Speaker, as we are finding pensioners going to the bank with a government cheque and the bank saying we have no money.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Under the PNM the people who needed the most help could feel comfortable and be assured that their social grants, which is public assistance and disability assistance, would reach them on time, not late by days or weeks, into a new month as is happening now. Under the PNM our pensioners got their pensions on time, like clockwork, so they could buy their groceries, go to the

market, pay their rent, buy their medication. Under the PNM Tobago was not suffering for a water crisis. Under the PNM loose-cannon Ministers were not causing geopolitical international crises with our neighbours—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—on their latest live rants. Under the PNM, roadsides and recreation grounds were maintained and single mothers and breadwinners in families could have fed their children, bought books for school and not have to line up at social services.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: That is the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Now pothole and landslides abound on every road, whether main roads or secondary roads.

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

Mr. Padarath: Well, she had to laugh—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Fact.

Mr. Padarath:—with a straight face.

Ms. P. Beckles: Under the PNM, sporting cultural—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—you all wake up—and community originators were getting money to carry out vital community work. Under the PNM, our youths had hope with over 50 programmes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—training them in essential skills, agriculture, technical/vocational, auto repair, sound engineering, heavy machine and equipment operations, health care and many others now shut off by this Government.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: “What ah ting.”

Ms. P. Beckles: I expect that our young people who are now at a great disadvantage with the termination of all the youth initiatives are taking notice. Mr. Speaker, as the people on the ground, in the streets, on the markets, in their homes and churches, temples and mosques, from Arima to Erin, from Cedros to Charlotteville, from Carenage to Carapichaima and all areas in-between are saying, we gave them the country to run and they just cannot run it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, this Government has irresponsibly increased the budget deficit for 2025, from \$5 billion to \$9 billion. It is increasing the public debt to unsustainable levels, draining our foreign reserves at an exponential rate, attacking the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund even though there has been no natural disaster or global pandemic over the last five months and has placed our currency under tremendous strain. Mr. Speaker, while publicly and dishonestly speaking about alleged PNM financial management, the UNC has drastically and deceitfully behind closed doors, grossly over estimated revenue for 2026 and has based the budget on a highly unrealistic and false assumption.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, since they were elected they have not left the political platform and have been campaigning ever since. They still behave as if they are in Opposition and have not yet settled to govern.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: These are serious things that they are playing with, and a dangerous mix of incompetence and political agendas, which will lead this country down a road which will inevitably result in a debt trap. That is where this Government is taking us, Mr. Speaker, over the economic precipice, and the alarm bells are already being rung. One only has to look at the most recent Standard &

Poor's credit rating report which specifically highlighted the scrapping of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority and property tax and other revenue generating measures, together with increased spending and increased borrowing as the main reasons for the downgrade in our credit rating outlook from stable to negative and by extension our economy.

Mr. Speaker, independent agencies are already losing confidence in this Government in a mere five months in office and raising concerns about where their disastrous economic policies will take us. Mr. Speaker, they will take us to decades back to their origin, to the infamous NAR Government which caused so much pain that they were reduced from 33 seats to two in a mere five years. Ask any qualified independent economist what the true state of our economy is and where these policies if sustained for a few years will lead us, and they will tell you, unequivocally to the International Monetary Fund.

Mr. Speaker, I use this budget response to issue a stark warning to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. These policies of the UNC Government are an economic crisis in the making, the likes of which we have not seen in the last 40 years. The collection of promises made by this Government is the single greatest con job perpetrated upon the people of Trinidad and Tobago in history.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, before I get into the substantive portion of discussion on the budget and highlighting the major areas, I want to address a common theme, which the Minister of Finance tries to weave into all his presentations in this Parliament. He continues to claim that the PNM crashed the economy when he knows that this is simply untrue and that all international agencies have a completely different view.

Mr. Speaker, in my contribution on the Finance (Supplementary

Appropriation) Bill, 2025, I was at lengths to quote the Central Bank, which published growth data for Trinidad and Tobago for the years 2022 to 2024 and into 2025. I quoted independent international agencies, such as the IMF, which also confirm three years of consecutive economic growth from 2022 to 2024, and prior to the arrival of this disastrous government, had projected growth of 2.3 per cent for Trinidad and Tobago in its world economic outlook for 2025. Mr. Speaker, the most recent Standard & Poor's report also confirms growth in our economy under the PNM for three consecutive years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: As a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, if you examine the economic data presented in the UNC's own *Review of the Economy 2025*, you will see the Minister's own documents point to economic growth under the PNM for years 2022 to 2024.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: So where is this alleged economic crash under the PNM?

Mr. Gonzales: A fake, a fraud.

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the records prove that the claim of economic mismanagement by the PNM is absolutely not true, which is why the Minister's 2026 Budget Statement is fake and fraudulent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: As a matter of fact, the *Review of the Economy 2025*, laid in the Parliament by the Minister of Finance clearly illustrates that this UNC Government has reversed the economic recovery this country enjoyed and maintained up to 2024, which would have continued in 2025 if the PNM was still in government.

The UNC has caused an almost irreversible shock to this economy, sent the country into a recession, created an economic downturn and reversed years of

painstaking work done by the PNM in rebuilding the economy after COVID-19 pandemic.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, at a time when the energy crisis are declining and are projected to fall further and production is falling, this Government saw it fit to damage our revenue base. They repealed the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act for political reasons, even though all they said in their 2025 Manifesto about the TTRA is that they would amend the Act to make the PSA the bargaining agent for the employees in the TTRA, which was not something the PNM would have objected to.

As we pointed out during the debate in the TTRA Bill, the Revenue Authority would not only enhance revenue and make tax collection more efficient by capturing within the tax net, but it would also have dealt with many businesses and high-wealth individuals who have been avoiding and evading tax for many years. Mr. Speaker, did the Government repeal the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act to protect their tax-evading financiers?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Padarath: —I know the Leader of the Opposition is reading a prepared text by her handlers—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Padarath:—but I rise on Standing Order 48(6).

Mr. Speaker: Leader of the Opposition, it plainly—

Ms. P. Beckles: I did not hear the Standing Order.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Speaker: It is—the Standing Order—

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 48(6).

Mr. Speaker: Yes, I was just about to point it out. That plainly offends 48(6). So you could rephrase it somewhat. That intention of passing the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Bill to protect their tax evaders, it plainly—

Hon. Members: “Who write that?”

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Do I—all right, I do not need any help with that.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: I do not think I need to remind you of the contents of that Standing Order, do I? So just rephrase it somewhat.

Ms. P. Beckles: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Did the Government repeal the tax and Revenue Authority to protect those who have been evading taxes?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Ms. P. Beckles: But I did not even mention a name, who is evading taxes.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Speaker: Use somewhat more anodyne language.

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I will just simply not go down continuing in that way.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, if I can indicate that the TTRA stood to collect some \$5 billion annually in additional revenues. However, in one ill-advised fell swoop, the Government scrapped this critical revenue-generating tool, along with others. What will happen, Mr. Speaker, when these unrealistic revenue estimates are not met? Either significant borrowing will have to be undertaken or they will

have to cut expenditure. If the entire premise of this budget, which is that the revenue estimate is unrealistic, then the entire budget presented here is a fairy tale and a figment of their imagination.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, as I said, this budget is fake and fraudulent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the fact remains that this Government is triggering a fiscal crisis in this country, stemming from a lack of revenue and common sense. On the campaign trail, we warned the country, and especially the UNC, that the financiers or the finances of this country cannot sustain the fairy tale plans, programmes and policies, which they want to put in place. Mr. Speaker, we warned about the dangers of cutting revenue sources. We warned about the dangers of increasing expenditure and we warned about a potential devaluation as their only option. We red flagged that state enterprises and some of the jewels of the crown of the State would be at risk of being privatized just to keep the Government afloat. We cautioned that this Government's policies will throw us into a cash flow and fiscal crisis, and force them to search for cash balances wherever they can.

Now, we are in a mad search to raid state enterprises, such as NGC, UTC, NIB, First Citizens, Republic Bank and other entities where the State has an interest just to pay wages and salaries. Mr. Speaker, I am sounding a warning again and telling the Government, leave cash balances at Unit Trust Corporation and NIB alone.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: They do not belong to you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, after repealing the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, which would have brought large, medium and small businesses into a reasonable tax net, the Opposition is getting regular reports of BIR showing up at a small business, asking for VAT registration and if they have made their payments. Because of the Government's incompetence and total botched fiscal management, the small man has to pay, while others laugh all their way to the bank.

Mr. Speaker, apart from the fiscal crisis we have found ourselves in, this Government has also thrust us into a liquidity crisis. This is a very concerning development for every citizen, because not only does it affect and impact the day-to-day lives of the people of this country, it also explains for late payments of salaries, the late cheques for social services and pensioners, and the spending freezes in the public sector. Without saying it publicly, Mr. Speaker, this Government has imposed spending increases on most areas of the public expenditure, especially goods and services, which also compromise contract employment.

Mr. Speaker, apart from the revenue element of the delicate financial balancing act, Government has to be concerned with liquidity and cash flow, and while both are related, they are not the same. Mr. Speaker, when the UNC took office, they admitted that the overdraft at the Central Bank had funds which could be utilized. The overdraft stood at 70 per cent when they assumed office versus the almost 100 per cent overdraft level that we discovered when the PNM took office in 2015. They were also able to utilize unused balances withdrawn from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, as well as loans that were left in escrow for capital expenditure purposes, all sources of liquidity left by the PNM Government.

Mr. Speaker, the same loans they criticized the PNM for taking, they

repurposed them to use for recurrent expenditure, thus stalling economic activity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, loans meant for road upgrade projects, HDC, HVIP, housing, land development for the Petrotrin workers, school construction, water supply and many other development works were used to pay salaries. That is the state of desperation they descended into. Mr. Speaker, how did this Government find themselves in this position in only five months?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: They spent the first three months attacking big businesses, banks and other financial institutions. They labelled them as cartels and eroded confidence in the financial system. Mr. Speaker, excess liquidity has declined sharply from \$7.3 billion in March 2025 to \$3.8 billion in August 2025, and who knows where it will go.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: They have drained the liquidity in the system and there is simply is not anymore for the banks to lend. Repurposing the \$1.3 billion in loans for the productive sector has further drained liquidity, taking it to this level not seen in over a decade. Mr. Speaker, if liquidity dries up, payment of salaries is the least of our worries. We have debt service payments to make, which are critical and timed across the year. Missing one payment can lead to default which can see the Government impose even more severe austerity measures on the people of this country.

Mr. Speaker, even in the forex markets, the increased rates for accessing forex through credit card purchases can translate to increased prices for consumers. Mr. Speaker, the investment grade rating, “BBB”—“BBB-” by Standard & Poor’s is all due to the good work of the People’s National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I want the country to note that the negative outlook for our economy issued by Standard & Poor's is a forward-looking factor, which is based on the future policies and plans of the UNC and whatever the Minister of Finance told Standard & Poor's.

Let me repeat. The retention of our investment grade credit rating is all due to the PNM and the downgrade to a negative outlook is all due to the UNC.

10.40 a.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I say this, without fear of contradiction, that this Government has declared war on the lower-income workers of this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Out of vindictiveness, this Government began putting workers on the breadline. It started with a trickle at first, but now, Mr. Speaker, some 50,000 workers have either been terminated or have lost their jobs as a direct result of the hands of this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The UNC firing squad celebrates and gets sinister pleasure in firing people whom they perceive as PNM and therefore undeserving of a livelihood in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: They are not concerned that they are affecting families, breadwinners, children and impacting real people and their lives in this country. Mr. Speaker, there is currently a humanitarian crisis in this country caused by the termination of thousands of workers by this uncaring Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Not surprisingly, not a single word was mentioned of this crisis at the UN General Assembly. They say they love you, yet they pound you down with a hammer of vengeance. It is clear that the UNC does not care about the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, over 10,000 CEPEP workers, 4,000 forestry workers, 400 workers in WASA, from CEOs to janitors, and thousands more have suffered under the hands of this callous Government. Mr. Speaker, not even the state enterprises and Ministries escape their firing squad. People have been dismissed from CAL, RBC, T&TEC, NIDCO, FCB, WASA, NEDCO, Heritage, HDC, TSTT, Paria, various Ministries and other constituency offices at Cumuto/Mazanilla.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The UNC firing squad is in full effect. Citizens have been made to suffer and beg for a small change for groceries and line up for social services, which this Government cannot even pay on time. Imagine this, Mr. Speaker, having been fired from your job and then having to suffer the indignity of being told by a Government Minister to apply for social services and your public assistance cheques cannot even arrive on time. Meanwhile, a senior Minister tells the people, “stay home and cook.”

Mr. Imbert: Imagine that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Cook with what?

Mr. Speaker, threats by this Government have left thousands of workers in this country fearful of victimization and fearful of their future. Incomes are lost, spending in the economy will decline, families will be affected. This will have a

negative economic impact, but more so, creates a human and social crisis. Mr. Speaker, this conservative estimate from our analysis show that the cumulative impact of these mass terminations can result in as much as a 1.5 to 2 billion decline in GDP over the next year. But this is not just the Leader of the Opposition or the PNM saying this.

Trinidad Guardian, Mr. Speaker, September 14th, 2025:

“URP, CEPEP job cuts may harm economy, communities – Economists.

Economist Prof. Karl Theodore was blunt. ‘Whenever you interfere with the incomes of low-income people, you are interfering with the very lifeblood of the economy,’...Theodore pointed to the well-worn but seldom measured principle of ‘marginal propensity to consume’, the idea that those who earn the least spend the most proportionally on local goods and services.

‘Poor people don’t sit on money. They spend it on food, transport, small shops, and books for their children. That keeps the economy ticking,’ he said.”

Mr. Speaker, you cannot shock an economy with the termination of 50,000 workers and not have a drastic economic impact. But this is much more than an economic shock. This is a people issue. This is a humanitarian crisis. These people would now flock to our social services to seek reprieve. In true UNC firing squad style, this Government, upon assuming office, proceeded to fire state board members, senior management, and persons who were serving, had given of their time and effort as professionals.

The Prime Minister herself attacked them in a most vicious manner, calling them shameless for not resigning. Mr. Speaker, the state enterprises sector plays a vital role in this economy, providing vital services, acting as implementing agencies and acting as pillars in critical sectors. They also facilitate investment in

our economy through the relevant investment programmes.

Mr. Speaker, there are 141 state entities and boards impacting every sector in our economy, which play differing roles, some critically pivotal, and some less so, but this sector also contributes significantly to economic growth. Dismantling boards, some of which belong to publicly traded companies, disrupts the governance of these entities, their strategic direction, and management in most cases. Its operations as well, because they cannot enter into contracts, gain higher-level approvals for operational activities and in some cases, even conduct financial transactions.

Mr. Speaker, this Government has removed boards of the state enterprises sector and has brought this vital part of our economy to a practical halt, or at least stymied their operations. How many of these boards have been reappointed in the last five months? What this Government has done is slowed down economic growth and impacted this sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, only one has to look at the disruption of the operations of the EximBank, essential forex window, as a result of this Government's incompetence in this transaction. The window provides a facility for the importation of essential goods like food and pharmaceuticals. This window was created by the PNM administration during the height of the COVID pandemic to allow this country to have access to these essential items.

Mr. Speaker, the Government has created major problems by the mishandling of their transition and I quote *Trinidad Express*, July 16th 2025:

“EximBank forex disruption hits SMEs

Small and medium-sized businesses in the country are facing growing strain amid a sudden halt in foreign exchange allocations from the State-owned

Export-Import Bank (EximBank) the Express has confirmed.

According to a source directly affected by the situation, the EximBank has not allocated US dollars to any of its clients in recent weeks, citing bureaucratic delays caused by a shift in ministerial oversight and the absence of a functioning board.”

It is irresponsible management of the economy on the part of this Government and this has the potential to reverse the growth recovery trend I discussed earlier.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, look at NGC. A chairman was appointed and a month later, his appointment was revoked and an attorney who has questions to answer in the court was appointed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: How could we be serious when we make decisions like these about an entity as critical as NGC which is a linchpin in our energy industry?

As it relates to FCB, Mr. Speaker, as if it were not enough, we have this Government interfering in our delicate financial sector. First Citizens Bank was founded in Trinidad and Tobago in 1993 under a PNM Government through the strategic merger of three existing financial institutions, NCB, Workers' Bank and the Trinidad Co-operative Bank. This merger aimed to create a stronger and more competitive local and financial institution. Mr. Speaker, FCB has become a highly successful financial institution in Trinidad and Tobago. It is a publicly traded company which allows citizens to own shares in the bank. It falls under the regulation of the Central Bank and the exchange commission and among other things, it is governed and regulated by the Companies Act, but despite all of this, there is a serious issue of the Government's interference with the FCB.

10.50 a.m.

I was urged to call upon the Government to come clean on the matter of the CEO when we were receiving conflicting reports. Some were stating that she resigned, some reports stated that she was on vacation and others suggested that she was about to retire. Mr. Speaker, you cannot have this level of uncertainty regarding the head of one of our pillars, our financial sector, a publicly traded company.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: It shatters confidence. Why therefore are government Ministers getting involved in the management of a publicly traded financial institution? Mr. Speaker, that is not good governance. This can be called a political hijack of a public bank.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, what message does this send to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? What message does it send to investors, to the international community, to every citizen who entrusts their savings, their mortgages and their futures at FCB? I want to warn the nation to keep a close eye on the Government's dealing with First Citizens Bank. Your savings could very well be at risk.

Mr. Speaker, this Government is making a habit of attacking big business in this country, including some of the largest non-energy contributors to the economy, employment and government revenue. They have gone out of their way to collect and divulge private information from the Central Bank, something that is clearly illegal. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance have continued the false narrative of the existence of a forex cartel and threatened to expose the so-called cartel. But this turned out to be totally fabricated and another distraction of this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Fortunately, the Central Bank Governor, in a presentation to the media on September 05, 2025 stated clearly for the record that he had no evidence of any forex cartel.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I now turn to a serious injustice which has been inflicted on the people of this country. I speak of the heartless mass terminations and non-renewal of contracts of workers across this country by this UNC “firing squad”. I was shocked to hear a Minister, a former trade unionist, say that sending home workers is collateral damage.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, our single mothers and schoolchildren being described as collateral damage and this from a government who supposedly cares. Obviously, no Prime Minister, no government, if they honestly believe this, loves you. For almost 10 years, the PNM Government kept the unemployment rate down.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Even through the worst COVID-19 pandemic, we ensured that salaries, grants and other facilities stayed in place so that affected people in this country, many of whom formed the most vulnerable, had the ability to feed themselves. Critically important, no public servants on the establishment were sent home.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, as I said, after April 28th, 50,000 persons have been fired in a mere five months.

Hon. Member: Shame.

Mrs. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, if we think about it, the scorched-earth strategy the UNC has impacted on almost 200,000 citizens. How can that be an economic policy to deliberately put such a large number of people on the breadline? Mr. Speaker, apart from the social impact, there is also the economic impact. The loss of 50,000 incomes will negatively affect this economy both directly and indirectly. The shops, the groceries, the parlours will feel it. The markets and vendors are already feeling the pinch. The roadside food vendors are telling us that business is slow and people are buying less. Clear signs that a recession is at hand.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: This is a self-induced economic contraction. We see this reflected in the negative economic growth for 2025 in the *Review of the Economy* presented by this Government. For the first time, our economy has shrunk in four years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I heard the hon. Prime Minister say that the Government would provide income support grants for those who lost their jobs. So let us get this straight, you fire workers who were doing something productive and then promise them grants.

Mr. Imbert: Shame.

Mrs. P. Beckles: Obviously, the Prime Minister does not think so because to her, as she mentioned, are “lowly grass cutters”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: However, they were maintaining our environment and improving the health, safety and security of our citizens. To add insult to injury, the Government is consistently, as I said, late in their payments of their salaries and grants. That is what happens when you have no plan and only operate based on

hate and vindictiveness.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: They have pushed this unemployment rate to the worst levels in decades and the worst among regional counterparts.

Mr. Speaker, youth employment has always been a high figure on the national average but the PNM Government had taken deliberate steps to empower young people and provide sustainable and viable alternative employment opportunities. We created an entire Ministry of Youth Development and National Service and developed over 50 programmes where young people were being trained in various fields from agriculture to mechanics and air-condition repair to heavy equipment operators and technicians, and to take advantage of available opportunities to anchor their own lives and futures.

Mr. Speaker, they were being trained to acquire highly-skilled jobs in the energy sector such as operators, riggers and technicians. We are all familiar with the successes of these programmes. In the middle of this training and transition for young people, these programmes have been abruptly halted and dismantled. I repeat to our young people, please take notice. The UNC definitely is anti-youth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I turn to the issue of monetary policy. I cannot discuss the issue of monetary policy without discussing the Central Bank, which is the institution responsible for executing such a policy. There is no doubt that this Government has absolutely derailed and shaken confidence in the Central Bank. They tried to intervene in the operations of the Bank forcing the then Governor to do something which he knew was wrong and which they ought to have known was illegal. Mr. Speaker, in their misdiagnosis of the forex problem, they sought to sell the narrative that the reason for the forex shortage lay in the distribution of the

foreign currency. In so doing, they launched a vicious attack on some of the largest businesses in this country that pay taxes, contribute to revenue, GDP growth, foreign exchange earnings and employment. What did they call them? A foreign cartel, a forex cartel, demonizing the main users of forex in this country.

Mr. Speaker, it is no secret that we have large conglomerates in this country. We have businesses in the food distribution sector operating supermarket chains. Our food import bill is over US \$1 billion. Of course, these will be some of the large users of foreign exchange but this reflects a deeper problem regarding the taste and preferences of the population. A major part of the foreign exchange issue lies in a demand problem and unless we can curb our appetite for imported goods, especially food, we will continue to face problems like this. Mr. Speaker, this Government, in demonizing these businesses, does not only erode business confidence but also places the Central Bank and particularly their Governor in a very difficult position.

Mr. Speaker, I quote from the Trinidad *Guardian*, June 06, 2025 entitled:

“PM: Central Bank refusing to divulge forex...”—information.

“Getting back to the topic of the forex cartel,”—Prime Minister—“Persad-Bissessar said the ‘blocker’ the Government is getting from the Central Bank is its failure to provide information. She said the Central Bank is ‘using certain provisions of the law, saying they don’t have a duty and that they are not under any obligation to disclose information’.”

11.00 a.m.

The Regulations are quite clear on this matter. Section 56 of the Central Bank Act states, and I quote:

“Except in so far as many as may be necessary for the due performance of its objects, and subject to section 8 of the Financial Institutions Act, every

director, officer and employee of the Bank shall preserve and aid in preserving secrecy with regard to all the matters relating to the affairs of the Bank, any financial institutions, or person registered under the Insurance Act or of any customers thereof that may come to his knowledge in the course of his duties.”

Mr. Speaker, this Government was, therefore, asking the Governor of the Central Bank to do something that was in breach of the law, to disclose the private banking information of top users of foreign exchange. Why did they need this? To demonize our business community? To go on a political platform, as they would say from time to time, and “buss ah mark”?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, this is the law that we are speaking about, but more than that, this is the business confidence. This is business interest which was being attacked. As an admission to what the hon. Prime Minister was asking the Central Bank Governor to do was wrong, the Prime Minister announced that the Government will bring legislation to allow for the disclosure of private banking information. Which country in the world does that, expects confidence—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Which country does that and expects confidence in the banking sector to be maintained?

Mr. Speaker, the budget statement should have been an opportunity to stabilize the economy, to rebuild confidence and to set a credible plan to restore our foreign exchange position. Instead, what we have been given is an exercise in economic recklessness by a Government that has neither the understanding nor the competence to manage one of the most delicate systems of our economy.

Our foreign exchange framework is like a delicately balanced house of

cards. It is not perfect, but it definitely promotes stability. And yet, this Government is prepared to collapse those cards without understanding the consequences, not because they have a sound plan, but because it seems their friends and families are whispering in their ears.

If you pull the wrong card, Mr. Speaker, then the entire thing will collapse. When it collapses, it will not be the Cabinet that suffers, it will be shopkeepers all over Trinidad and Tobago who cannot pay their suppliers. It will be the manufacturer from Couva to Matelot who cannot get materials. It will be families from Diego Martin to Mayaro, who suddenly face soaring prices for basic goods. And yes, there will be people on the streets, angry and, no doubt, seeking answers and solutions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I want the Government to know that sound economic management is not public relations, marketing or populism. It is rooted in facts, research and a deep understanding of the economic realities which we face as a country. It is not about soundbites or politics.

The Government's central mistake is that they believe the foreign exchange problem is about allocation. They believe that if they tinkered with who gets forex and when, the problem would be solved. Mr. Speaker, they continue to attack the businesses which form fundamental pillars in our economy.

Developing famous terms from time to time like "one per cent", "forex cartels", they would have you believe that forex allocation was a problem and that some were being favoured over others. They misled the population into thinking that all they had to do was to change the way forex was reallocated and the problem will be solved. How quickly they went, quiet and they have since faced the reality.

What became of all the talk about forex shortage and unfair allocations? Did the forex suddenly free up in the country? Mr. Speaker, is the problem solved? Of course not. In fact, in the few months of the Government's tenure, it has worsened.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The Government needs to explain the rapid precipitous decline in net international reserves of over US \$600 million in their first five months of office, and this is after withdrawing over US \$200 million from HSF after April 28th. The UNC's mismanagement of our foreign reserves has led to our import cover shrinking to just five months by the end of August 2025, the lowest in several decades.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: You will recall, Mr. Speaker, that during the debate in the mid-year review, the Minister of Finance expressed his feigned shock and dismay at discovering that the PNM Government left the country with seven and a half months of import cover. I wonder how the hon. Minister feels now? In less than six months, he has caused our import cover to drop to barely five months.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the system of allocation is not the disease. It is only a symptom. The disease is our inability to earn foreign exchange at the levels our economy requires, and that ability is tied fundamentally to our energy sector's performance and our capacity to export competitively. Simply, it is an issue of the demand and supply.

Mr. Speaker, not one single reference was made to the refinery. As a result, we will wait to see if the Prime Minister will make another 180-degree turn as it relates to issues of the Dragon gas. When the People's National Movement demitted office in April, we were at a point where we had a preferred bidder for the

Guaracara refinery. Mr. Speaker, on the campaign trail, the Government promised the people of Trinidad and Tobago that the UNC would reopen the Guaracara refinery. Yet, this Minister of Finance was conspicuously silent last Monday on that issue.

They painted the false and fake picture of jobs restored, foreign exchange earned and prosperity revived. Five months later, that promise remains only on a platform stage. Promise made, promise broken.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The PNM Government did not just make promises, they acted. The process to restart the refinery was advanced through a competitive evaluation exercise. After extensive technical and financial assessments, Oando PLC of Nigeria was selected as the preferred bidder to lease and operate the refinery. That represented real progress. A private sector operator was identified. Taxpayers would not bear any costs of restarting the loss-making facility. A framework existed for moving, from mothballing to operation, in a structured way. The public could see a path forward. What has this Government done since coming to office? They scrapped that process, as is their right. Instead of building on the groundwork laid, they appointed a 12-member refinery restart committee in July 2025, and that committee was given four months.

We are told that the committee will report soon, but, Mr. Speaker, the fact is that no concrete plan has been presented to the population. We wait to see what is the strategy that this committee was given that time to prepare. We wait to see exactly what is that strategy. In fact, even the committee itself admitted to little progress on a restart plan, citing the enormous capital cost of refurbishing the refinery and uncertainty about financial partners.

In fact, what we have is a video of the Minister in the Ministry of Energy

and Energy Industries shaking like a leaf, as he said, he has the report and the refinery is ready to go, except for the financing.

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

11.10 a.m.

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, let me warn this Government and point out to the people of this country that, given the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act, the Government cannot simply hand over the refinery to any entity without following a proper procurement process. It would be a breach of the provisions of the procurement Act. We will be monitoring the evolution of this situation closely, and I want to remind the people involved that the procurement Act involves hefty fines and jail terms.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: So, Mr. Speaker, therefore, the idea of reverting the EximBank to simply providing loans and insurance guarantees will be detrimental to our exporters since the facilities to provide them with forex will no longer exist. Mr. Speaker, as it relates to tariffs, the current global environment has made it even more difficult to implement these strategies.

Mr. Speaker, whilst this Government was firing workers and attacking financial institutions and businesses and undermining independent institutions, they were not doing their job. At this time, the US, our largest trading partner, had imposed a 10 per cent reciprocal tariff on exports coming out of this country. This Government did nothing to have this tariff removed or negotiated, or, it may be possible that the hon. Prime Minister, in her contribution, may indicate to us whether that was a discussion that was held during her visit to the United States. Having done nothing while the rest of the world was feverishly trying to negotiate away these tariffs, the US imposed another round of tariffs, and this time went up

to 15 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has been and will be impacted by this new tariff, which will also impact foreign exchange earnings. Now that the Government is scrambling with the economic realities, all we hear is political rhetoric, but no solid economic plans and actions. The Minister of Finance is totally out of his depth and will surely leave the country in economic disaster.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. Minister of Finance, in his presentation, indicated that he does not understand that if we run out of foreign exchange, we cannot import, pay our foreign debt, and make simple foreign exchange transfers, then it will be our job to make him understand where he has taken us. Mr. Speaker, this role will inevitably lead us to harsh realities of potentially defaulting on our foreign debt, which will cause us to default on most of our debt obligations, which will become immediately due for payment as well.

Another significant consequence, because we operate a managed floating exchange regime, is that our reserves are still required to defend the exchange rate of our TT dollar. If we run dangerously low on reserves, we will be unable to maintain our 6.79 rate against the US dollar. You know what would happen, Mr. Speaker. Guess, I suggest. We all know. The Minister of Finance, of course, is smiling, because he knows the dreaded “d” word. Mr. Speaker, we warn the country that, given their promises, the UNC threatens to crash the economy and trigger a possible devaluation. It is the only way they could pay for all these promises. How can they manage all that they promise by operating on such diminished revenues?

Mr. Speaker, debt and devaluation will be the order of the day and more and

more this Government seems likely to, in the near future, come to this country looking, of course, as usual, to blame the PNM again for forcing their hand to devalue the dollar. But we shall take absolutely no responsibility for this fraudulent and fake budget of this incompetent Government. We have nothing to do with this nonsense.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: We warned, Mr. Speaker, about the irresponsibility of their promises and the expectations they were creating. We specifically warned the country that the only way they could do this would be if they devalue the dollar to almost 10 to one. Mr. Speaker, watch them carefully, because this is where they are taking us. Remember, we warned you, and we are warning you again. If they continue down this road, we will face a full-blown foreign exchange crisis. It will not be academic, it will not be abstract, it will mean empty shelves, shop businesses, job losses and a cost-of-living explosion. When that happens, it will be because this Government misdiagnosed the problem, ignored the warnings and played politics with the economic lifeblood of this nation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, as it relates to the energy sector, which contributes 40 to 45 per cent of our GDP and has traditionally been the largest earner of foreign exchange for Trinidad and Tobago. It is also responsible for approximately 80 per cent of our country's export revenue. It is widely accepted that our country's energy sector is the foundation of our economy and it has traditionally provided Governments with the ability to fund their initiatives. Accordingly, I, like many citizens, was looking to the Minister of Finance's budget speech to see what this Government's plans and initiatives are for the energy sector. Unfortunately, like many, I am disappointed but not surprised.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The budget speech said very little about the energy sector, and then, out of the little that was said, there was not a single new initiative. Not one, Mr. Speaker, nothing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, it has become clear and patently obvious to everyone that the Government is lost when it comes to the energy sector, but the whole population can see it. The stakeholders must be salivating when preparing to negotiate against this Government, as it is obvious that they are unsophisticated, out of their depth, and I fear that Trinidad and Tobago will be taken advantage of.

Under the heading of what was delivered in the first 150 days in office, the new Minister of Finance stated with much aplomb that we secured landmark energy deals. He then went on and, quite ashamedly, to claim for the Government that they signed this historic agreement with Exxon Mobil.

Mr. Speaker, it was the former PNM Government, under the distinguished Minister of Energy at the time, the hon. Stuart Young, and the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, then Prime Minister, that secured the interest of Exxon Mobil for our ultra-deep water blocks.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: It was the former PNM Government that took a Cabinet decision in 2024 to negotiate with Exxon Mobil for the ultra-deep water blocks. It was the former PNM Government that oversaw the negotiations of the production sharing contract with Exxon. This was all the work of the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: It was the first time in Trinidad and Tobago's history that the Government secured interest in our ultra-deep acreage. This Government turned

that work into a signing ceremony and now wishes to claim it as an achievement. But, I am calling on the hon. Prime Minister to tell this country what the terms of the production sharing contract are. Did you secure a signing bonus? If so, how much was it? If there was none, then why was there none? What are the terms that you claimed that you agreed to with Exxon? Is it true that you gave these blocks away? What are the shares of profit for the people of Trinidad and Tobago? The hon. Minister of Energy, and the hon. Prime Minister, must tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago what the cost recovery is. What concessions did the Government make?

The next landmark energy deal that the new Minister of Finance claimed is that on October 08, 2025, they obtained an Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) license from the United States Treasury Department to pursue development of gas on the Dragon field. The hollow ghost reeks of hypocrisy. The UNC Government is absolutely shameless.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, is this not the same Dragon Gas Field that the UNC Opposition spent nine years attacking the PNM Government about? The Government needs to be honest. The work that was done to secure the Dragon gas deal was done by the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.20 a.m.

It was the PNM in December 2023 that secured and delivered a 30-year exploration and production licence from the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to develop the Dragon field and to export gas to Trinidad and Tobago. It was the UNC Opposition that did everything possible to try and scuttle that deal. It was the UNC, in an unpatriotic manner, called for the former

Prime Minister, Dr. Rowley and the hon. Member of Parliament, Stuart Young, for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, to be sanctioned by the US Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: Shame, shame. Hypocrites.

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Gonzales: Hypocrites.

Ms. P. Beckles:—the number of times that we sat in this Parliament over the past nine years and heard the UNC attack the Dragon and attack us for pursuing the gas from the Dragon. Well, I want to remind the population today that the gas belongs to Venezuela and I want to ask the hon. Prime Minister what does she recognize, or who does she recognize as the President of Venezuela?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: It was the PNM Government that acknowledged the need to try and secure gas from an alternative source. It was the PNM that identified the Dragon gas field and negotiated with Shell, with the Government of Venezuela and the Government of the United States to secure and pursue this. And the UNC will not be allowed to pretend that they have the ability and foresight to secure the Dragon gas.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, let me make it abundantly clear, we on this side want Dragon gas for Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, it was the hon. Prime Minister who, on her assumption of office, immediately said and boasted, “de dragon is dead”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: It was the hon. Prime Minister who said that they will get gas

from Grenada, Guyana and Suriname.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Shame.

Ms. P. Beckles: They then rushed off after being rejected by Guyana—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: Chased away. They were chased away.

Ms. P. Beckles:—and that there are no proven gas reserves in Grenada and being out of depth in Suriname and ended right back to Dragon. Today, the question Trinidad and Tobago has for the Prime Minister is: What do you promise in exchange for the six-month provisional OFAC licence?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Tell us. Tell us.

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, every single energy project that the Minister of Finance mentions in his budget speech that is holding our gas production steady at 2.7 bcf per day is the work of the former PNM Administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mento is PNM; Cypre, PNM; Perenco taking over Woodside and bpTT shallow water assets, PNM.

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

Ms. P. Beckles: The deep water bid round they want to claim is a success was started and opened and launched by the PNM. We wait to see if they manage to award any blocks and if so, on what terms, as they are notorious for giving Trinidad and Tobago away cheaply at a loss. Even the restarting of the steel production the Minister of Finance wants to try and claim, was started, negotiated and done by the?

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

Ms. P. Beckles: Shamelessly, the UNC is trying to claim progress in the solar

energy sector. A 92.2 megawatt Brechin Castle solar project is again all the work of the PNM. It was the PNM that secured the deal, negotiated the deal and began construction of the largest solar power plant in the Caribbean.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The green hydrogen they want to claim is also work of the?

Hon. Members: PNM.

Ms. P. Beckles: It was the PNM Cabinet that took the decision and approved the building of a green hydrogen facility in Trinidad and Tobago and all the wind-generated projects that they are claiming are the policy and decisions of the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, there is not a single energy project that is commenced by this Minister of Energy and Energy Industries who unfortunately was not invited to attend—

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

Ms. P. Beckles:—with the hon. Prime Minister when discussions were held, historic discussions were held, by the hon. Prime Minister and the Secretary of State.

Mr. Gonzales: Uninvited guest.

Ms. P. Beckles: But I took note of the fact that the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries has indicated that he would be going to Venezuela to continue negotiations.

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

Mr. Gonzales: By boat; a fishing boat.

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the National Gas Company—and, of course, Mr. Speaker, we on this side wish the hon. Minister well in those negotiations. Mr.

Speaker, the National Gas Company is critical to the energy economy of this country. It engages in midstream transmission of gas from upstream to downstream and is the centerpiece of all elements of our gas sector. But under the UNC, Mr. Speaker, the NGC has been highly politicized and utilized almost like a piggy bank to be smashed and raided and utilized for political purposes.

You may recall, Mr. Speaker, in the period 2010 to 2015, this vital and highly profitable state enterprise held some \$16 billion in cash balances. Over that period, every single cent was drained, extracted through special dividends and spent at that time by the UNC Government. Mr. Speaker, this was equivalent to 10 per cent of the GDP at the time, an amount larger than this year's already massive fiscal deficit emptied from the NGC. To be spent on what? The highly dubious and overpriced Beetham Wastewater Treatment Plant, costing over a billion dollars, which was a total waste and squandering of taxpayers' funds.

Mr. Speaker, I want to remind the honourable House, this was the fraudulent UNC Government that used \$700 million of taxpayers' money while the owner of SIS fled to Panama after the UNC lost the elections in 2015.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Under the PNM, NGC fought SIS in an arbitration and won and the Government and the Chairman of NGC have refused to tell the population what the decision of the arbitration was. I call on the hon. Prime Minister and Minister of Energy and Energy Industries to tell us, did NGC win the Beetham Wastewater arbitration and does SIS have to pay NGC over \$350 million and what is the Government and NGC doing to collect the said money?

Mr. Speaker, I now wish to raise some matters as it relates to social development. Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of the People and Social Development is the conscience of the State. What is being presented to the country as an

innovation, is in fact a systematic weakening of the institution that safeguards the poor, elderly and vulnerable. It is important to remind the nation that the solid foundation of this Ministry was laid by the People's National Movement. It was under the PNM that a comprehensive partnership was forged with the World Bank to assess and modernize the country's entire social protection system. That work produced a detailed framework for reform, focus on accountability, data integrity and efficiency. The system policies and digitization projects that the current Administration boasts about, were conceived and built and implemented by the PNM leadership. The present Government has therefore inherited those efforts, rebranded them and now parades them as their own.

Adding to this function is the creation of the National Payment and Innovation Company of Trinidad and Tobago. It has been promoted as a new digital mechanism for government transactions but in practise it centralizes control of social grants payment under the Ministry of Finance. This move strips the social development Ministry of its operational independence and places the welfare of citizens under political management. It is a consideration of power disguised as modernization, one that risks turning social assistance into a political tool.

11.30 a.m.

This is the broader truth of the budget before us. It is not about empowering people, it is about controlling them. It is not about continuity, it is about dismantling what works.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: When the PNM was in office, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services operated with accountability, purpose and humanity. In the budget, the UNC tried to take credit for the work already completed by the PNM, another example of a fake and fraudulent budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, as it relates to housing, the Government has signalled that its target is 20,000 houses in two years, using public-private partnerships and innovative mechanisms. This objective is a carbon copy of the PNM's *Vision 2030*. The UNC is shameless and bereft of ideas, stealing without imagination.

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

Ms. P. Beckles: The objective in the way in which they have submitted is unachievable for the following reasons. Based on the hon. Minister's statement during his budget presentation, there is a lack of availability of suitable lands, there is a reluctance by banks and contractors engaged in a genuine PPP, and there is a lack of suitable contractors for the skill and know-how to carry out such a programme. The use of the PPP to achieve this target is flawed. Affordable housing does not provide large margins of profit, and hence would not generate the rate of return to appeal to investors and financial institutions. To redress this is likely to be the State supplementing the shortfall.

In addition, PPPs are notorious with the private partner defaulting and the Government having to acquire the debt. The entire allocation for the Ministry of Housing is \$668 million, with \$200 million earmarked for the HDC.

Mr. Speaker, I will now like to turn to the sporting sector. The sporting sector has been left visionless, untouched and directionless under this UNC Government. Again, the Minister of Finance took credit for the work of the PNM. The Government has no plan for sport and youth, no plan, no new programmes and no plan for the development of the youth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, why do I say so? If it is that youth and sport was a

priority for this Government, then it would not have been a case where precious little would have been said about it in the budget. Mr. Speaker, a PNM Government would have expanded our partnership with the GC Foster College of Jamaica, enhance the utilization of the Elite Athlete Assistance Programme facilities, and expanded the July/August vacation programme and the extension of the Community Cricket Programme.

Hon. Member: PNM again.

Ms. P. Beckles: This, plus many other sporting programmes, were all started under the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, they are also telling us that notwithstanding the fact that the hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs has been in office for five months, that he has not been able to meet the stakeholders. We are waiting patiently for the Minister's contribution to get an indication as to what is this situation. Mr. Speaker, we are talking about the major sporting bodies in the country and the first fundamental duty of the Minister has not been completed.

Mr. Speaker, as it relates to youth, this budget has tragically gutted the youth agenda in our development programme. Under the PNM, we created the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service to specifically promote holistic youth development by producing over 50 youth-centred policies—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—and programmes for the largest demographic in the country.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance has said little or nothing on youth development simply because the budget is bereft of any real youth development initiative. Half a page with nothing of substance was dedicated to youth in their *Public Sector Investment Programme*. Mr. Speaker, we allocated 50 million to the

development for youth in the last fiscal year, while they have proposed a measly 10 million, and 8 million of which is to repair indoor arenas and the rest for IT services. In summary, Mr. Speaker, the youth of this nation have received zero dollars for their development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, when the new Member for La Horquetta won, the young people of Trinidad and Tobago lost everything.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: I implore the young people to take notice.

Mr. Speaker, I will now like to turn to the allocation of local government. Local government is critical to the development and maintenance of our major cities, borough, towns and villages. Local government accounts for more than 80 per cent of our roadways, drainage systems and streets, and primarily acts as the first responder to the disasters in our communities. Mr. Speaker, what we have seen by this Government, in relation to local government, is political victimization, coupled with regressive policies, crowned with a lack of vision.

Mr. Speaker, the PNM-led corporations, which account for more than 50 per cent of the population, saw drastic reductions in their recurrent and development allocations. However, the UNC corporations received a greater share for themselves. This is very draconian, discriminative and very vindictive.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: I, Mr. Speaker, will give a few examples. The 2026 *Development Programme* allocation for the borough of Arima has been cut by 12.6 million, when compared to 2025. The *Development Programme* for the allocation of the borough of Diego Martin has been cut by 6.3 million. The *Development Programme* of the Port of Spain City Corporation has been cut by 15.6 million and

so on. Every single PNM corporation has had its 2026 *Development Programme* allocation drastically reduced.

Hon. Members: Wow.

Ms. P. Beckles: But when we look at the UNC corporations, Chaguanas, Princes Town, Penal/Debe, we have seen huge increases in their 2026 allocations in an excess of 20 million, making their *Development Programme* allocations for 2026 more than six times as large as the PNM corporations. Imagine the *Development Programme* allocation for Princes Town Corporation is now twice as large as the allocation for the capital city and the second city, San Fernando.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, to compound this inexplicable and cruel allocation, they have failed to release money for the PNM-controlled corporations for the *Development Programme*, which includes money for the repair and clearing of roads and drains.

Mr. Speaker, it is utterly disappointing to see a Minister, who has once served on the helm of local government, to allow this administration to stymie the ability of some corporations to provide for the basic needs of their communities. The PNM must be credited as the only Government that has been serious on the policy of local government reform, allowing for greater autonomy in law, executive management, and increased resources for our communities to advance real and progressive development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the agricultural sector that this UNC Government inherited in April 2025, was rebuilt, modernized and strengthened through a decade of structured investment and innovation under the stewardship of the PNM and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. When the PNM assumed

office in 2015, agriculture was on the decline, plagued by poor infrastructure, lack of access roads and weak institutional support. By 2025, through the deliberate policy and partnership, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries delivered tangible, measurable results across all public sectors.

The 2026 budget conveniently rebrands these achievements by calling them, Mr. Speaker, new plans, while failing to acknowledge the existing framework that made them possible. The new hon. Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries spoke of three-year priority commodities programme for 15 high-demand products, with annual focus on three crops and one livestock category, as if they were new areas of focus. I want to remind the hon. Minister, the truth is that these initiatives were launched and implemented under the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.40 a.m.

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, as a matter of fact, on May 18th 2025, three weeks into this Government's tenure, they executed a PNM policy by distributing an additional 100 tonnes of high-quality rice seeds procured from Guyana under the same memorandum of agreement arrangements for the 2025 rice growing season, not at least even willing to give the People's National Movement not even a 1 per cent credit.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The seeds are expected to support the commercial planting of approximately 2,000 acres of land across Trinidad and Tobago. This strategic intervention was part of the PNM Government's commitment to reducing the national food import bill, improving local agricultural resilience, and increasing rice self-sufficiency. Again, Mr. Speaker, sound PNM policy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the 2026 Budget's promise of new agricultural roads and irrigation projects mirrors exactly what the PNM completed over the last decade. These works build the foundation for food security and rural economic growth. Yes, this administration now speaks of starting where the PNM already succeeded. The budget claims of regularizing farmers and granting leases, again, rest and groundwork completed under the PNM.

In addition, while the 2026 Budget highlights digital transformation, the records show that it was the PNM Government that modernized the sector, full digitalization of the import permitting via TTBizlinks, Grow Trinbago platform, drone mapping, and LIDAR surveys for land management, digitalization of all state land, paper records, online farmer training via Moodle, and youth-focused 4-H programmes, reaching over 33,000 participants in 10 years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Under the PNM, agro-processing was greatly expanded. In fact, under the PNM, the Moruga Agro-Processing and Light Industrial Park was opened in 2020. NAMDEVCO's e-market platform and farmers' market expansion strengthened farm-to-market linkages and increased monthly consumer reach to over 21,000 shoppers. Mr. Speaker, the Minister reported that in agriculture, India donated agro-processing machinery valued at US\$1 million to NAMDEVCO and extended technical support for natural farming systems. Mr. Speaker, what he did not say is that the India/Trinidad and Tobago collaboration for the provision of grant funding of US\$1 million agro-processing equipment designated for NAMDEVCO was negotiated by the PNM administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: These negotiations began in June 2023. These are the kinds of structural transformations that the UNC now attempts to claim as new projects

under their government. Mr. Speaker, the PNM ensured access to agricultural credit through the ADB, approving over \$1 billion in loans.

Mr. Speaker, as agro-processing, aquaculture, hydroponics, aeroponics, indoor farming and poultry production are categorized as commercial customers, they will now experience a rise in their cost of production since the Government proposes the introduction of an electricity surcharge as a targeted fiscal measure. This could lead to increased prices for consumer agricultural products.

Mr. Speaker, the full implementation of the tax-free concessions for the agricultural sector is PNM policy, and all steps were initiated already to review the various pieces of legislation that cause ambiguity in the system. It must also be noted that most agricultural machinery and equipment are already free of VAT and duties, and existing provisions provide for farmers to apply to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries on a case-by-case basis for duty-free concessions and relief on any input they wish to procure for their operations. Provisions were also made under the existing Agricultural Incentive Programme for rebates of up to 50 per cent of the cost of many inputs for various sub-sectors in agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, going further, it was sound PNM policy that led to an additional line item for funding at the Ministry of Finance for agro-incentive grant funding of up to \$100,000 per person, or entities, wishing to upgrade their farms into climate-smart systems, move primary productions to agro-processing and add value to their operations. This Government came in, met cheques prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and blatantly refused to distribute them, allowing those checks to go stale-dated. Most of the farmers affected are, in many instances, their own constituents and certainly will be the judges of their actions.

Mr. Speaker, in relation to tourism, this budget failed to sustain and continue

policies already in place, failed to maintain investor confidence and has failed to articulate its vision for the tourism industry. This budget offers only empty slogans, ambiguity and vagueness. Mr. Speaker, this Government inherited the foundation of a tourism sector positioned for take-off. What we expected and what the country deserved was a budget that would consolidate and build upon that momentum. Instead, what we have is a document full of re-announcements, contradictions and vague plans.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the Minister declares that tourism remains a high-growth sector and lists accommodation projects such as Four Points, Hampton Inn, Maracas Bay, Tobago Marriott, and the Elephant Tree Resorts. He conveniently omitted, hopefully not by accident, to mention the already approved 125 Hilton Garden Inn, and the planned operationalization of the NAPA hotel, where a hotel operator was already chosen. While these projects are expected to bring jobs and economic generation, they are not new, as they were already on the way.

Mr. Speaker, they were in opposition for almost 10 years, and for the 10 years, they claimed to have all the answers. Yet today, in their first budget statement, there are no new initiatives, no policy direction, no capital allocation to support Trinidad and Tobago in tourism diversification.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the Government speaks of tourism as a high-growth sector, but the fiscal measures announced by the Minister of Finance will achieve the exact opposite. The budget introduces new taxes, surcharges and fee increases that will undoubtedly drive operating costs for hotels, restaurants, tour operators, and every small business connected with tourism. What this Government has

done, under the guise of broadening the tax base, is to broaden the burden, placing it squarely on the backs of those who are trying to grow the non-energy sector.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, you cannot speak about diversifying the economy on the one hand and then impose higher costs of doing business on the other. You cannot declare tourism as a high-growth sector while simultaneously draining its livelihood through higher operating expenses. This budget punishes participation in tourism rather than encourages it. How can you speak about “Tobago competitive” while increasing the operating costs of every hotel and guesthouse on the island?

Mr. Speaker, the Minister proudly announced that the ANR Robinson International Airport will be fully operational in the second quarter of 2026, which is nine months after the date that the PNM had scheduled for the said operationalization. Let us be clear, this project was virtually complete before the UNC Government took office.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Further, an airport terminal is simply infrastructure. What is needed is a complete tourism ecosystem such as what was planned and envisioned by the PNM Government with international flagship hotels, airline partnerships and world-class marinas.

11.50 a.m.

While the new Minister spoke about the airport, he said nothing about airlines. There were no mentions of Caribbean Airlines and its strategic routes, no mention of new partnerships, no plan for increased airlift, no destination marketing, no route incentives, and no international promotion of Tobago as a world-class destination. Equally troubling, the Minister announced no initiative to

attract a new international flagship hotel since they chased away Sandals, those global brands and anchor destinations, and created a pull factor for airlift.

Mr. Speaker, it is astonishing that the words “cruise ship” do not appear anywhere in this budget statement. The cruise industry, which has brought thousands of visitors and millions in foreign exchange, is now being completely ignored. The sector faces serious challenges due to the International Maritime Organization’s Net-zero Framework, which compels cruise lines to reduce their carbon footprint and shorten itineraries. As a result, many now operate five-day cruises that exclude Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, we wait patiently to hear what is the Government’s policy to address this particular issue. The new reality jeopardizes tourism jobs, foreign exchange earnings, and our cruise sector, yet, there is no mention in the incentives to attract cruise liners, no intent to negotiate, and no plan to mitigate the effects of this shift. While the other Caribbean countries are adapting to remain relevant and competitive, the Government has chosen to remain silent.

The budget boldly claims that the marine and yachting sector will attract some US \$3 billion in two years and US \$9 billion in five years, yet the Minister provided no policy, no plan, no feasibility study, no legislative framework, and no PPP agreement. These are not projections; they are fantasies in this fake and fraudulent budget.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister also spoke of an orange economy and the creation of a Carnival city, but no details. Where is this to be located? How will it operate, given the Government’s policy to limit noise in urban areas? What will happen to this sector with the huge increase in the price of alcoholic beverages? Where is the funding and business plan? Cultural tourism requires investment in people and experience, not vague declarations.

Mr. Speaker, our creative industries are living assets. They need structure and support, not speeches. Having listened to the Minister, that is the most I heard during his presentation as it relates to culture. We know that culture is the heart and soul of Trinidad and Tobago, yet absolutely no plans and projects were submitted by the hon. Minister as it relates to this area.

Mr. Speaker, I would now like to turn to Tobago. Like most Tobagonians, I welcome any increase in allocation to Tobago. We on this side will never oppose more for Tobago; however, we will always insist on the truth for Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, what is being sold to the public is a record spend of over \$3.7 billion, made up of 5 per cent of the budget allocation and an additional \$763 million in the central government expenditure, is quite frankly deceitful, deceptive, and dishonest.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the Government has blurred the lines between two very different types of expenditure. Direct THA allocations, which the assembly can actually use to manage Tobago affairs and central government expenditures in Tobago, such as oil spill response payments, WASA upgrades, T&TEC works, and other national programmes. These, Mr. Speaker, are not the same.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, central government projects in Tobago cannot be substituted for the THA's development funds. They do not build Tobago's autonomy, nor do they expand the assembly's fiscal authority. Mr. Speaker, it was the People's National Movement, both in Trinidad and Tobago, that voted to guarantee Tobago a minimum of 6.8 per cent through the Tobago Development Fund.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: It was the UNC, aided and abetted by their ally in Tobago, the current Chief Secretary, who derailed and rejected that constitutional commitment.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the result is that instead of receiving 6.8 per cent, roughly \$4 billion, Tobago is now getting only 5 per cent, \$2.96 billion. So let the record show, the UNC did not give Tobago a billion dollars more, they cost Tobago a billion dollars less.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, this is not the highest percentage the THA has ever received. In 2018, under the PNM Administration, Tobago combined allocation, including both direct THA funding and central government spend, represented approximately 6.4 per cent of the national budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: So what is being implemented, trumpeted today as historic, is in truth a record-breaking spin. When UNC spins, everybody spins.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, the development allocation, which funds Tobago's growth construction investment, actually decreased by \$4.5 million from \$205 million to \$201.4 million. Mr. Speaker, and this Government will have you believe that the People's National Movement, over the years, has not supported projects and plans for Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to note that with the partnership of the Tobago House of Assembly, a People's National Movement assisted in the acquisition of Cove Estate and its establishment as an eco-industrial hub for economic diversification. The landing of a 1 billion natural gas pipeline and natural gas

processing facilities in collaboration with a natural gas company was done by the People's National Movement; the construction of a dual-powered electricity generation plant at Cove and the designation of the Cove Eco-Industrial and Business Park as a special economic zone with a view towards accelerating the transformation and diversification of the Tobago economy; financial support for the acquisition and expansion of the Assembly's land bank; construction of the Scarborough and Roxborough hospitals; construction of the Roxborough and Shirvan Road Police Station; construction of the Roxborough Fire Station; construction of the Speyside Secondary, Mason Hall and Goodwood high schools; introduction of the Inter-island Ferry Service and the recent acquisition of three new fast ferries, *APT James*, the *Buccoo Reef* and the *Galleons Passage*, resulting in the potential growth of the Tobago economy by 25 per cent or \$500 million, providing valuable foreign exchange, creating direct employment for approximately 1,400 persons.

So, Mr. Speaker, let me make it abundantly clear. I want to state emphatically that the Opposition is in full support of sustainable tourism development in Tobago. We support the construction of complementary infrastructure in the tourism sector in Tobago, such as a marina, and we are also in support of the Rocky Point Marriott Hotel development project, which commenced with the joint efforts of the previous THA Administration and the central government. We hope that the current Government will reconsider their policy stance on tourism investment in Tobago, given that the leaders of the UNC, and the TPP/PDP, took full responsibility for throwing the Sandals projects out.

So, Mr. Speaker, let me make it abundantly clear that the Tobagonians are not asking for any favours, they are asking for value.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I want to say that when we look at URP and CEPEP, two programmes that sustained hundreds of Tobago households, we cannot find any clear allocation. So, I ask, is it that CEPEP and URP will be shut down in Tobago after the next THA election, just as they are being dismantled in Trinidad?

12.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, since 2021, the THA administration has received over 11 billion, averaging 2.7 billion per year, more than any administration in the history of the Assembly. Yet our people are asking: What has improved under their lives? My information is that over 300 million in development spend has been awarded to contractors outside of Tobago for works that were done in Tobago. The economic effects are devastating, Tobago contractors, who previously executed these services, now face cash flow crises and banks are moving to foreclose on long-standing local folks.

Mr. Speaker, tourism should be Tobago's economic engine, yet we see real signs of collapse. According to the Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association, international tourist arrivals have dropped, Mr. Speaker, by some 70 per cent, with only 24,500 foreign visitors recorded last year. This decline, confirmed by the THTA President in August 2025, represents an economic and social crisis for the island.

Mr. Speaker, we should also be honest about investments in Tobago. The PNM initiated both the Marriott and the Elephant Tree projects after spending over 25 million on overseas travel. What new bankable investment has the THA secured? To those who once ran Sandals out of Tobago, today I say, as the region embraces similar models—look at St. Vincent—see the opportunities that they have chased away.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, perhaps the greatest insult of this budget is the complete silence on Tobago's autonomy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: It is clear that the UNC's name is a misnomer. Mr. Speaker, there is no "national" in the United National Congress and soon there will be no "united".

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

Ms. P. Beckles: How could you be a national party and say not one word, not one line and not one promise in a budget about the autonomy for Tobago. The Chief Secretary, who once declared Tobago's autonomy his life's mission, who led marches and accused others of betrayal, was ignored by this congress.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Mr. Speaker, I would now like to address some issues as it relates to national security. Mr. Speaker, the budget statement was eerily silent about the crime and criminality.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The visionless Government did not present any workable anti-crime plan but boasted that murders were down, another fraudulent and false statement—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—in the face of 10 murders in a 24-hour period and all within a state of emergency.

Since my appointment as Leader of the Opposition, I gave the country an undertaking that this People's National Movement will do, as it has always done in

the national interest, cooperate with the Government on all initiatives and legislation that will advance the national good of the country.

Crime and criminality have been in this country's Achilles' heel for decades, from legislative interventions and social programmes, criminal justice, and policy and reforms, the challenge remains pervasive and the landscape remains fluid. A sustained national effort is the only way to fight this menace and the petty blame game will take us nowhere very fast.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: As a matter of fact, we have seen political obstructionist behaviour by the UNC when the PNM brought legislation to reform our justice system and to give law enforcement the upper hand in the fight against crime. Today, many of key spokespersons in the Government speak with the level of brazen hypocrisy on this matter, that even the criminals probably hold their heads in astonishment.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The UNC has played petty politics with crime, and on many occasions, has refused to cooperate with the previous PNM Governments in our efforts. From the cancellation of the purchase of the offshore patrol vessels to protect our national borders, the dismantling of the Special Anti-Crime Unit, the misuse and abuse of the assets of national security, the appointment of a telephone operator to lead the country's premier National Intelligence Agency—

Mr. Gonzales: Shame, shame.

Ms. P. Beckles:—the dismantling of the country's facial recognition system—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Yes, yes.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—are just a few examples of political misbehaviour and wickedness that work towards protecting criminals and giving them the upper hand to wreak havoc on our citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The country must never forget that it was the hon. Prime Minister who once said, “The war against the criminals is not the war on the seas, but it is on the streets,” to justify her Government’s reckless and irresponsible cancellation of a contract for the purchase of high-powered and high-speed naval vessels to protect and secure our nation’s porous borders. We must ask ourselves the sobering question: How many lives this has cost the people of Trinidad and our esteemed Caribbean neighbours?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: In case citizens are asking why they need to remind the country about this, it is because our circumstances today are as a direct result of uncooperative, undermining and destructive politics, practised by many in the past 15 years who now sit in the Government and who today are still on the stage pretending that they are now the champions and defenders of the people against the scourge of crimes.

[MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Speaker, fast forward to today—

Mr. Hosein: Madam Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to officially welcome you and to say that we are very pleased that you have the opportunity to preside.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, fast forward to today, since assuming office in April 29th, the Government and its Ministers, Homeland Security and Defence, have not articulated anything that inspires confidence. As a matter of fact, their presence and utterances in this Government have caused more to fear and consternation in the national psyche than crime itself.

Within a state of emergency called by this Government to address a specific national threat, this is the present state of affairs: Approximately 230 murders since this Government assumed office; approximately 85 committed since the State of Emergency was declared; 30 murders already recorded in the month of October; removal of the Prisons Commissioner from his position, sending the commanding officer of the regiment on leave and rescinding this decision within 48 hours; termination of the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff; Minister of Homeland Security in a recent passing out parade at the police academy, pleading with senior executive to stop infighting.

To add insult to injury, this unpatriotic Government cancelled our national Independence Day Parade because of a fear of attack by criminal elements. However, several Ministers have been seen in very public spaces without fear of criminals. The nation remains in the dark as to whether these threats were credible. Madam Deputy Speaker, it is clear to the national community that the UNC has once again fooled the population.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, they have no obvious plans to tackle crime from its root causes and are unable to demonstrate that it will do so differently from the previous PNM Government. Madam Deputy Speaker, so far, what the country has gotten from the Ministers in charge of national security is nothing but astonishing, bizarre examples, calling for the trying of child offenders

as adults, asking for the public to be patient, advising that attorneys stop drinking milk from their clients—

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

12.10 pm

Ms. P. Beckles:—invoking Standing Order 27(1) to evade answering questions on serious national security issues. All they can offer us, is plastic bags of hot air.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, these are certainly frightening times and the road ahead will be bumpy and rough. Madam Deputy Speaker, I would now like to turn to public utilities.

The hon. Minister of Finance, boldly mentioned and boasts about projects completed during the UNC's five month in office in the water sector. Madam Deputy Speaker, as Minister of Planning and Development in the last PNM Government, I worked closely with my colleague, the then hon. Marvin Gonzales, Minister of Public Utilities and Member of Parliament for Arouca/Lopinot in the transformation agenda for the water and sewerage sector. As part of this transformation road map, we secured funding from the Ministry of Finance through the development programmes and the Inter American Development Bank, for a suite of projects that saw water flowing in communities for the first time.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the People's National Movement was successful in completing over 400 small, medium and large projects that brought relief to many rural communities through the length and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago. Over 600,000 people experienced an improvement in their water supply and no amount of UNC misinformation will erase our stellar achievement in Port of Spain.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, we are aware that there is still work to be done in the water sector, but the foundation has been laid. I urge the Government to continue the work that was done and the plans and programmes put in place by technocrats and professionals that placed Trinidad and Tobago on the path towards achieving water security for all.

Madam Deputy Speaker, those of us who were in this Parliament in the year 2000 would recall that the then UNC Government said, that there would be water for all by the year 2000. Projects that started, and I could name a few, Guanapo, North Oropouche, Carapal, Freeport, Goldsborough, Santa Cruz and the Chatham Water Treatment Plants, these projects started under a visionary PNM Government, would bring relief—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—to the citizens and we expect to hear that this UNC Government, would carry through with them for the good of all. The undermining and demonizing of the transformation agenda for narrow political gains has already reversed years of hard work by true patriots in this sector and the country has already started paying the political price. Madam Deputy Speaker, no amount of press releases to fool the people will bring about water relief. It was hard work, fairness and a commitment by the PNM to take on difficult decisions and undertakings that will secure our water future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, although the budget was silent on climate change and any matters relating to the environment, its impact on the water surface and ground-water resources is already bearing down on our citizens, and the Government has said nothing that points towards a direction that inspires hope. Madam Deputy Speaker, the announced electricity rate increase for commercial and industrial customers came like a shock to many customers. This is the same

Government that campaigned and promised that there would be no electricity rate increase in Trinidad and Tobago. And in August this year the Minister of Public Utilities, boasted that the Government has rejected the last RIC report which was submitted to the last PNM Cabinet and was under consideration.

The PNM Government gave no undertakings save to say that whatever decision may be taken, the poor and the vulnerable would be insulated. Madam Deputy Speaker, in true UNC fashion the country got a six for a nine, with massive increases in the price of electricity, with these increases to be borne by all consumers in our supermarkets, small businesses, hair salons, shops, malls and variety stores. The Government has failed to put in place systems or policies to safeguard the poor and vulnerable in societies against these shocks. Yet another example of a fake and fraudulent budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: As it relates to education, Mr. Speaker—Madam Deputy Speaker, my apologies—under the People’s National Movement, education stood as a pillar of employment and opportunity. We invested in our students, protected the vulnerable, and built a system that worked for every child. Under this Government that legacy has been destroyed. Our education system has been gutted, neglected and left visionless.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, this budget exposes a government without compassion, without foresight, and without a plan for the young people of Trinidad and Tobago. Under the PNM, no child was left behind. We funded the remedial education programme, the book grant, and the school feeding programme. Under the UNC, those very programmes have been cut. The remedial education programme was reduced by \$4.4 million. The book grant was completely

removed, leaving 20,000 students without help. The school feeding programme was cut by \$10 million and for the first time in years, no vacation/revision programme was held to help the struggling SEA students. Madam Deputy Speaker, this is not policy, this is punishment.

Mr. Gonzales: Wickedness.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Under the PNM, we provided consistent funding for primary, secondary and special schools. Under this Government, there have been no increases, only deception.

The Minister boasted that 13 partner schools received \$11 million in support, pretending it was a new initiative. However, that same amount was allocated under the People's National Movement in 2024. Once again, the UNC has taken PNM projects, rebranded them and claimed them as their own. When we look at school repairs, the picture is even worse. Under the PNM, \$98 million was spent on repairing and upgrading schools. Under this Government, they were given \$192 million and spent only 26, less than 15 per cent. Then, even received an additional \$83 million in the mid-year and still failed to use it. Madam Deputy Speaker, schools had to turn to the regional corporations for help to reopen. One school was forced into a shift system because there was no furniture, even after the Ministry of Education delayed opening by a week. This, Madam Deputy Speaker, is incompetence and failure.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, under the PNM, we modernized education with e-classroom project and the education technology unit, bringing digital learning to life. Under this UNC—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. P. Beckles: “You will speak during yuh time, doh worry”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Under this UNC Government, that project was simply renamed “NextClass” and presented as something new. The UNC recycles PNM’s achievements and pretends it is their own.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.20 p.m.

Ms. P. Beckles: In the youth sector the pattern continues, new funding was cut by \$45 million.

Mr. Gonzales: Wow. Wow.

Hon. Member: For youth?

Ms. P. Beckles: That is right. There are no new programmes at UTT, NESC, National Training Agency, Accreditation Council, YTEPP or MIC. The provision for contract employment across both Ministries of Education and Tertiary Education was reduced by \$30 million, putting the jobs of hundreds of professionals at risk.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this Government has not only cut funding but it has also cut hope.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Under the PNM we built educational opportunities, under the UNC Government, they built excuses. They have dismantled what works, silenced what mattered and betrayed the young people of this country. This budget is not about building a nation, it is about breaking one. It is a budget of broken promises, misplaced priorities and fake delivery.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, this budget was empty on substance,

short on delivery, and, I maintain, false and fraudulent.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish now to address some issues as it relates to sales tax. The only new source of revenue suggested by this Government is the sales tax, which is intended, they say, to replace VAT. However, this new dispensation will take a minimum of five years to be fully implemented and not a cent of revenue will be derived in this financial year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I now want to deal with some issues relating to wage negotiations. I noticed, and I think the whole country noticed that the PSA is celebrating what they perceive to be a “done deal” with an increase of 10 per cent of their salary. However, while they celebrate, it is interesting to note that nowhere, absolutely nowhere in the Estimates of Expenditure can the allocation for the back pay of \$5 billion for an increase in annual recurrent expenditure of over \$500 million, which is just for the civil service, absolutely nowhere can it be found. It is not there. Did they forget? Was it \$1 billion oversight? And what about the other workers, the other trade unions, will they also get a 10 per cent increase or is the UNC playing favourites?

If they deprive the other trade unions of a similar 10 per cent increase, which they simply cannot finance without devaluing the dollar, they will create massive unrest. Madam Deputy Speaker, the Minister, as it relates to contract employment, outlined a policy of transition of fixed-term contracts to the permanent establishment, but let slip that only 40 per cent of existing contract positions are targeted for this transition. Apart from the fact that creating permanent positions on the civil service establishment is a complex undertaking that can take years to complete, what will happen, Madam Deputy Speaker, to the other 60 per cent of contract workers? Will they be terminated and sent home? This will be another 10,000 workers who can lose their jobs.

In this context, I say to workers, “Watch out, your contract positions will now be filled”. Of course, as they said, “When UNC wins, everybody wins”, but just wait to see—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—yes, just wait to see who will fill those positions, whether it be friend—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—or family, because we know very well, we just have to look. On the one hand they tell us that CEPEP and URP have been closed, but yet still we know that they have already hired certain persons to management positions to those programmes. So let us wait and see because the evidence is going to be made public whether in truth and in fact those URP programmes have really been closed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would now like to talk about the Development Programme. The Development Programme or PSIP is estimated at \$4.1 billion or 6 per cent of total expenditure. Is it enough? Can all those promises be fulfilled? Will the population be given full disclosure on the areas of new revenue streams as bandied about boastfully during the election campaign? What are these new revenue streams? Are they part of the Development Programme? Are they part of the Recurrent Expenditure or are they a figment of somebody’s fertile imagination? While destroying the TTRA, no mention was made of any new significant streams. As we all know, Madam Deputy Speaker, the PSIP is designed to promote growth, to generate employment, and of course to attract investment. No mention of how the PSIP will be used.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I therefore want to return to certain matters as it relates to URP and CEPEP, and I want to say that after mistreating and brutalizing

the CEPEP and URP workers for months, the Minister of Finance on Monday finally killed those programmes, and indicated that the Prime Minister will perform the final rites. This is the ultimate betrayal of workers who have been told that they would be getting back their jobs in a short space of time. As a matter of fact, on the one hand they spoke about an audit, and on the other hand they spoke about opening a new company. Now, I hope that the CEPEP and URP workers are very clear what was always the intention of this Government.

These workers who the Government put on the breadline with an expectation that this would be temporary have found out that there is no prospect of being rehired. Another fake and fraudulent promise.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: What therefore is their consolation, an “Unemployment Fund”, and I must ask, where will this fund reside and who will administer it? Will we now see the political patronage in exchange for employment? Who will workers now have to grovel in order to gain employment to this fund? Another plan to suit their UNC friends and family. We wait patiently.

As it relates, Madam Deputy Speaker, to the issue of revenue, this Minister of Finance predicated the budget on an oil price of US \$73.25 per barrel and US \$4.25 per MMBtu for natural gas. He has severely overestimated the energy prices on which this budget is based, therefore overestimating his revenue and severely underestimating the deficit. Madam Deputy Speaker, as I speak, yesterday West Texas Intermediate oil price, a benchmark used by Trinidad and Tobago for decades, was just over \$57 per barrel.

Shockingly, the US Energy Information Administration, a source used by the Ministry of Finance for decades for its forecast, is currently estimating a WTI price of US \$48.50 per barrel in 2026. This is almost US \$25 below the Minister’s

estimate of \$73.25, indicating that the Minister has grossly or, probably, deliberately overestimated the price of oil in 2026 in order to inflate his estimate of revenues from petroleum. Thereby, giving himself the ability to withdraw funds from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund when his bogus oil price is demonstrated to be false.

Fitch ratings, another source used by the Ministry of Finance, in recent years, just last month, lowered its oil price forecast to \$60 per barrel based on the increasing global oversupply of oil. When we exposed the ridiculous oil price estimate quoted by the Minister on Monday, one of his inexperienced but talkative colleagues claimed that the UNC had looked at various scenarios both optimistic and pessimistic to arrive at the dubious \$73.25 oil price for 2026.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the International Monetary Fund is similarly forecasting oil price below \$60 a barrel for Brent oil in 2026, and oil from Trinidad and Tobago fetches much lower prices than Brent on international markets. The World Bank is also estimating similar declines. In an effort to avoid any form of doubt, there is no credible source in the world that is currently predicting an oil price above \$60 per barrel of oil in 2026. That \$73.25 price was pulled out of a hat and it is as fake and fraudulent as the rest of the budget and only has one purpose—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.30 p.m.

Ms. P. Beckles:—that is to falsely inflate the estimates of energy revenues in order to meet the HSF rules for withdrawal of billions of dollars from the HSF.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as it relates to the analysis of fiscal measures, after inheriting an economy that was growing year on year, this Government successfully flattened and brought our economy into stagnation in five months. The

Review of the Economy 2025, produced by this Minister of Finance, is estimating a minus 0.8 per cent contraction of the economy in 2025, a complete reversal of the growth curve of previous years. This is after growth of 0.9 per cent in 2022, 1.5 per cent in 2023 and 2.5 per cent in 2024, under the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, nothing in this budget is designed to address our stagnating economy, stimulate growth over the next year and provide the groundwork for an economic recovery. This is purely a budget of delusion. But it is worse. The Minister of Finance has brought fiscal policies, which are contractionary, inflationary and arbitrary, a fantasy designed to fool the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while this Government congratulates itself, businesses will be reeling from increased taxes, surcharges, fees, price and doubled costs at the port. In haste to extract revenue, this Government has put the business sector under immense pressure, sent up costs and has set the stage for stagnation to turn into a full-blown recession. And these new draconian and punitive taxes are so hypocritical.

In 2020, the Prime Minister, who was then the Leader of the Opposition, proudly declared:

You cannot tax a nation into prosperity.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. P. Beckles:

For a nation to tax itself into prosperity, it is like a man standing in a bucket and trying to lift himself up by the handle of the bucket.

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

Ms. P. Beckles:

A UNC Government will lower tax and put money back into the pockets of citizens.

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

Mr. Imbert: Lowered taxes.

Ms. Beckles: Yes, one is lowering taxes. Look at the said UNC Government and the said Prime Minister. Tax, after tax, after tax.

Mr. Gonzales: Hypocrite.

Ms. P. Beckles: Who do you think will bear the brunt of these increased costs for businesses, the increase in electricity rates? The industrial and commercial users. It will be certainly transferred to consumers. People will feel the pinch in every purchase, increase in every freight, increase in every price of all imported goods. LPG increase will impact restaurants and small food businesses alike, but then, “Stay home and cook.”

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: “Aahh boy”.

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

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, the banks have already stated that it is the customers who will pay the increased taxes charged to them. With alcohol taxes doubled, we will probably, in many communities, see bars closing down. This country, as persons now curtail their consumption, the UNC, the Grinch that killed Christmas—

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

Ms. P. Beckles:—limes and a killer of Carnival fetes, bars and events. Very interesting, Madam Deputy Speaker, the price of the cheapest locally-produced bottle of rum has increased from \$110 to \$160.

Hon. Member: What?

Ms. P. Beckles: A whopping 45 per cent increase.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Ms. P. Beckles: A bottle of Stag or Carib will now cost \$13.

Hon. Member: What?

Ms. P. Beckles: And to add salt to the wound—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—not VAT-free salt, yes?—

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

Ms. P. Beckles: As his colleagues banged their desks and shouted that this punishment for our citizens was a win for everyone, the Minister described these huge increases, ranging from 30 to 50 per cent, as small. So out of touch are these elitists with the ordinary man on the street. It is clear. An analysis of these measures indicates it will only stymie business growth and investment, and increase prices for consumers. These are clear examples of the contractionary and inflationary fiscal policies in an economy that is stagnating. These policies are not the recommended approach. But the new Minister of Finance will not even admit that under his tenure, the economy has taken a turn for the worse. So, he is obviously in denial.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would now like to deal with some fiscal measures. Let me briefly review some of the fiscal measures and their implications. Levy on banks and insurance companies: 0.25 per cent asset levy on total assets of commercial banks and insurance companies. This will automatically and immediately increase all bank fees for customers. Commercial banks do not have a history of absorbing costs and will pass it on immediately to customers. The Prime Minister said, “The Government will intervene to avoid this possible scenario”. The question now becomes, how and through what mechanism. Well, I think every Trinidadian and Tobagonian is waiting eagerly for the intervention and the

solution.

As it relates to the landlord business surcharge: New registration and requirements for all landlords with the Board of Inland Revenue. This will lead to an immediate increase in rents throughout the country of all tenants. In addition, since it is going into the Consolidated Fund, this new tax deprives local government corporations of badly-needed funds to maintain local infrastructure and amenities.

Of course, Madam Deputy Speaker, the dreaded word, property tax, which we have not heard about. And we know that of the 55 Commonwealth countries, 49 have some form of property tax. It is considered an essential mechanism for collecting taxes to fund local government bodies.

So, notwithstanding the fanfare, the hon. Minister of Finance was clear. He only halted the implementation of the property tax. It is important for all citizens to know that that piece of legislation is not repealed and therefore, still stands as part of the legislative framework. Where, therefore, does he leave property holders, especially those who are selling property and giving an undertaking to ensure that their property is properly conveyed? What is the surcharge on property owners who rent their properties? It is not calculated on the net income derived from the rental of property, net of expenses. It is calculated on the gross value of the rental, which is penal.

What about the corporations and/or individuals that currently rent properties and already tax their income? They too are landlords and now are subjected to another tax at the same income. Similarly, many retirees rent out their properties to supplement their retirement income, if they have any, and must now pay surcharge too. Madam Deputy Speaker, what hypocrisy.

As it relates to the electricity surcharge: A fixed of 0.05 per kilowatt hour

surcharge on commercial and industrial users. The increase in electricity rates will be passed on to consumers through food, groceries, manufactured products and services. Our manufacturers stand the risk of losing their competitiveness in the Caricom market and further abroad.

As it relates to the increase in excise duties, fees and charges, alcohol and tobacco-related industries will face difficult times. This will have serious negative effects on tourism industry in this country. Since with this move, alcohol is now much cheaper in all the Caribbean islands than that of Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago was already struggling to compete with other countries that have a much better tourism product. Several bars and restaurants could very well be facing imminent closure.

12.40 p.m.

As it relates to the new National Investment Fund bond, when the first NIF bond was issued under the PNM, the hon. Prime Minister and then Leader of the Opposition described the NIF as dangerous and risky fraud and told her supporters to resist it because, according to her, it was a Ponzi scheme. Madam Deputy Speaker, this is yet another 360-degree turn, similar to the Dragon gas. Let them say what they want. NIF 1 and NIF 2 are major success stories of the People's National Movement—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. P. Beckles:—and are two of the most successful investment vehicles and gifts to the citizens in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as it relates to higher penalties for traffic offences, the Government has virtually scrapped the demerit system introduced by the People's National Movement, which had reduced road fatalities and road accidents significantly, but now, in yet another flip-flop, wants to implement huge penalties

for traffic offences as a revenue-generating mechanism. Some of these offences are very subjective, such as careless driving, and when left to the interpretation of a police officer could mean anything, while you face a fine of \$15,000. We wait patiently to see how this is going to be implemented.

Removal of motor vehicles tax concession for returning nationals. Just last week, the hon. Minister of Finance was quoted as calling on the diaspora to return to the motherland of Trinidad and Tobago now that the UNC is in power. But within hours, the Minister of Finance is dis-incentivizing the process by removing the incentive for returning nationals. In other words, they want nationals living overseas to return to live in Trinidad and Tobago, but they cannot bring their personal effects and vehicles without the imposition of punitive taxation. Madam Deputy Speaker, it could simply be a case where it could be a system that is not working well, so you revisit it. But to totally eliminate it, that shows the continued level insensitivity of this Government.

As it relates to the adjustment of the LPG subsidy, Madam Deputy Speaker, this will have an immediate impact on small businesses who sell food like doubles, corn soup, bake and shark, all the fast food outlets, restaurants, parlours, cafes, roti shops and a myriad of caterers who sell food to the working people, which must lead to an increase in the price of these food items. The hon. Prime Minister, who has a habit of making spontaneous statements, was quoted as saying that:

Not many people use the 100 pound gas cylinder for business purposes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, that is absolutely false.

As it relates National Insurance system reform, again, the hon. Prime Minister as Opposition Leader stated on the campaign trail:

“Any discussion about changing the retirement age”

—and I am quoting:

“Any discussion...”—about—“...changing the retirement age will need serious consultations”—and—“should that be the option preferred by the majority, it should be the one by choice.

That is to say, those who wish to go home by 60, fine. Those who wish to home by 65, fine. But you cannot tell a man work his...”—entire—“...life, put his savings in the NIS every week or every month and you come to tell him now, sorry sir, you cannot get it you have to wait till 65. You cannot continue like that.”

Hon. Member: The Prime Minister said that?

Ms. P. Beckles: That is right. In actuality, this measure will add 3 per cent to the National Insurance contributions in 2026 and another 3 per cent in 2027, thereby increasing the NIS contribution rate from the present 13.2 per cent of insurable income to 19.2 per cent of the insurable income by 2027. It is double what was discussed by the PNM and would lead to a 45 per cent increase of the NIS contributions. And of course, if that is not true, hon. Minister of Finance, you can say that in your winding up. For the average worker earning \$7,500 per month this will increase their monthly contributions from \$350 to \$500 per month, thus wiping out an illusionary win as stated by the UNC.

Further, the Prime Minister, as Leader of the Opposition, said emphatically that before any increases in the retirement age is implemented, consultations must, must be conducted with the population. I want to ask the hon. Prime Minister, whether any consultations was done. However, no consultation on increasing the retirement age and reducing NIS pensions with any affected stakeholder or any working person. Notably, the trade unions like the PSA, who screamed outrage when the PNM publically discussed this exact measure with them in 2021 and 2023, they are now quiet as a mouse. And we know, at that time there was no

trade union that was supportive of that measure. What is the case now? Quiet. To use the exact words of the PSA in June 2021, still on their website; still on their website. If you go today, it is there:

“No”—to—“Retirement”—age—“At 65!”

“Government Ministers shame, on them”

—for suggesting an increase in the retirement age.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Bunch of hypocrites. Misleaders.

Ms. P. Beckles: As a matter of fact, the words of former UNC Member of Parliament for Couva South at the time, April 2023, speaking on behalf of the UNC also, reveals the sheer hypocrisy of this Government. At the time, the hon. Mr. Indarsingh, at that time, now a judge of the Industrial Court and shadow Minister of Labour, on April the 5th 2023, just over two years ago, and Madam Deputy Speaker, if I can quote:

“The recent announcement by the Minister of Finance Colm Imbert that the Rowley-led Government is seeking to increase contributions to the National Insurance Fund is one of the most oppressive, anti-worker, deceitful stabs in the backs of workers across Trinidad and Tobago.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.50 p.m.

Ms. P. Beckles: “The People’s National Movement,”—has—“made mention...of a consideration to increase the retirement age, another measure which I vehemently and totally reject.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: He continued:

Mr. Gonzales: “These people sick?”

Ms. P. Beckles:

“Between the increase in the retirement age to 65—

Mr. Gonzales: “Dem is de devil?”

Ms. P. Beckles:—“and this new dictatorial move to increase NIS rates, it is clear that this Government continues to pick the pockets of the workers of this country...”

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

Ms. P. Beckles: “More so,”—

Mr. Gonzales: Tancoo picking it now.

Ms. P. Beckles:—“an increase in contribution rates means that all businesses have to pay more”—

Mr. Gonzales: That is right.

Ms. P. Beckles:—“to the”—NIS—“Fund. Given the increases in utilities...property tax and other related inputs, can this be afforded by small and medium businesses?”

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: UNC said that?

Hon. Member: No.

Mr. Imbert: Yes.

Ms. P. Beckles: “Increased expenses will lead to business closures,”—

Mr. Gonzales: That is right.

Ms. P. Beckles:—“which will lead to unemployment.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, at that time the People’s National Movement had started the discussions and had started the consultations, and these statements were in response to mere discussions on the NIS initiated discussions initiated by the PNM years ago and are all now ironically applicable to this UNC

Government, which according to hon. Mr. Indarsingh's logic in 2023, has now come in 2025 like "a thief in de the night", to use his word, to oppress workers and pick their pockets, increase their NIS contributions by almost 50 per cent, reduce workers' disposable income significantly—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: "Nah."

Ms. P. Beckles:—and damage the livelihood of small businesses without any consultation whatsoever with the population.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Then they want to market to you, "when UNC wins, workers win". Totally misleading.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Bias.

Mr. Gonzales: Pick-pocketers win.

Ms. P. Beckles: Fraudulence.

Mr. Gonzales: Pick-pocketers.

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, I now want turn to agricultural incentives. The hon. Minister of Finance made a loud boast about removing VAT on agricultural equipment. However, because of the PNM's policy on the agriculture sector, this sector is already a VAT-free sector. Something the Minister should know. This is just smoke and mirrors, "gambage" by the hon. Minister of Finance. As it relates to one of their big marketing strategies, VAT removal on basic food items. They promised to give the population another UNC win by removing VAT on vegetables like cucumber, lettuce—

Mr. Gonzales: Cabbage.

Ms. P. Beckles:—tomatoes.

Mr. Gonzales: Salt.

Ms. P. Beckles:—coconut water, cabbage. It is absurd and it shows that

somebody clearly misled the Minister of Finance. The items that he mentioned fall into the first category of zero-rated items published by the People's National Movement government in—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—2016.

Mr. Gonzales: Wow. Wow.

Ms. P. Beckles: That is, unprocessed food of a type for human consumption. It appears that the UNC Ministers have become accustomed in the short space of five months—

Mr. Gonzales: Drunk on mauby.

Ms. P. Beckles:—of going to places where they do not have a clue that all of these items that they are boasting about already have VAT removals.

Mr. Gonzales: Wow.

Ms. P. Beckles: Clearly, I am very suspicious as to whether they go to the grocery or they go to the market because once you go to those places and you get your receipt you will be able to tell whether when you purchase cucumber, when you purchase tomatoes, when you purchase lettuce in the grocery you could see what is the situation. I strongly suspect that they are not going to the market and have not been going there for years. Ironically, as it relates to possibly the exception of salt, and ironically the removal of VAT from salt is a clear indication that the UNC now wants the thousands of dismissed workers in CEPEP and URP to suck salt.

Mr. Gonzales: To suck salt.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: Suck salt. Drink mauby. Salt suckers.

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, before I conclude as the first female leader of the People's National Movement—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—and as an accomplished professional woman in my own right, I must speak on the complete absence of gender equity in this budget. Madam Deputy Speaker, I currently hold the position of President of the Women Parliamentarians of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: I take note of the fact that a lot of my colleagues on the other side, for whatever reason, have refused to participate in this organization which is a strong advocate for gender-based budgeting which is a process that utilizes fiscal policies to promote gender equality.

Madam Deputy Speaker, many Parliaments all over the world have taken a decision to establish women parliamentarians on both sides of the divide, and I hope that it is something that this Government will reconsider, because it does not mean that you have to change your policy on any of your issues. All it means is that women on both sides of the aisle can discuss matters that impact positively on women.

Through gender-based budgeting the gender gap in government policy can be better addressed to serve the specific needs of men and women alike. In consideration of this gender-based approach, I am compelled to ask: What is the gender impact of these allocations? And is there a gender equity component in this budget with women facing additional barriers in the workplace, the creation and support for child care centres and homework centres could increase the female labour force participation. Why is this not mentioned in the budget statement? Given the drive towards digitization and the under-representation of women and girls in STEM, where are the policies to channel girls toward these higher-paying fields without growth opportunities? These are just a few policy considerations I

would like to raise, Madam Deputy Speaker. The budget made no mention at all of that word “gender”.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the last couple of minutes that I have, I want to use the opportunity to deal with some matters relating to my constituency. Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to continue to thank the people of Arima for the opportunity that they have given me to serve them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: I heard the hon. Minister speak about the fact that a water project was done in Arima, and when the UNC wins, the people of Arima win.

Hon. Member: The Arima market.

Ms. P. Beckles: If they get that market, it is because the plans have already been completed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: And like all the other projects, you all simply take it and then take the credit.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Do not get too excited.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. P. Beckles: I want to say that—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: Stop it.

Ms. P. Beckles: I know the hon. Member for St. Augustine gets a little excited every time she hears Arima.

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

1.00 p.m.

Ms. P. Beckles: I just want to remind you, it is different “A”; Arima not

Augustine, right? So, let us stick to it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: Double Palm.

Ms. P. Beckles: I just want to say that it is very important that—and I want to ask the hon. Minister of People, Social Development and Family Services to look very closely at the facility that was completed in Arima some time ago and is yet to officially open. I made representations to your Ministry, the Ministry of People, Social Development and Family Services and at that time, the hon. Minister, Donna Cox—because the people of Arima, Blanchisseuse, Morne La Croix, Paria, and many places, go all the way to Tunapuna. So that I am aware from information received that there was everything put in place for that facility to open and it is now almost five months. So, I ask you to kindly look in to that issue, so that the people of the Arima can have the benefit of the use of that facility.

I want to also say that under the People's National Movement, the constituency of Arima became the first smart city in the Caribbean, implemented through the Ministry of Housing and the Inter-American Development Bank, and my hope, of course, is that project continues, together with the Arima connect project, which is the one patient, one record.

Thanks to the PNM administration—and I know the hon. Member for St. Augustine does not agree with me, but we have delivered the state-of-the-art Arima public hospital.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: We also opened the Blanchisseuse Health Centre, which now includes an incident response unit, a conference centre and a non-communicable disease service, and I say thanks to my former colleague, former Member of Parliament for St Joseph, the hon. Terrence Deyalsingh. In 2025, the centre

received a portable ultrasound machine, improving the diagnostic care of the rural residents, and I am sure all of you agree that challenges exist from time to time for rural communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud to report as well that the People's National Movement has upgraded the Blanchisseuse and La Fillette fishing facilities. I have not seen any further allocation in the budget to complete the Blanchisseuse facility, but I will be writing to the hon. Minister to ensure that that facility is completed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to raise the issue of youth for those issues of Blanchisseuse, La Fillette, Brasso Seco, Avocat, Morne La Croix, Temple Village, and so on, just to indicate that the closure of the youth agricultural programmes, the closure of the reforestation project, the closure of CEPEP has resulted in hundreds of persons from those areas not being employed. And I have said to my many constituents who, in some instances, as the Member of Parliament for St. Augustine said, voted for the UNC, they now realize that a vote for the UNC was not a vote for many people who live the constituency of Arima.

I, finally, Madam Deputy Speaker—I want to urge this Government to continue to do the upgrade of works in the rural communities. Some of those projects have stopped, particularly in Aripo, Morne La Croix, and Brasso Seco.

As it relates to the Santa Rosa First Peoples, who received 25 acres of the land on the Arima/Blanchisseuse Road, and under the last Government, was able to receive electricity and pipe-borne water, our First Peoples, the contract—the CEPEP contract—the reforestation contract for the First Peoples has now ended. I took note of the fact that no Member of this Government attended the conference organized by the First Peoples or their normal ceremony that takes place outside of the Red House for whatever reason. I just want to remind all of us that First

Peoples were here long before any of us came to Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: I want to—

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—notwithstanding—

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Notwithstanding—I have a feeling the Member of Parliament for St. Augustine wants to come and live in Arima, you know.

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

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Gonzales: “It ha no Double Palm dey, you know. It ha no Double Palm”.

Ms. P. Beckles: I just want to record my thanks and appreciation—

Ms. Ameen: I have better representations—[*Inaudible*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—to the former Member of Parliament, the former Minister of Public Utilities, the hon. Marvin Gonzales, for the improvement of water supply in the constituency of Arima—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—the Aripo Water Treatment Plant, the Guanapo Water Treatment Plant and the Community Water Improvement Programme.

I also want to acknowledge—because when I looked in the PSIP, I saw works to begin on the public library, the velodrome upgrades and I wait, of course, very patiently for the start of those projects.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to conclude by saying that in these very five short months, this Government has lost the trust and confidence of the people, and now that the mask is unveiled—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles:—and the true plan is at hand, the people are realizing they are taking us to a place where no wants to go.

In five months, the Government has attempted the following: To completely destroy our national Independence Day celebrations; to completely destroy our nation's achievement of independence; to completely destroy our Republican status; to destroy relations with our Caricom neighbours; to destroy our Caribbean region as a zone of peace. And in five months, the Government has fired the Board of Directors of every state enterprise and every statutory body. In five months, the Government has tried its best to destroy our racial and ethnic harmony. They have tried to promote—

Mr. Padarath: Madam Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6).

Mr. Imbert: Oh, come on.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Arima, I suggest that we move on, please.

Ms. P. Beckles: Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, we will not support a social crisis brought about by targeting the poor and the vulnerable. We will not support forced austerity in this country and the hardship it is causing. The PNM will not support attacking small, medium and big businesses. The PNM will not support fiscal incompetence and clueless Ministers. The PNM will not support the depletion of our forex reserves, while misleading the population about cartels. The PNM will not support a devaluation of our dollar.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The PNM will not support the Government taking the country into is debt trap and will not support the destruction of the very fabric of our

society, while the UNC seeks to rewrite our history. The PNM will not support the diplomatic and national security crisis being perpetrated by this Government on innocent citizens who now live in fear of being targets in a greater geopolitical game. The PNM will defend the rights and freedoms of all our citizens, while the Government abuses its constitutional majority. The PNM will defend our independent institutions, which we hold sacred and dear, and which the UNC is determined to destroy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: Madam Deputy Speaker, this budget is one of deception, treachery and betrayal. We warned the nation and it is sad to say, it is coming to pass.

1.10 p.m.

This is a government that is so caught up with the limelight of the dance with powers greater than itself that it has forgotten the people and has become tyrannical in its governance. Madam Deputy Speaker, the hope lies in people who refuse to forget who they are and in an inherent pride in ourselves and our struggles. They have demonstrated at the masses congregated to celebrate our independence despite the actions of a wicked government to deny us our patriotic right, and we made sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we were present.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. P. Beckles: The people of Trinidad and Tobago will always prevail and we are coming together under the banner of unity. They have totally rejected the divisiveness perpetuated by this Government and are ready for a safe, steady and competent hand of the People's National Movement.

Madam Deputy Speaker, after they have destroyed all that has been built over the 63 years of independence and beyond, it will fall to this side to rebuild.

We are prepared to do so hand in hand with the people of Trinidad and Tobago.
Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Arima, I thank you for your contribution and your response to the 2026 Budget reading.

**MATTER OF PRIVILEGE RULING
(PARLIAMENTARY WALKOUT)**

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I have an announcement to make. On Monday 13th, October, 2025, I received a matter of privilege from the Member for Couva South in accordance with Standing Order 32(2). The Member for Couva South sought leave to raise the following matter: During the siting of the House of Representatives on Friday 10th October, 2025, Members of the Opposition Bench staged a parliamentary walkout, which was followed by a subsequent statement on their actions by the Leader of the Opposition and Member for Arima. The Member for Couva South submitted that under the letter head of the Leader of the Opposition on 10th October, 2025, the following public statement was issued, and I quote:

“...after months of enduring bias and prejudicial behaviour from the Presiding Officer of the Lower House, all Members of Parliament on the Opposition Bench were left with no choice but to leave today’s Sitting. The pattern of unfair treatment and rulings has continued unchecked and unaddressed.

It is now beyond question to unbiased observers that the current Speaker of the House has failed in his duty to act impartially and to uphold the Constitution and the Standing Orders of Parliament. Since assuming the Chair, the Speaker has consistently rejected the majority of Urgent

Questions and Prime Minister's questions filed by the Opposition. His refusal to maintain established precedent on Supplemental Questions is a direct challenge to accountability and transparency in the conduct of the people's business.

Another constant feature of recent Sittings has been the uneven and biased application of Standing Orders. The Speaker routinely overlooks inappropriate behaviour from Members of the Government, including disorderly conduct and offensive remarks, yet is quick to silence Members on the Opposition Bench."

The Member of Parliament for Couva South has raised a matter of privilege based on the submission that the Member for Arima attempted to bring into disrepute the independent democratic work of the House of Representatives in the eyes of the public for political gain by questioning the independence of the Presiding Officer. The Member for Couva South submitted that this was an act of, and I quote:

Constructive contempt against the House of Representatives, breaching the privilege of the House as the Member's actions seek to obstruct and tarnish the democratic as well as independent management, presiding and rulings of the Presiding Officer.

Members, since receiving this on Monday 13th, I have undertaken significant research and analysis. Members, today I am prepared to rule on this critical matter. Members, the House of Representatives and the Parliament as an institution represent the foundation of democracy; democracy whether what side of the aisle we stand must always be preserved. Preserving the democracy means protecting the independence of our Parliament in the public eyes, as well as the operations of its duties. It has always been a precedent of our Republic and past Parliaments to

never bring the Presiding Officer into the realm of political attacks or aspersions based on the foundation of protecting the dignity of our parliamentary institutions.

Erskine May's Parliamentary Practice on page 138 speaks to constructive contempt as it states and I quote:

“...indignities offered to the House by words spoken or writings published reflecting on its character or proceedings have been published by both the Commons and the Lords upon the principle that such act of abuse tend to obstruct the Houses in the performance of their functions by diminishing the respect due to them.”

So, hon. Members, in deciding whether a prima facie case of contempt has been made out, the Chair must carefully consider the facts alleged and all the information placed before her. I have done just that and find that the prima facie case of contempt has indeed been made out.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: I so rule and refer this matter to the Committee of Privileges for consideration and report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Members, I now suggest that we suspend the House for the lunch break and we return at 2.17 p.m.

1.17 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

2.17 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Land and Legal Affairs and Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (Hon. Saddam Hosein): Thank you very much, thank

you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you very much colleagues. Mr. Speaker, it is my great privilege, for the first time as a Member of Cabinet in the Government led by the Member for Siparia, to rise in this debate and contribute to Budget 2026.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: As a young man, I am very proud to boast that this is the ninth budget that I am contributing to in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Eight in Opposition, one in Government and many more in Government again, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: But, Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank the great people of Barataria/San Juan for reposing the confidence in me as their elected Member of Parliament to represent their interests in this very sacred Chamber. Additionally, we would also like to thank the hundreds of citizens who would have attended our budget consultations that were conducted by all of the Members of Parliament on this side, who had attended those consultations and also those persons who have submitted their suggestions, their questions and their concerns. And then, the Ministry and the Minister responsible for taking the will of the people through those consultations and placing it into this budget document, I would like to congratulate the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and their respective teams, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, I would also like to congratulate and thank our hard working Prime Minister, the hon. Member for Siparia, for her critical role in guiding government policy and her meticulous examination of the policies and allocations that are before this sacred House to be debated by Members here. I

also would like to thank all of my Cabinet colleagues for the work that they have put in the last six months in Government, the tremendous amount of work to ensure that we are at this moment here today, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.20 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Arima is not here, but I would just like to tell her in her absence, Mr. Speaker, that the Member looked very beautiful this morning and I want to congratulate her on her maiden budget response, as the Opposition Leader. But as our good leader said, Mr. Speaker, is that you must not only look good, you have to sound good.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: And I think that is where the Member for Arima fell down, Mr. Speaker. That is where she fell down. Because I want to know, Mr. Speaker, who really wrote that speech for the Member for Arima? It was disjointed, it was inconsistent, it lacked substance—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein:—it was intellectually bankrupt, Mr. Speaker, and it was simply boring.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes.

Hon. S. Hosein: Boring.

Mr. Lee: It was a bad novel.

Hon. S. Hosein: The Member for Arima flip-flopped all over the place. The Member said that we are engaging in populist decisions and policies but at the same time said that we are attacking the ordinary man and woman in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Member: Make up your mind.

Hon. S. Hosein: The Member then said listen, you all—this is not a small-man budget, this is for the big people but said that we are attacking the banks and all of the commercial institutions in Trinidad and Tobago. Make up your mind. They are eternally confused, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: That is probably the weakest Opposition they have in the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Then the Member said that we came into office because of populist measures and decisions. We did not come into power because of populist measures, Mr. Speaker. We took hard decisions as our first Government here, Mr. Speaker but they were voted out because of their corruption, inept and—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, you see, the Member said that the alternative to the PNM is what, chaos? I think the 310 ex-Caroni workers who received leases under the last six months will not think so, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: They will not think so, they will not think so at all. And then the Member said, what? That in six months “it have pothole” in this country.

Hon. Members: “Ooooh.”

Hon. S. Hosein: Six months, “it have pothole” in this country. They are blaming us for their incompetence, Mr. Speaker. They forgot who their Minister of Works and Transport was, Mr. Sinanan. Mr. Speaker, they fixed nothing and they want to come and blame us but we are not taking that. That is clear hypocrisy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Clear hypocrisy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: For God's sake, have a "lil" shame.

Ms. Mohit: Have shame.

Hon. S. Hosein: Have some shame.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Have some shame, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Lee: "It have ah" bad pothole in Glencoe.

Hon. S. Hosein: And the Member—I would have thought, because when I sat in Opposition, Mr. Speaker, I always listened to what the Member for Siparia said as the Opposition leader. There was an intellectually analysed contribution. You heard about the macroeconomics, the microeconomics; you heard about plans to take our country forward, Mr. Speaker. I listened for about three hours to the Member for Arima and all I heard, Mr. Speaker, was, "Rum too expensive".

Dr. Moonilal: She sounds like Ravi B.

Hon. S. Hosein: That rum is too expensive.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. S. Hosein: That is all I heard, Mr. Speaker. And then complained that we increased the price of rum. But Mr. Speaker, history and record will bear us out today. Do you know that the Member for Diego Martin North/East, when he was the Minister of Finance, in fiscal 2017 said this:

"...over 3 million deaths"—occur—"every year..."—because of—"...the harmful use of alcohol."

So he proposes to:

"increase with effect from October 20, 2016, the excise duty on locally manufactured tobacco by 15 percent as well as on alcoholic products by 20 percent."—This is expected to—"yield...\$60 Million."

Sheer hypocrisy, Mr. Speaker. Sheer hypocrisy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: But we are not taking that, Mr. Speaker, because we here are about delivery. We make the promises. We make the promises and we keep the promises, Mr. Speaker. We make them and we keep them. That is what we do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Because what did the Member for Arima do in the last five years or so as Minister of Planning and Development? What did the Member plan? The Member planned nothing, but what they left the country is penniless.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: You know, the Member had “pip” for the last 10 years but wants to give us mouth here today, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Member: Oh, my.

Hon. S. Hosein: They had “pip”. Where was the Member’s voice when over 610 persons died in one year and they kept a sleeping Minister of National Security? Where was the Member when people could not get water in their pipelines, Mr. Speaker? Where was the Member’s voice when they raised gas, not one, two or three times, Mr. Speaker? Where was their voice? Where was the Member’s voice? But I can tell you that this compassionate, caring Government led by Siparia lowered the price of super gasoline by \$1.00.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: While the Member for Fyzabad was speaking on Monday and people were fulling their gas, they were getting cheaper gas at the pump. That is performance, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: That is performance. That is performance. And then the

Member had the gall to say, what? We are anti-youth and so on.

Mr. Lee: Anti-youth?

Hon. S. Hosein: You know, they have a 65-year-old pensioner as the Youth Officer of the PNM?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. S. Hosein: You know that, Mr. Speaker? Mr. Speaker, they have the gall to tell us about unemployment. Under the PNM, 70,670 jobs were lost under the PNM. Take that in your pipe and smoke it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: And then talking about, “Drag-on” and talking about Venezuela and so on, Mr. Speaker. I can tell you that Prime Minister Persad-Bissessar will not be in any conga line, she will be sitting in the boardroom, Mr. Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein:—making decisions in the best interest of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. That is where she will be, Mr. Speaker, so we are not going to be distracted by them and their nonsense, Mr. Speaker. But what I will tell you—

Hon. Member: Rubbish.

Hon. S. Hosein:—is that they have been making some noise in the public domain since Monday because they do not know what to say about this budget again. Because this is one of the best budgets I have ever heard, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: It is a fair budget, Mr. Speaker. It is an equitable budget, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it is a budget that is people-centred. That is what it is.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: So this nonsense about fake and fraud, but I will get to the fake and fraud soon.

Mr. Speaker, they talked about this NIS issue. I want to make it very clear to the population that these are not measures that will be implemented overnight. This will take a 10-year rollout period, Mr. Speaker, in terms of the retirement age, because two things are being done. One, the increase of the retirement age and two, the increase of the contributions and so on. But this is not instant. It is a way, Mr. Speaker, that we are easing into the population. It takes us 10 years for the increase of the retirement age to be done. But I want to tell you something, Mr. Speaker, because I heard the Member for Arima quote all kinds of speech and narrative about the retirement age, but I want to quote too, Mr. Speaker. The House of Representatives *Hansard*, Mr. Speaker, dated 09 October, 2023, budget debate 2023, the Member for San Fernando East had this to say. He said:

“Mr. Deputy Speaker...”

I am quoting, Mr. Speaker:

“Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me explain to the national community just how important of an issue this increased requirement age is. I can say here today that without an increase in the retirement age, there may not be a public pension fund to benefit future generations of this country going forward.”

That is what the Member for San Fernando East had to say about the increase in the retirement age, Mr. Speaker. That is what he had to say. Why did the Member for Arima not quote the Member for San Fernando East?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Why? Why did you not quote him? And this is not a mandatory thing, Mr. Speaker. If someone wants to retire at age 60, they can retire and they will still be entitled to a pension but it will not be the full amount. And, Mr. Speaker, this as I said, it is a 10 year rollout period but, Mr. Speaker, I want to tell

you that when the UNC wins, the public servants will win because the Minister already indicated that the 10 per cent is on the table, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: It is on the table and, Mr. Speaker, let me tell you the burden that they are talking about. The NIS provided some information for us and with the increase, the 3 per cent increase to the contribution rate, we looked at three categories, the lowest, middle and the highest. The lowest category, Mr. Speaker, where someone earns a salary, a monthly salary of about \$1,472, Mr. Speaker, their average monthly increase will be \$11.70.

Hon. Member: Repeat that.

Hon. S. Hosein: \$11.70

2.30 p.m.

A person with a salary of about \$6,400, Mr. Speaker, their average monthly increase will be \$60.24, less than \$100. Where someone's salary increases or goes over \$13,000, the employee will have to contribute \$136.05. We are a caring and compassionate Government. We are easing these matters.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: So, Mr. Speaker, we do not buy that narrative of the Opposition.

And then they had the gall to talk about the HSF and foreign exchange reserves and what they left us with and how many months' cover we had now. Mr. Speaker, I have to report in my hand and I am going to count, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. They dipped their grubby hands in the HSF 12 times, Mr. Speaker, 12 times.

Mr. Elder: "Nah, nah, nah, nah". Never. "And dem talking?" Never.

Hon. S. Hosein: From the period June 13, 2016, to 13 November, 2024, taking out US \$3 billion.

Mr. Elder: US? US?

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, \$3 billion. And then you all have the gall to tell us about import cover and the HSF, when you had your hands in the cookie jar 12 different times, taking out US \$3 billion and there is no benefit to the citizens? What benefit? What benefit to the citizens? There was absolutely none. There was absolutely none, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: And, Mr. Speaker, their tune changed, eh. Before they came into the Parliament on Monday, I heard the Opposition Leader being interviewed outside and she said, “Well, I do not know where the Government will get the revenue from.” Well, when the Minister of Finance finished his budget presentation, they said, “Well, it fake.” “So dey gone with ah new narrative from, they cannot make it, to now it fake, Mr. Speaker”. But I will tell you where we will find the money. We will find the money by cutting out all of the ghost gangs and ghost employees that they had employed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: We will cut it out by cutting out the corruption, waste and mismanagement over the last 10 years. We will find the money through the NIF \$1 billion bonds, Mr. Speaker. We will find it through the 40 million, in terms of the taxes for luxury vehicles, the \$1 billion in the alcohol and tobacco tax. We will find the money but at the same time, we will balance the budget to ensure that we can afford for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: That is what we will do. And they are making a sound and dance and they are misleading the population, Mr. Speaker, about this landlord's surcharge. It is not a property tax. Let me repeat that for those who were closing

their fridge door and did not hear me. The landlord surcharge is not a property tax. It is an income tax, Mr. Speaker. The surcharge is based on the income, and let me explain.

When they were trying to implement the property tax, “ah man who have ah residential house, who doh rent it”, they were putting a fake rental value on that house and then assessing your property tax on that, you know. That is what they were doing. What we are doing, Mr. Speaker, is a man who is actually renting his house, he is going to have to pay the surcharge.

Hon. Members: *Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: But you see, Mr. Speaker, they are so accustomed to dealing with ghosts, that they are thinking about ghost rentals. We are to dealing with real people, real jobs and real lives, Mr. Speaker. That is what we are dealing with.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: And we did not pull this landlord surcharge out of a hat. This took a lot of research. It took a lot of deliberation. Are we the only jurisdiction to do this? The answer is, no. We have Malta. Malta does this landlord surcharge. You have the jurisdiction of Singapore. You have various states in the European Union; Barbados, our neighbour; and New York. So, there are examples from other jurisdictions with respect to this landlord surcharge and what we are doing is—the Prime Minister was very clear. There are people who are renting their properties in Trinidad and Tobago, having to pay tax, and they are not paying the tax. It is time they also contribute to the national development of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Everyone has to pay their fair share of the pie, Mr. Speaker. And what is wrong with that? What is wrong with that? So, I want to encourage my

friends opposite to be responsible in your narrative. When you go out to the population, stop misleading the population with political propaganda.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: And another thing, Mr. Speaker, is that the Minister of Finance—and I must say, the Minister is very creative when it comes to all his fiscal policies, and so on, and his team that is behind him, Mr. Speaker, because this was one of the most creative budgets. For the last week, I have been receiving calls on my phone—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein:—that this was one of the best budgets that they have ever heard being presented in the Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, with respect to the bank assets levy, again, this is not only in Trinidad and Tobago. There are other jurisdictions that do this with respect to Jamaica, the United Kingdom, Hungary and Sweden. There are other jurisdictions that we can learn from this. The US also has measures such as this.

And also, while they say that the banks would have to increase fees and so, Mr. Speaker, the citizens have to stand up for their rights because our policy is, you must also stand your ground because the banks also benefit, you know. The banks also have incentives: Cybersecurity, investment tax allowance, wear and tear allowance, training allowance, carry forward of losses, capital gain taxes, Mr. Speaker. So, it is not that we are imposing any heavy burden, but we are asking everybody to contribute the fair share to the national pie, so that we can provide for goods and services for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Nothing is wrong with that, Mr. Speaker; nothing is wrong.

Mr. Speaker, I also saw that the Member for Diego Martin North/East, as usual, got himself into a lot of problems this week, posting and tweeting rubbish—

Dr. Moonilal: “Dais normal”.

Mr. Elder: “Everything he does post and tweet”.

Hon. S. Hosein: Normal—with respect to the wage negotiations for public servants. The Member came out boldly and said that he offered 9 per cent.

Hon. Member: Oh my.

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, I do not want to be unparliamentary in here but you hear—

Hon. Members: That is.

Hon. S. Hosein:—that is.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, look I have the letter in my hand here, 17 June, 2022, written to Mr. Leroy Baptiste, now Sen Baptiste:

Salary for the period January 01, 2014, to 31 December 2016: For 2014, 0 per cent; for 2015, 0 per cent; for 2016, 2 per cent.

The other period, 2017 to 2019: For 2017, 0 per cent; 2018, 0 per cent; 2019, 2 per cent.

So, two plus two gives you, what? Four or nine? And if he thinks two plus two means nine, Mr. Speaker, we now understand why the country is in this place, you know.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: I do not know what calculator he is using, Mr. Speaker, but he should pelt it away. Mr. Speaker, but that is why when the UNC wins, the public servants will win because the 10 per cent is on the table.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: The 10 per cent is on the table. That is where it is. And, Mr. Speaker, as I told you, people are saying this is one of the best budgets that we

have; one of the best budgets. Because you know why? We made promises and we are keeping those promises.

With respect to foreign used vehicles, you will now be able to import a vehicle that is six years old from three years old, making it cheaper for the ordinary man to have a vehicle.

Hon. Member: Affordable.

Hon. S. Hosein: Affordable. And when is this taking effect? The 1st of January, 2026. Promise made—

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

Hon. S. Hosein: Thank you very much.

I heard, Mr. Speaker, that the Member was crying about crime. Where was the Member's voice in the last 10 years? Where was the Member's voice?

Mr. Manning: Right here.

Hon. S. Hosein: When Ashanti Riley was murdered—you remembered that—where was her voice, Mr. Speaker? I can tell you, murders are down by 40 per cent under this new Commissioner of Police.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: We are bringing home invasion laws in this Parliament and we hope we get the support of our colleagues next door, Mr. Speaker. We hope we get the support of our colleagues because they are accustomed to voting against grandchildren and voting against children in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes, that is their legacy.

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, we are going to expand 6,400 senior citizens' grants. We increased the illnesses covered under the Children's Life Fund. This is a caring, compassionate Government. My friend from San Fernando West, a real Member of Parliament, is going to deliver 18,000 laptops nationwide for our

students.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: I believe 279 schools were repaired in the vacation programme and all schools were able to open on time, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: That is achievement. And coming soon, the UWI Debe campus will open its doors. It will open its doors.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, the Member for St. Ann's East could not open St. George's College. "Dey bring big ribbon. Dey roll out ribbon from de car to by de gate. And when we went in de classroom, it doh have desk, it doh have board, it doh have chair. Where dey were going to put de children?"

Mr. Lee: And it flooding.

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, in the last few months when they were in government, "ribbon run out, yu know". They were cutting ribbon for everything and nothing opened. "Imagine, dey open de Central Block and it eh ha no hospital bed".

Mr. Lee: "It ha no elevator".

Hon. S. Hosein: "Dey open de airport in Tobago and ah plane cyah fly".

Mr. Lee: "It ha no plane".

Mr. Elder: "It ha no runway".

Hon. S. Hosein: "Dey open St George's College and it ha no desk and chair". Mr. Speaker, they were running a government where you had "ah coast guard without boat, yuh had ah air guard without plane and ah police service without vehicles". That is their legacy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: But, Mr. Speaker, I can give you a guarantee that this UNC Government will fix it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: We will fix it. We will fix it.

Mr. Speaker, another thing I heard the Opposition Leader said—and I have to address this because the Opposition Leader is making incorrect statements in this Parliament by talking about the PSIP projects and the Development Programme. Mr. Speaker, when we looked at the record, the last Revised Estimate of 2025 for the PSIP is \$3.9 billion. The Member said we cut it by \$1 billion. Do you know what is the 2026 Estimate, Mr. Speaker? It is \$4billion. I do not know what calculator they are using next door.

Hon. Member: “Their maths doh maths”.

Hon. S. Hosein: “Their maths not mathsing. Their maths not mathsing. I doh know if they went ah school that the Member for St. Ann’s East open”. Mr. Speaker, they keep making high allocations for PSIP projects and they are not able to receive it because they do not do the work. There was a level of laziness across there that they just could not have gotten the work done. They could not have gotten it done. And trying to make a mockery of this issue of the VAT exemption on foods and stuff, Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance will address but I want to take the opportunity also to look at it.

In the case of local produce—let us be absolutely clear here. In the case of local produce, it should be noted that the food items are currently only zero-rated if they are unprocessed. You understand? It is unprocessed. I do not know if my friends opposite can understand that. But it is unprocessed food, Mr. Speaker. We are now going to create VAT exemptions where the food is also processed. How hard is that to understand? So, you will not be paying VAT on the processed items

now, Mr. Speaker. How hard is that for my friends opposite to understand? But they cannot count and they cannot read.

Mr. Elder: And they cannot process that.

Hon. S. Hosein: And they cannot process that. They cannot process that. They cannot process that.

Mr. Speaker, I want to tell you, and I am very proud today to say, as the Minister of Land and Legal Affairs, in just under six months, we were able to distribute over 310 leases to ex-Caroni workers, who are waiting 22 years now for their title. And the last 10 years, they, through spite, malice and ill-will, refused to give justice those ex-Caroni workers. But promise made—

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

Hon. S. Hosein:—promise kept. Promise made, promise kept. And when you look at the budget items and the allocations, we are going to accelerate this project to ensure that we give justice to those who gave this country a lot of their time, their effort, their sweat, their blood and their tears, Mr. Speaker. It is time we gave those ex-Caroni workers their just due, what was promised to them over 22 years ago.

Mr. Speaker, I want to get to some other matters that I think are very important to this debate. In local parlance, it have something called “hot baccs”.

Hon. Members: What?

Hon. S. Hosein: “Hot baccs”. Yes, Mr. Speaker. And I have in my possession certain records and documents with respect to some bacchanal—

Mr. Lee: Oh, bacchanal.

Hon. S. Hosein: Bacchanal, yes. “Hot baccs” means bacchanal, hot bacchanal—emanating from the Ministry of Finance.

2.45 p.m.

Not under the Member for Fyzabad, under the Member for Diego Martin North/East, under his watch. Mr. Speaker, we have been able to access, analyze—

Hon. Member: Some “hot baccs”.

Hon. S. Hosein:—some “hot baccs” in relation to the contractual employment and engagement of one Ms. Rhoda Bharath—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein:—trading as Type 1 Media and Research Solutions with respect to successive awards, payment discrepancies and procurement practices that were taking place at the Ministry of Finance. And, Mr. Speaker, I want to give you the source.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: The *Newsauce*. Mr. Speaker, I am told that there were contracts emanating from the Ministry of Finance for the period of 1st December, 2017 to the 1st May, 2025 as a communication consultant, and, during this period, Ms. Bharath was paid \$3,027,735 from the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, Ms. Rhoda Bharath collected \$3,027,735 from the Ministry of Finance. Mr. Speaker, this individual runs a social media page called *Newsauce*. Public funds were being used by that woman to denigrate persons, use racist remarks and ensure—Mr. Speaker, today we are going to expose what was taking place.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: And, Mr. Speaker, I am not afraid of any of them. I am not afraid because all of us on this side were victims of her venom, were victims.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: And, Mr. Speaker, it is not me alone on this side who was a victim; some of my friends opposite were victims of hers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Lee: Who, who, who on that side?

Hon. S. Hosein: Some of my friends opposite.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: You see, Mr. Speaker, and while she was engaged at the Ministry of Finance, she was also collecting money from the NLCB at the same time.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: She collected \$300,000 from the NLCB. And, Mr. Speaker, you want to know something? When she submitted invoices, you know what the NLCB had to say about that?

On perusal of her file, Rhoda Bharath, I noted that no evaluation performance review was prepared, therefore I am unable to state if she met her contractual duties.

So they do not even know what they were paying her for.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: So in total, Mr. Speaker, under the watch of Diego Martin North/East, Rhoda Bharath collected \$3.3 million worth of taxpayers' dollars as a paid blogger, as a paid blogger to spew xenophobic, racist and venom; racist remarks.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, we on this side will expose them for that. But I want to go more into this and I will give you examples of what she was paid for.

Do you understand that she did a 45-second advertisement, 45 seconds, for NIF and that cost the taxpayers \$80,000?

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Hon. S. Hosein: There was an item called “Services Rendered” for December 2020. Nobody knows what the service is. She was paid \$82,000 for this. Loan by loan advertisement, she was paid \$168,000.

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Hon. S. Hosein: And then when you think it will get worse, Mr. Speaker, she is a communication consultant. I see an item here called “Purchase of Christmas tokens”.

Hon. Member: What, what?

Hon. S. Hosein: She was a paid shopper for the Member for Diego Martin North/East.

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Hon. S. Hosein: I do not know if she was buying elf, “douen”, or stockings. I do not know what she was buying but she was buying Christmas tokens in the sum of \$56,300. Mr. Speaker, this is the nonsense that we found here.

Mr. Speaker, I want to give you something else. So in 2017, Ms. Bharath’s company was formed, in and around October ‘17, the 31st of October 2017. In a matter of a few weeks, she was able to get a contract with the Ministry of Finance on the 1st of December 2017 and said—“hear wais the fraud they want to talk about. Hear the fraud”. The company presented itself as having over 25 years’ experience in communications and media consultancy being about three weeks old.

That is fraud, that is fake. That is the budget that they want to talk about?

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. S. Hosein: You want to know who signed off on this contract?

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. S. Hosein: One Vishnu Dhanpaul.

Hon. Members: “Ooooh.” [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Yeah, yeah, that is who signed off on the contract, one Vishnu Dhanpaul.

Mr. Lee: “Wow.” That is the Minister of Finance.

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, it gets worse you know.

Hon. Member: “Ooor, dats why he qualify.”

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, it gets worse.

Hon. Member: “Nah man.”

Hon. S. Hosein: Do you know what process was used to hire Ms. Bharath? Single source selection.

[*Mr. Speaker rises*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, I need to get that additional time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Lee: Single source or *Newsauce*?

Hon. S. Hosein: Single source selection. What does that mean? She was handpicked by the former Minister of Finance, handpicked.

Mr. Lee: “They have two former yuh know, they have two former yuh know.”

Hon. S. Hosein: The Member for Diego Martin North/East, the former former. That is why I understand why when the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann’s West became Prime Minister, he removed him as the Minister of Finance. I now understand.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Forthwith.

Hon. S. Hosein: Forthwith.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Lee: Well done there Stuart. Good call there Stuart.

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Padarath: He was using Members to mash up—

Hon. S. Hosein: Yes, yes, Diego Martin, they were using—yes.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: That is why, Mr. Speaker, I said some of my friends opposite were victims of Rhoda Bharath.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: And, Mr. Speaker, you know what she did? She gave a profile of the sole trader, but she had workers, right. She had workers. And there is one of the workers there and I want to tell you his name. His name is called—hold on, hold on. Yeah, she had workers. There is one worker named Leslie Granderson and when you watch Leslie's résumé, this is what it says. He works for Rhoda Bharath:

I am one of the primary photographers for the Trinidad and Tobago Minister of Finance and Member for Parliament for Diego Martin North/East, the hon. Colm Imbert. I am responsible for attaining images for him in his constituency, capturing his likeness for portraits, press conferences, meetings and events. I am also responsible for photographing him with fellow Members of Parliament and his interaction with his constituents, colleagues and staff with some relay to the Office of the Prime Minister and local newspapers.

Mr. Speaker, "it have ah next one call Anthony Sullivan". This is where Anthony Sullivan's experience is. He said he is:

The videographer, editor and content director for Type 1 Media Limited.

His clients are Ministry of Finance, MP for Diego Martin North/East and *Newsauce*.

This is the résumé. The résumé says that he works for *Newsauce* and the Member for Diego Martin North/East. That is what it says, paid for by the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: But, Mr. Speaker, it gets even more “curiouser”. The man who first retained Ms. Bharath when he was a Permanent Secretary, Mr. Vishnu Danpaul, when he became the Minister of Finance, Mr. Speaker, he decided to ask “well how much yuh pay this woman”. So when they told him that they paid her \$3 million, this is what the note says:

In March 2025, following the transition from one Minister of Finance to another and subsequent to the discussions with the incoming Minister, the PS requested advice from the Treasury Solicitor on the process for termination of the consultancy services of Type 1 Media and Research Solutions.

When Sen. Dhanpaul became the Minister of Finance, he fired Rhoda Bharath. “We didn’ fire she.”

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: We did not fire her. So whatever bacchanal or “hot baccs dem have in the PNM, Mr. Speaker, we stayin out of it”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: But, Mr. Speaker, you see this bundle of documents I have in my hand here, this will be transmitted to the hon. Attorney General.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: Because we do not understand what the—

Mr. Lee: [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: The Attorney General said he has a copy. We do not understand what they paid \$3 million for, 3.3 million. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, I have an additional copy, I can hand it to you.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: "Hear nah", they spent \$3.3 million to make the Member for Diego Martin North/East look good and that could not help.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. S. Hosein: It still could not help. Mr. Speaker, that is what was taking place at the Ministry of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, I want to also make a point and today I call upon the University of the West Indies because this woman is still employed at the UWI teaching our nation's students. Under the code of ethics for instructors at the UWI, because she is an instructor there, where persons are guilty or they make remarks that are or they engage in activities calculated to endanger the peace and security of the community or otherwise engages in religious, political or racial propaganda of an inflammatory nature, that is misconduct. And, nothing she says is truth, we cannot take anything for her word because the Member for Oropouche East was also a victim. But he took her to court and got a judgment of about \$100,000 in defamation against her.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: So, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Oropouche East knows that she has \$3.3 million that she can pay you.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: She can pay him, Mr. Speaker, she can pay him. She can pay the Member for Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Speaker, so those were the "hot baccs" for the evening. Right, that is

from the “sauce” and the “Sauceress” or whatever she calls herself. “Take dat in yuh pipe and smoke it”. I am not afraid of you.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: And, Mr. Speaker, I know that I will be featured on the *UNC Cabal* or the *Newsauce* for whatever days ahead. Whatever they say about me, Mr. Speaker, “it have nothing else that they could say”.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: Nothing else because my hands are clean. My hands are clean. But what is upsetting about this entire situation is that they were paying a racist blogger \$3.3 million, Mr. Speaker, out of taxpayers’ money to run these online pages like *Newsauce* and *UNC Cabal* and so on. But, we will expose what they were doing with taxpayers’ money. We will do that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: My young colleagues on this side of the Chamber, you all should hang your heads in shame to defend the PNM.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: You all may be decent; you all may be the decent young men but you have to understand what your senior colleagues were engaged in. And, I “doh” want to hear nothing from San Fernando East because he was in the Ministry of Finance and he should have said something.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: So I do not want to hear anything from you. But it gets worse, Mr. Speaker, it gets worse.

You see, Mr. Speaker, I want to move to my portfolio because I deal with lands. Mr. Speaker, I deal with lands and one of the—at the last Cabinet meeting by the last administration on the 17th April, 2025, they rushed the

approval of a particular note to give a lease to a particular water company in Orange Grove, in Orange Grove. The note was passed on the 17th of April 2025 with respect to issuing a lease for that water company.

Mr. Speaker, would you believe the night before the election, the 27th of April 2025, a WhatsApp voice note was sent by one Solange De Souza. You all remember who is Solange De Souza?

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. S. Hosein: She was a former PNM candidate in Fyzabad but she happened to be the Chambers Manager at the AG's office in the last administration. And she sent a voice note and this is what she said:

Good night, so this is for the Blue Waters file, if it is that you get—you will proceed with the instructions before you get the file.

So she is telling the person proceed with the instructions before you get the file.

I just said let me take the picture as AG not too long did it, right, well send me the picture. So if I said let you know—let me know if it will take a little longer to get the file to you.

Basically, what she saying, Mr. Speaker, in the voice note is that the AG just gave the instruction, the file “cyah reach” by you as yet, proceed with the lease, proceed with the lease.

3.00 p.m.

Do you know who was the AG at the time, Mr. Speaker? The hon. Member for Trincity/Maloney, and there is a note:

Reference is made to folio 10—
—“thing happening fast, fast dey, yuh know.”

On April—

—this is the 25th now, this is the Friday before the general election. “Thing happening fast. Note writing up fast.”

Please be advised that the civil law department is hereby instructed to prepare the requisite leases to give effect to the Cabinet decision.

But, Mr. Speaker, do you want to know what is the issue with that Cabinet decision? You want to know what is the issue? There are two commercial leases to be granted to this water company, C1 and C2. Mr. Speaker, in 2019, two offers were made by the State to the company, and, Mr. Speaker, for C2, which is commercial piece 2, the value that was attributed to the land at that time was 32—it was offered, Mr. Speaker, I want to be very careful with what I say here. The—*[Inaudible]* returned to the Cabinet and, by Cabinet Minute listed at 5, obtained approval of an offer to C2 at a premium of \$32.2 million with a difference of approximately \$17.9million from the 2019 offer of \$14.3 million. Mr. Speaker, understand what happened there, you know. They cut the lease price by half in 2019, you know. That is for one.

With regard to C1, the approved premium was \$50 million, but the offer made was \$22.1 million. You understand what is happening there, Mr. Speaker? When the public servants got wind of this, no lease was prepared in 2019 to 2022, “thing hold up”. Mr. Speaker, do you know what is the lease price that the last Cabinet approved for that water company? They are using a 2015 valuation to grant a lease in 2025, a 10-year-old valuation. And, Mr. Speaker, what is strange about this is that they were hurrying this thing to the end, Mr. Speaker, that the night before the general election, you have a man from the AG’s office calling public servants to tell them, “aye, prepare that lease, you know”. Because you know why, Mr. Speaker? They got wind that they were going to lose the general election. That is what was happening. That is what was happening.

And also, I think my hon. colleague the Attorney General, has a copy of this file. And AG, I ask, and I plead with you that advice and direction be given on this matter because we are not going to allow these things to sit silently, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: We are not going to allow it to sit silently. But, Mr. Speaker, with respect to what was taking place at the Ministries and so on, I know I gave some instances of what was taking place in the last administration of corruption, of mismanagement, and of waste, Mr. Speaker. We understand what was taking place there. We have a mandate. We will fix it, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: We will fix it. Mr. Speaker, I want to give some of the achievements from my Ministry over the last five and a half months. Mr. Speaker, as soon as I went into that Ministry, I understood that there were members of the business community whose companies were struck out and so on, we immediately instituted an amnesty for the Companies Registry, benefiting tens of thousands of companies, Mr. Speaker, tens of thousands of companies.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, there was another file at my desk when I went in there. The public servants were telling me that it was like pulling teeth in the last administration. One, because I do not think that the Minister understood what was taking place, this is in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, the Cabinet approved the new forms for the issuance of state grants. So, now over 500 state grants that were waiting to be prepared at the Commissioner's office will now be ready for delivery in a matter of weeks, Mr. Speaker, 500.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: So that means that 500 people will have their title. And, Mr. Speaker, you want to know what the issue was? The issue was that the type of paper that they were using was archaic, and they did not have a printer to align with the paper. Could you imagine that, Mr. Speaker? Simple fixes like that we were able to do in a matter of weeks, Mr. Speaker. Take it to Cabinet, get the new form, update the language, and ensure that these state grants are issued to these persons who have already paid for their leases, and it will be done in a matter of weeks, Mr. Speaker. We give you our assurance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, we understand what the issues were with respect to land management and land tenure in this country, Mr. Speaker. The Prime Minister, in her wisdom, decided to now place all of the Ministries in charge of land or touch and concern land, one being the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the other being the Ministry of Legal Affairs, and the other being the Ministry of Finance. You had the Valuation Division doing one thing. You had the Ministry of Legal Affairs registering the title. You had the Commissioner of State Lands doing surveys and the repository of state lands. Mr. Speaker, we placed all under one Ministry as a commonsense approach, as a one-stop shop to streamline regularization, to streamline management, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: So that what we are going to do, Mr. Speaker, we have a vision. We are going to integrate the Land Registry with the Surveys and Mapping because, do you know, Mr. Speaker, that public officers have to physically walk from Richmond Street across the street with original documents to go to the post office building where the Surveys and Mapping vault is, Mr. Speaker, and physically bring files to and fro. We are now going to integrate that, Mr. Speaker.

Do you know that building that is housing all of the survey records in this country, it was placed there, I believe, in 2022, is now deemed to be unfit, Mr. Speaker. And, in fact, they took away the building from Surveys and Mapping and gave it to Pan Trinbago. All the original records for survey plans are housed in that building.

Mr. Speaker, the LIDAR survey I heard the Member for Arima talk about, L-I-D-A-R she called it. It is a LIDAR survey. Mr. Speaker, do you know when was the last time that was done in this country? That was done in 2014, and we are going to do it again, Mr. Speaker. It will always take an UNC Government to ensure that there is progress in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: To ensure that there is progress. Because, Mr. Speaker, when you had all of these Ministries working separately, what was happening was that there was a lot of siloing and duplication of resources. Because the LSA was telling me that they are going to do a LIDAR survey, and then the Director of Surveys was saying that she is going to do a LIDAR survey, both spending taxpayers' money separately, when we could spend the same money for one resource, Mr. Speaker, and everyone shares it. Everyone shares it. That is a streamlined modern-day approach. We are going to integrate laws, technologies, processes, Mr. Speaker, to ensure that we get the job done, to ensure that we get it done, Mr. Speaker.

Another one is with respect to the registration of births. We are now engaging, and I want to thank my friends, the Minister of Health, and also the Minister in the Ministry of Health. We had a meeting, it is advanced, Mr. Speaker. You will see it in the PSIP project, that we will now have bedside registration for births, bedside registration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: And, Mr. Speaker, we are testing the software so that when the child is registered, Mr. Speaker, with the click of a button, you can apply for the birth certificate, and the first copy is delivered free at your doorstep.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, that is ensuring that we break down the walls of bureaucracy and red tape, Mr. Speaker. We break down the walls of bureaucracy and red tape. Those are some of the few projects that we are doing at the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs, Mr. Speaker. We have so many more issues, so many more plans and policies to discuss, Mr. Speaker. I could spend my entire evening entertaining you and telling the population what we are going to do with our allocation, Mr. Speaker. Because we have so many plans.

I can tell you what was happening too, if the Member for San Fernando East wants to hear. I do not want to go into the LSA because that will be another day, eh, what was taking place at the LSA, Mr. Speaker. But you see the same contractors that were appearing in the RDC about who was bid rigging and so on, and who was bringing engineers' estimates within one to three per cent of award? Mr. Speaker, those same contractors were appearing at the LSA also, eh; Americas Marketing, Zorina's Maintenance, all of them close to, I believe, San Fernando West, all of them. Not this San Fernando West, you know, the previous one. All of them, Mr. Speaker.

They was a consortium of them, but I understand my sorrows from the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. I understand what they were doing to him, Mr. Speaker. When you see the documents now, and you see the evidence, you understand what was taking place on that side. But I am sorry you have to remain there for some time. We will be here for a lot of time.

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

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, also, I want to get to my constituency. The good people of Barataria/San Juan, Mr. Speaker, when I was 29 years old, they reposed their trust and confidence in me, Mr. Speaker, in order to become their Member of Parliament. I hold that duty sacred to my heart, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Minister of Public Utilities. For years, the people of Barataria/San Juan have been complaining about the water supply. We now have a better water supply in Barataria/San Juan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, lanes such as Bootan Lane, Ibis Lane, Ali Drive, and so on—if you look at it, Mr. Speaker, you have long pipelines running from the road to each house.

Mr. Lee: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. S. Hosein: No, separate pipelines. We are now going to install mains on those streets, Mr. Speaker, so that everyone will have individual taps and connections to their houses, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank the Minister of Public Utilities for ensuring that the Don Miguel Grounds have lights, and to ensure that the St. George's Grounds have lights. I cannot thank the Member for St. Ann's East for that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. Hosein: Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank the Minister of Works and Infrastructure for coming into my constituency. When she saw the neglect at my constituency, in one minute she arrived there, Mr. Speaker. We are going to ensure that those pumps in El Socorro South, the Minister has given me the

assurance that we are going to ensure that we treat with the pumps in El Socorro South, Mr. Speaker.

So, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I gave some of the promises that were made, the promises that were kept. And, Mr. Speaker, when the UNC wins—

Hon. Members: Everybody wins.

Hon. S. Hosein: When the UNC wins, Mr. Speaker—I thank you very much, and I thank the people of Barataria/San Juan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for Port of Spain South.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Keith Scotland SC (Port-of-Spain South): Mr. Speaker, if I did not know better, I would say that the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan did not have a portfolio.

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

Mr. K. Scotland SC: He spoke for 55 minutes, and he spent three minutes on his Ministry. That is governance? “Boy, you rel winning, he winning.” Mr. Speaker, what happened was that there was just fluff and just plain lack of substance from this hon. Member. It really means that hot air rises, Tunapuna.

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

Mr. Scotland SC: Hot air rises. He has “hot-air-enteritis”. Because he claims to be able to balance the budget on a projected oil price at \$73.25 per barrel. In which world that is happening, Mr. Speaker? He speaks and he boasts about giving ex-Caroni workers their just due. What about the CEPEP workers and their just due?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: What about the URP workers and their just due?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: What about the Forestry workers and their just due?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: The former Governor of Central Bank and his just due.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: The CEO of TSTT and his just due?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: The CEO of CAL and his just due?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: The CEO of WASA and his just due?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: It is just due for a few. What happened? They do not have blood, sweat, and tears? Because he spoke of blood, sweat, and tears. Well, the CEPEP workers put their blood, sweat, and tears for this country, and you know what they deemed them? Collateral damage.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: When you examine the track record of this Government over the last five months, Mr. Speaker, and you look at the facts: the cancellation of the staple which is the independence day parade; the unbalanced and perceive nepotism and nepotistic appointments to state boards; the unexplained drop in foreign reserves by US \$600,000 between April 2025 and August, Mr. Speaker, the unexplained drop by US \$600 million of foreign reserves in five months; Mr. Speaker, the key firing of senior management and replacement with friends and families, incompetent as they are; the continuous late payments of public servants and the most vulnerable the old age pensioners; and the unkindest cut of all, the

firing of those 50,000 people, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, it is my new mantra, “When UNC wins, Trinidad and Tobago loss”.

3.15 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: “We loss”. Because, Mr. Speaker, when you understand the state of this country and the economy—I want to speak the facts for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, what the actual state of the economy is, not that fluff and nonsense that I just heard. Mr. Speaker, in September 2024, Standard & Poor’s, the international credit rating agency, affirmed Trinidad and Tobago’s credit rating at BBB, an investment grade rating, reflective of the country’s credit strife, and Standard & Poor’s maintained a stable outlook for the economy of Trinidad and Tobago under a PNM Government.

Moody’s:

“On the 16th of December, 2024...affirmed Trinidad and Tobago’s rating at Ba2 with a Stable outlook. This affirmation underpinned the country’s return to sustained growth, primarily driven by the non-energy sector.”

—under a PNM Government.

“The rating agency...”—at Moody’s acknowledged—“...that potential fiscal risks...”—to Trinidad and Tobago was—“...mitigated by significant buffers.”

—such as:

“...the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund...and”—certain—“cash reserves amounting to more than 40% of GDP....”

This happened, Mr. Speaker, under a PNM Government. It goes on.

In March, and particularly:

UNREVISED

“...March 14, 2025, Caribbean Information & Credit Rating Services Limited...the regional credit rating agency, reaffirmed Trinidad and Tobago’s investment-grade credit rating of CariAA, with a Stable outlook. The Rating Agency also acknowledges the Government’s ongoing commitment”—and I quote—“to responsible policies to diversify the economy and transition toward renewable energy: ‘T&T continues efforts to achieving 30% of energy usage from renewable sources by 2030.’”

And they cited:

“...stronger investor interest from international gas companies...”—under a PNM Government.

“The Agency...”—highlighted the—“...country’s resilience to”—economic “shocks:”—stating that—“The country had a diversified energy export...”—base—“...thereby mitigating, to some extent, the risk of over-dependence on one energy commodity.”

Mr. Speaker, that is the state of the economy that was inherited by this incompetent Government on the 28th of April, 2025. And these are the facts, not from the Central Bank, these are the international rating agencies. So, let us now deal with this budget.

The hon. Minister of Finance delivered a \$59.2 billion budget under a budgetary theme: T&T First: Building Economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies. That was the budgetary theme, and that is what we are here to discuss, not “who get contract where and who working there, and ah sending a file here”. We are here to discuss that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: They cannot help it. They could only campaign, they cannot govern.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: But the content of the budget reveals fairness as only a slogan, not a practice. Accountability is promised but not demonstrated. Mr. Speaker, behind all that thumping of desks and bravado and the chanting of slogans, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are being saddled with a slew of taxes, levies and surcharges that will choke, rather than uplift the working class, the small business owner and the vulnerable.

More importantly, Mr. Speaker, on a totally different level, the budget and the policies of this Government engender a fear in me and the constituency that I represent for the delicate balance of this country that is Trinidad and Tobago, where every creed and race is supposed to find an equal place. A national budget is supposed to be both a political document but most importantly, an economic plan.

This Government is in its sole purpose of electioneering, and in so doing, fails to manage the scales and balance the scales of governing and electioneering. They are not managing the nation's affairs in a balanced and equitable manner. It is beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are consistently peddling cheap politics, political sloganisms, and that overrides the national economic interest. And, in fact, by doing so, "Trinidad and Tobago loss".

One example is when you look at the lack of planning for small and medium enterprises. The 2026 budget—and maybe in his rebuttal, the hon. Minister of Finance could show us where in that budget he has accounted and a plan that will grow small and medium enterprises. Economic growth is a key indicator for this country, Mr. Speaker, to prosper. It is key in creating jobs, self-sustenance and increasing the standard of living. Where is that in the budget? If I am shown, I will get up in this Parliament and say, *mea culpa*.

UNREVISED

Let us look at the policies in this budget. The electricity surcharge: This electricity surcharge, the new excise taxes on alcohol and luxury vehicles, Mr. Speaker, a 5 cent per kilowatt-hour, will not remain in the boardrooms. This charge will be passed down to the consumers, and it will lead to a higher price for goods and services. That is how the “maths will maths”. A 5 cent per kilowatt-hour surcharge on commercial and industrial users may not target households directly, but it will impact households directly through higher prices for essential goods and services, bakeries, salons, restaurants and laundromats among them. No mechanism has been put in place by this Government to prevent this cost transfer. It will be widespread inflation through the backdoor. So, to the bakeries, the salons, the laundromats, “yuh loss”.

Let us look at the landlord surcharge. They call it a surcharge, not a tax. So, let us examine it on the gross rental income. Mr. Speaker, let us be real, what is a surcharge? It is an additional charge on cost on top of the usual one. It is a tax. They cannot even be honest with that?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: “Ah mean, yuh feel we so gullible that you use the word surcharge”—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—and we do not know, Sir, that it is a charge. Is ah tax yuh taxing us?”

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

Mr. K. Scotland SC: I mean, we are so unsophisticated?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: And the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan said it with a straight face. Trinidad and Tobago, tape that, you know. And had the gall to say,

“Yuh hear”—that is—what he should have said was, “Doh show him the man. He tailor his class. Just show him the corner where the fella pass.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: What is this surcharge? Trinidad and Tobago, it is a tax. And this tax will result in higher rents, especially as landlords already juggle mortgages and maintenance costs. Who do you think that surcharge would be passed on to? And it will affect low and middle-income families who do not own their own homes. This may very well have the potential to destabilize housing security. Was any thought put into that so-called surcharge, and the repercussions and consequences of that surcharge? The surcharge also, when you do a comparison with the proposed property tax by the People’s National Movement—let us do the figures.

The proposed property tax—let us take away households and let us just deal with taxes on business. The proposed property tax was at 2 per cent. This surcharge is 3.5 per cent. If my math is correct, it is 1.5 per cent higher than what was proposed by the People’s National Movement in its property tax. Juxtapose this unconscionable and heartless surcharge with the fact that tenants have been given no mechanism for rent monitoring or protection, what do we have? What are we left with? We are left with a cause for alarm because landlords will pass these burdens on to the tenants. The Government removed the property tax but replaced it with a higher surcharge of 3.5 per cent. That is scaring. So middle and low-income earner, who do not have their own property, “yuh loss”.

Let us look at the asset levy on financial institutions of .25 per cent. This is a tax on banks and insurers, and it may seem, to their mind, as a hit. But history tells us that the cost—and the Bankers Association, they did not wait, you know, they have said that the cost will be passed on. So, what will it do? It will include

an increase in banking fees, loan interest rates and insurance premiums. Without regulatory enforcement, ordinary citizens will feel the pain and brunt of these increases. Where are the safeguard measures? What incentives have been put in this budget to encourage persons to save?

A .25 per cent levy on the assets of commercial banks and insurance companies is another hidden tax, but I suppose they will call it a surcharge. The banks will not absorb the cost, they have said so already. So, the banking sector and the public who do business with the bank, “yuh loss”.

Let us look at the increased—[*Device goes off*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—customs and administrative fees and NIS contribution. Mr. Speaker, let me—

Mr. Speaker: Whoever has that cellphone on, turn it off now, please.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: The doubling of container processing fees and customs charges will only raise import costs, meaning higher consumer prices. This will result in more financial challenges for the businesses, whether small, medium or large. When this is compounded, Mr. Speaker, with the 10 or 15 per cent US tariffs, this measure by this so-called caring Government, who thump their desks and they say, “Everybody winning,” it will negatively impact the manufacturing sector. I have not heard one iota of analysis of the effect of this increased customs, administrative fees and NIS contributions. The sector will be even more challenged to be competitive on a global and national market. The sector will also have problems with the increase in its outlay of being competitive and keeping people in jobs. At the end of the day, all of these increases in administrative fees will be a cost borne by the consumer, and at the end of the day, the cost of living could only rise.

3.30 p.m.

The NIS contribution hike, it raises payroll costs without any parallel measures to support wage growth or job creation. So you increase the contribution, but you do nothing to see where the wages may be increased or a job creation. Raising it by 3 per cent, let me do some figures now because the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan for once quoted figures, but I do not trust those figures. Here is what my calculations say. For an employee earning \$4,000 a month, that will add \$16 to \$20 monthly. For the employer, an extra \$60 per employee, that will be the additional cost. Therefore, a large enterprise hiring over 3,000 employees would have to pay \$180,000 extra monthly or over \$2 million more annually. Mr. Speaker, who will absorb that cost at the end of the day? It means, Mr. Speaker, also for the employee, less take-home pay in an already struggling worker situation. The burden does not rest at this point. These added costs will be passed on through higher consumer prices, lower wages, and inevitably, more firings.

When combined with rising input costs, increased overheads, and the squeeze on consumers, this does not signal prosperity for all. To my mind, simple as it is, it signals a crisis for all. “We loss”. The cumulative impact of these policies, Mr. Speaker, “they win”.

They increased or decreased premium gas by a dollar per litre.

Hon. Member: Super.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Super. They decrease super by a dollar per litre. Let me say it one more time. They decreased super by a dollar per litre. What is the cumulative effect of this though when you look at the budget? Do not look at that increase in isolation. We gave it to them three times. The combined rate of higher electricity charges, higher rents, increased fees, and payroll costs, how does that

balance with a decrease in super for a dollar? That is UNC mamaguy. That is what it is.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Because, Mr. Speaker, what you save by that \$45, in fact, by the time you buy one Carib, “you lose. You lose.”

Now, the new price. Let us look at the lack of safeguards. Mr. Speaker, with that savings now, you cannot—listen, with that savings now you cannot even buy a bottle of Puncheon, when you look at how the prices have gone up. Let us look at the lack of safeguards. There is a consistent failure to include protective buffers for vulnerable citizens in this budget. And that, I do not know if it is a major oversight or if they just do not care.

Hon. Member: Do not know.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Maybe they do not know. There is over-estimation, over-borrowing, and over-promising. And that is why this Government has to now put a theoretically impossible projected price for oil at \$73.25 per barrel and gas at \$4.35 per mmbtu.

Let us look at what the independent organizations who deal in natural gas and oil, let us look at their forecasts. West Texas Intermediate Crude is projected in 2026 to yield \$48.50 per barrel. Juxtapose that with \$73.25. Brent Crude, which I think we are pegged to—

Mr. Young SC: And there is a discount.

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—and it is discounted, is estimated to fetch in 2026, \$52 per barrel, and Henry Hub Natural Gas, \$3.90 per unit. Thus, this Government is over-estimating by approximately US \$25 per barrel for oil and \$0.35 mmbtu for gas. From that one distortion, everything else cascades, Mr. Speaker. Everything else falls down. Revenues are inflated. Deficits are artificially shrunk to \$3

billion. And, the burden we pass on to the public in taxes, levies, and higher costs is understated. Why is this done? Why was that deliberately done? You think that the hon. Minister of Finance did not have the information from West Texas Intermediate and Brent Crude when he pegged oil at \$73.25 per barrel? That was done to hoodwink and fool the people of Trinidad and Tobago once again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: I “doh” know anything about oil and gas. I went and I did my research because I am coming for a serious parliamentary debate.

Further, this Government is banking on a nearly 300 per cent increase on the year-on-year in profits and royalties from the non-financial state enterprises. At the same time, they propose adding \$8.3 billion in new borrowing and \$9.5 billion in new foreign debt. If the underlying revenue assumptions are inaccurate, as the projections from the independent bodies seem to suggest, we are left with a dangerous cocktail of the following: massive borrowing, mounting debt servicing burden, and the inability to deliver on promises. Ask the question rhetorically, Mr. Speaker, who will have to bear the burden of this over-borrowing? Generations will have to do that. People of Trinidad and Tobago, you will have to bear the burden. Your children will have to bear the burden and your grandchildren will have to bear the burden. With this uncaring and just plain old incompetent Government, when the UNC wins, your children lose, your grandchildren lose, and now your great-great-grandchildren losing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: With the UNC Government is losses from generation to generation. But, Mr. Speaker, I come to the one that is the most mind-blowing. And, I am saddened that the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan, who seems to know it all--“he know everybody business. I see he leaning” a lot on the hon.

Attorney General but he is not staying in his lane. But, let me come to this. Let me come to this. The most alarming revelation in this budget, to me as a practitioner is this. The Government's explicit intent to collect an additional \$180 million in revenue from penalties and fines. Hon. Minister of Finance who advised you juridically on this? Not from production, not from innovation, not from export diversification, but peddling in potential death that occurs when people drink and drive drunk on the road. Kill them, but fine them, and raise \$180 million. And nobody from this side ever killed anybody on the road. So hush!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: "Hush yuh mouth. Leave me alone today." So hear, Mr. Speaker, let me repeat, Mr. Speaker. So they intend to raise \$180 million in taxes from fines and penalties, from people driving drunk on the road. What happens when people drive drunk on the road? People die. People die. Does it take a genius to do that?

But let me examine it. What is really happening here? And, I await the rebuttal. The budget proposes sharp increases in penalties. And, I want to quote, I am quoting directly from the hon. Minister, as I give him a lesson in law. Environmental tax, that is all right, but let us go to driving while disqualified. In his presentation, he said driving while disqualified, no fee, proposed penalty, \$5,000; careless driving, no fee, proposed penalty, \$15,000; driving over the alcohol limit, no fee, proposed penalty, \$15,000.

The hon. Minister must be careful what he puts on the *Hansard*. I wonder who writes his speeches. Certainly not the insufferable know-it-all from Barataria/San Juan. Because, when you had no fee, did you consult the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, Chap. 48:50 of the Laws of Trinidad and Tobago? Section 4(2) of the Act says persons driving who were disqualified from holding or

obtaining a valid driving permit, he may be arrested forthwith without a warrant and he shall be liable to a fine of \$1,500 or imprisonment for one year. So what is the no fee about? There is already a fine imposed for driving whilst disqualified. He now went to careless driving and said no fee. Did you consult section 72 of the aforesaid Act? Section 72 of the Act under the rubric “careless driving” reads as follows:

“Any person who drives a motor vehicle on a road without due care and attention or without reasonable consideration for other”—road users—”is liable to a fine of one thousand dollars”

“Where you get the no fee from?” Then, driving over the alcohol limit. Did the hon. Minister, before he delivered this speech on the *Hansard* record, consult section 70A (1) and (2) of the said Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act? “Driving or being in charge of a vehicle while blood alcohol levels exceed the prescribed limit”? And, this is what it says.

“No person shall attempt to drive”

—whilst you are above the prescribed limit. And:

“(a) in the case of a first conviction, to a fine of twelve thousand dollars”

Mr. Speaker, here is the nub.

“(b) in the case of a...subsequent conviction,...twenty-two thousand...dollars”

So your proposal for the second offender, if it is about making money, it reduces the amount you will be allowed to charge if it is, Mr. Speaker, you are a second offender. Who advises you? I would have expected the Member from Toco who must know that these fines existed.

But, I want to ask the question though, and this is the cognitive dissonance that I suffer from this proposal. At the end of the day, is this proposal going to

mean, Mr. Speaker, that it is the police officer who determines what is careless driving? And, do you get a ticket and you pay the fine and you never face a judicial officer? Because, here is the problem. Driving under the influence of alcohol is a symptom, it is symptomatic of an ill. And when you go before a court, apart from a fine, there are other things that are put in place. Alcoholics Anonymous, going for EAP, going for treatment, that will cure the alcoholism that allows you, that will enable you to drive whilst under the influence. Have they removed that? Where is the thinking behind this proposal?

Now, Mr. Speaker, on this side, we are not opposed to stricter penalties for reckless and dangerous behaviour. Drunk driving, careless driving, unlicensed pesticide use, these are serious offences that endanger lives and public safety and the environment.

3.45 p.m.

But, here is where we take fundamental issues with this Government. Mr. Speaker, how much more time do I have? I am just asking.

Mr. Speaker: I think you have twelve minutes. Well, eleven minutes of regular time, and then your ten. If you would like.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have no issue with increased fines, but the Government is introducing fines not as a deterrent, but as a source of revenue. You are introducing a penalty not to deter, but to make money. Which lawyer advised you on this?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: What they have done in layman's terms, they have budgeted for \$180 million from fines, expecting or depending on people to break the law and kill people on the roads.

Hon. Members: To make money.

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—to make money. What if, from the top to the bottom people decide not to drink, from Prime Minister to lawyer, we are not drinking? We are being sober. What will happen to your revenue? It will go. It will go, Sir. What you need, is to liaise with people who know. Look to your left and look to your right. People who know, not the others.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Get some real help. You have not here told us how you intend—what is the thinking behind relying, peddling on misfortune to raise \$180 million. With the removal of the demerit point system you are now encouraging people to drink and say, “I will make the money”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: It is a dangerous philosophy, it is a Government that is budgeting for failure of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: It encourages misbehaviour, it encourages broken laws. It turns governance and it turns jurisprudence on its head. A penalty should serve as a deterrence for misconduct. It should not serve as an encouragement for misconduct. This budget, the Government is now financially incentivizing people. Drink more, drive when you drink, kill innocent people on the road, and make \$180 million off of you as a revenue stream.

Mr. Speaker, let me turn now to the issues of Homeland Security. Mr. Speaker, let me give you a tale of two states of emergencies. The last state of emergency under the People’s National Movement, and I want tell you that my figures are to date. So, there is still some time left for the numbers to grow, but I must tell you what the figures are, as we speak. Let us look at the number of operations conducted under the state of emergency that was done under the

People's National Movement from January to March this year. There were 5,192 police operations that resulted in 4,038 arrests. In contrast, and that is the state of emergency, sorry, that happened now. In contrast, Mr. Speaker, there are 5,828 operations. But here is what, only 2,589 arrests.

Further, when you look at priority offenders, we see a noticeable difference. In the state of emergency under the People's National Movement, 3,561 priority offenders were apprehended. In this current State of Emergency only 2,088 persons were apprehended. Let us look at a most important fact, the recovery of firearms, another key metric and indicator of the efficiency of the state of emergency. Under the state of emergency imposed by the People's National Movement, 205 firearms were recovered. I know when I said, "to date" that that just flew over, but—

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

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—it rolls, hot air rises, cools and condenses. That is not a geography term? In the current 154—I am coming to collateral clown just now. I am coming to you. One hundred and fifty four firearms. Compare the seizure of ammunitions on the People's National Movement's state of emergency that was imposed, 4,364 rounds of ammunition. Whereas the current numbers to date "in ladia"—I do not know if that is correct, but 1,855 rounds in drug seizures under the People's National Movement's state of emergency that was imposed, they seized 1,758 kilogrammes of cannabis and 186 kilogrammes of cocaine along with other types of drugs. In contrast this state of emergency has yielded 465 kilogrammes of cannabis and 8 grams of cocaine.

All it means, Mr. Speaker, is that, in the state of emergency under the People's National Movement, it was far more effective in seizing firearms, apprehending priority firearms offenders and disrupting the criminal network.

That is performance. And the statistics beat hot air every time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: They speak about the reduction in murders, and I want a reduction in murders to continue. But hear the figures. In mid-October alone, 20 murders in just seven days, and a staggering seven murders within 24 hours last year.

Mr. Speaker, I do not wish to dwell on murders because it is just not what I do, but the figures do not lie, and I really do wish the reduction in murders—the figures last year, it is too high. The figures now, although reduced is still too high, and I want to move on.

Let me deal with the reform of the justice system and the promises on paper coming from the hon. Attorney General's office. Reforming justice. One, there has been a Ministry of Justice that has been created for the last five months. Well, we have heard from one of the Ministers, and—there we go, three minutes. Home invasion and self-defence of property Bill that is much touted. Mr. Speaker, my question to you as someone who practiced jurisprudence. What is the lacuna in the present state of the common law that will drive the creation of this Bill? I do not know. So far, I have just heard, "Load up the matic", et cetera, but I have not heard the substance and the juridical basis for this proposed change. I have seen the draft Bill, and quite frankly it does not address my concerns about the adequacy of the common law as it stands. But here is the one that gets us, the proposal of the judiciary chancellor. It may sound innovative but I ask, is it merely cosmetic? What about the backlog in cases that still exist that the PNM government tried to effect by introducing AJIPA, appointing more masters and streamlining the system? First there were only three criminal masters, there are now 13 criminal masters in Trinidad and Tobago. That is a PNM government trying to streamline

the criminal justice system.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: The creation of the virtual rooms, the VACC that is also another policy of the People's National Movement, so that people do not have to go into a court house and face people, they could go in the sanctity of a VACC, give their evidence and go home after. No intimidation. That is a PNM government policy. What about this judiciary of the chancellor. What is behind this, let us look at it. Now, what we have is, there are two roles of a Chief Justice. There is an administrative role and then there is a judicial role. The administrative role is filled by the Court Administrator, mind you, who is an attorney-at-law appointed under the JLSC. Does that not meet the criteria for what is being proposed? What is there to fix? In essence we already have a judicial chancellor. We support the strengthening of the DDP's office and the Public Defender's office, but what we want to know is, where, hon. Minister, is the funding coming from for this? And then, Mr. Speaker, we have the other proposals which are just proposals with no time frame for the reform of the justice system in Trinidad and Tobago. It is so vague that I cannot comment on it.

Mr. Speaker, I now come to my pet peeve the unconscionable, not in consonance with the principles and practices of good industrial relations, elimination of the CEPEP, URP and forestry workers and other workers in a mere six months, over 50,000 persons lost their jobs. The Minister had the boldfacity to speak about achievements, yet he failed to tell this Parliament that since assuming office they have failed to pay public sector salaries on time. Month, after month, after month. Public sector workers you all have been promised 10 per cent. If you cannot get whatever per cent you are getting now on time, when will you get that 10 per cent? You may never get paid.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: And then in order to assuage their conscience they say, “Well the CEPEP workers were gangsters, they funded criminals”. In my view from the nine CEPEP contractors whom I knew in Port of Spain South and all the workers who I now know by heart, they were honest, hard-working, decent citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: The only crime they commit is that they look like the PNM, that is the only crime they commit. Yes, there is a PNM look. They look like PNM. The only person these people try to gangster is their MP, when want a donation, they “doh” gangster nobody else. They are law abiding citizens. But in order to save face you must stigmatize them, you must assuage your conscience, you must demonize them, you must say that—and here is what you do, you want to create now 8,000 jobs. How does 8,000 account for 50,000? Where is the Math in that? Is it US 8,000 jobs you are creating before you devalue the dollar?

Hon. Members: Yes.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Yeah. Which sector will absorb these 8,000 jobs? What will be the recruitment process? Or will these jobs be—Mr. Speaker, I have a text on my phone that came on Monday:

Dear, MP “we get” a call from Mr. So and So. “He say” come down to the office for your URP jobs. When “we reach” down they say, “\$200, go and march by the Parliament, ah giving yuh a jersey, but when you finish we will pay you the \$200”.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: That is how you treat people. That is how you treat poor people. I have it. So, when they are outside Parliament, it is because they get

their—"Come down for wuk".

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Nah, Port of Spain South, we said no no no, we said no to that, Sir. "Ah" coming to the butcher just now. "Ah" coming to him.

So, Mr. Speaker, I have it for everybody. Mr. Butcher, please wait your turn, you will get it. "Bambye we nah see am." What is deeply troubling is that these people were terminated in the midst of a school term. They were not ghosts, they were individuals who turned up for work every single day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: They were not engaged in corrupt practices, they were simply trying to make a living. There was countrywide evidence of their presence cleaning the drains, the roadsides, the highways, the cemeteries, beautifying the country. And in the midst of preparing for their children they were summarily dismissed. I see union members sit there and did not raise one voice, well, one did. Shame. These workers now face uncertainty having to support their families and prepare their children for their future and their education. What is even more deeply troubling, Mr. Speaker, is that some of these workers are single mothers who have to juggle earning a living, with caring and supervising their children. They depend on these jobs to make ends meet. What about that you all do not understand. They depend on it to make ends meet. They depend on these jobs to balance their lives. These workers are not just statistics, they are certainly not collateral damage, they are people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Real people, struggling to pay rent, struggling to buy uniforms for their children, struggling to feed their children and to put food on the table for themselves.

4.00 p.m.

How have you treated them like that? Why have you treated them like that? Because they look and sound like the PNM? This Government—

Mr. Alexander: I am confused.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: You are always confused.

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

Mr. K. Scotland SC: A government adrift. You are always confused. A Government, for the first time in the history of Trinidad and Tobago—

Mr. Alexander: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: I have the report from Justice St. Clair-Douglas. Leave me alone. Leave me alone.

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

Mr. Speaker: Port of Spain South.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Sorry, sorry. “Buh ah have de report”. Let me do constituency matters, Mr. Speaker. Let me do constituency—“not Instagram, Facebook and bussing mark. Ah have it. I just eh ready to release it”. The road ahead for Port of Spain South: Port of Spain South, from Beverly Hills to Plaisance; from Pump Trace to Block 8; from Canada to Africa; Nelson, Duncan, George Street; East Dry River; Sea Lots; from Woodbrook, Mango Rose, Plaisance, Sea Lots 1, 2 and 3; Production Drive; Pioneer Drive; the engine room, Woodbrook, I want to say to you all, wake up, “dis Government doh care about we”. Wake up, “dey doh care about we”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Let us now start to care for ourselves. Let us put ourselves in a position where we have our natural instinct given to us by our ancestors. We were the best tradesmen, we were the best carpenters, we were the best

shoemakers, the best seamstress, we are still the best chefs and cooks. Let us get our own business—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—and have a stake in the national pie, so that—have a stake and have some small and medium—so when we are discussing budget, we are part of the budget.

Let us now also, Mr. Speaker, have something, so that when any self-styled bullying butcher come, he cannot—he or she cannot affect us. When any collateral clown comes, he will not be able to refer to us in a derogatory way.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Mr. Speaker, in constituency issues, I call on this Government and the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, open up the Basilon Street Youth Facility; open it up. It has been ready and kept closed. Why is it closed? Because it is in a PNM area?

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Why is it closed? Because it is in a PNM area? Do not play with the young people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Do not play with that.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Come on. Come on. We opened the Basilon Street Youth Facility. We opened it. Why has it remained closed? Why has it remained closed?

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Mr. Speaker, as I close—

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Speaker, please. This level of hooliganism continues to

pervade the Chamber.

Hon. Member: What is the point of order?

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Okay, Leader of Government Business—

Mr. Padarath: 48(6), 48(1).

Mr. Speaker: Right. Okay, I reminded all Members when we started, let us not descend into that. So, Member for Port of Spain South, you have two and a half minutes. Let us just proceed with a measure of civility towards each other. There is no need to shout across, you address me. The Standing Order says you address me. Do not be distracted and address other people.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Mr. Speaker, in this season of Divali, the symbolism of light triumphing over darkness, it resonates deeply with all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, of every creed and race, as we search for clarity in these times of uncertainty. The light that we celebrate does not belong to any one person, any one party, but it is a light that shines from the businessman in Port of Spain to the farmer in Chatham. And we operate not through smoke screens and political theatrics, but through truth.

The budget hides what it cannot fix. It punishes what it perceives to be non-political supporters. It fluffs what it does not understand. But just as night cannot hold back the dawn, the truth always comes out about an incompetent and bankrupt Government who made promises that they are unable to keep. This is a Government of propaganda and self-praise. The true light of Divali does not need self-praise. It shines all on its own.

So, at the end of the day, people of Trinidad and Tobago, we will see the light. They will see that in Deepavali, which is the word for Diwali, it means rows and rows of light. I ask that these rows and rows of light, Deepavali, shine in our

community, in our homes, in our hearts and hopefully, in the minds of this wicked and uncaring Government. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for Point Fortin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (Hon. Ernesto Kesar): Mr. Speaker, I thank you. I rise on this very critical day to make a contribution to this debate. But before I do so, I want to thank the wonderful and beautiful people of the constituency of Point Fortin—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar:—who, for the first time in 40 years, just as how today is the eve of Divali, saw the light and voted out the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Elder: They have representation now.

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Prime Minister of this country, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, MP, for showing and for reposing the confidence in the trade union and to ensuring that we have a coalition of interests, and to this, Madam Prime Minister, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, I am an example of what unity and solidarity means. Mr. Speaker, I am very restrained this evening because it is the first time I am in this House experiencing something that is very surreal. It is unbelievable, Mr. Speaker, that I am listening to the people on that side, the hon. Members on that side, and they are talking as if they have never been in Opposition or Government or something. It is like they are confused, Mr. Speaker. Because I just heard the hon. Member for Port of Spain South tried to make an analogy, “and when he

realized that he went down ah road, he tried to pull it back and kinda give it ah lil undertone, kinda something there”.

Mr. Speaker, let me talk—before I go into—let me talk about just due. And I want to talk about why the hon. Minister of Finance, Minister Tancoo, why we had to move away from a budget of arrogant technicality, a budget of scoffing, and looking down, and disdain, and discontent to a budget of the people—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar:—a budget that was devoid, a budget that was simple, that the average man could have understood. That is why there is so much debate, because for the first time in probably ever, Trinidad and Tobago, the average man is paying attention right now, as we speak, to this debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: The average man—normally, Mr. Speaker, “the average man does say, man, with dem people, da ha nutten to do with me.” But for the first time in Trinidad and Tobago, the average simple person, the common man, is paying apt attention to what is going on.

Mr. Speaker, let me first, before anything at all, I want to pay respect to the 14 workers that died on Berth 5, October 17, 1985, in the refinery Petrotrin. I send to them and their family solidarity and continued honour, because I know later this evening, that is a memorial that we continue to have as the labour movement. But while I am on my feet, Mr. Speaker, I also would like to lend condolences for the Paria four. And as I want to ask, as people across there are expressing sentiments, Mr. Speaker, as we want to talk about just due, where was the just due for the Paria four? Where was the just due?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: When the same members across there sat by and said nothing?

And they allowed the former former Prime Minister, and the former Prime Minister, as they stood by and allowed these four nationals to perish? Where was the just due, Mr. Speaker? Mr. Speaker, where is the just due for Pete Phillip? Where is the just due? Mr. Speaker, where is the just due for the 610 murders that took place in 2024?

Mr. Speaker, this budget is a budget towards rebuilding, restoring and to recentre Trinidad and Tobago away from the morass that it is currently in that was caused by the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, where is the just due for the 5,943 Petrotrin workers, multiplied by the 10,349 contract workers, multiplied by an average of five, Mr. Speaker? Mr. Speaker, where is the just due? Mr. Speaker, 2018 still lives on in the minds of all these workers.

Mr. Elder: All, all, all.

Hon. E. Kesar: But, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Scotland: Did they get pay off?

Hon. E. Kesar: But, Mr. Speaker, as I humbly say, “de truth does hurt”, that is why they are responding.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: The truth hurts. The truth hurts, Mr. Speaker. The truth hurts.

Mr. Elder: Mittal got paid off?

Hon. E. Kesar: But, Mr. Speaker, where is the just due for the Mittal workers? Where is the just due for the TSTT workers? You see, Mr. Speaker, it was just reported by the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan the amount—70,000 workers lost their jobs under the People's National Movement. Right?

Mr. Speaker, the revenue, if I were to refer, Mr. Speaker—oil production in

2015 was 78,630; in 2024, 50,892 barrels per day. Natural gas production, 3.8 MMcf/d to 2.5 MMcf/d. Mr. Speaker, labour force participation in 2015 was 60.6 per cent; in 2024, 55.4 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, the refinery throughput in 2015 was 125,308; in 2024, zero. But let me explain why I am raising that point, Mr. Speaker. This Government is attempting, or will correct, or will fix—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar:—will fix what that—what those esteemed people failed to do.

Mr. Elder: “Make sure you eh shaking when you say dat”.

Hon. E. Kesar: “And ah making sure I eh shaking, ah standing firm”.

Mr. Elder: [*Laughter*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, refinery revenue. In 1994 to 2018—I will not go so far back. I will start with 2009, a time that they know about, because at that time there was a gentleman named Malcolm Jones; Malcolm Jones, who I continue to say is the single interesting person that has caused this country to be where it is today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Malcolm Jones.

Mr. Elder: “And that is ah disaster, eh”.

Hon. E. Kesar: I will come to that just now. In 2009, Mr. Speaker, revenue for sales from the refinery was TT \$37,420,000,846 or, US \$5,984,000,894.

4.15 p.m.

Fast forward. In 2013, refinery sales were TT \$30,178,000,268, or US \$4,701,000,031. Fast forward again. In 2015, sales from the refinery were TT \$18,496,000,292 or US \$2,941,000,736. Fast forward again, Mr. Speaker. In 2017, revenue sales were TT \$19,169,000,644, or US \$2,843,000,275. That is

2017. And, one more figure just for comparison. In 2018, the very same year that the most destructive, devastating economic decision that was ever made by a government took place, refinery sales were TT \$23,406,000,065 or US \$3,466,000,710.

Mr. Speaker, let us come forward now. In 2018, a decision was made. That economic decision, Mr. Speaker, cost this country dearly financially, socially, morally, and definitely spiritually. Mr. Speaker, the then Government created the Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited, and they broke up the company into about five different elements. But, I will focus on one particular element because there were two elements, Paria and Heritage, that were designed to be money-making.

According to the Heritage financial statements, in 2020, profit—this is in TT dollars now—\$1,017,860,000. In 2021, \$682,000,681. In 2022, \$1,000,113,271. And, just for comparison again, in 2024, \$940,000,279. Mr. Speaker, when you look at the financials of Heritage, and you compare the financials of the refinery, chalk and cheese. Chalk and cheese.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, you know sometimes, you “does hata” really allow time to pass. Mr. Speaker, I am here as I stand in the defence of every single oil and gas worker in Trinidad and Tobago, every single contract worker, every single artisan, and every single skilled worker.

Mr. Speaker, I commend the Minister of Finance for being a true man and being consistent and offering that 10 per cent wage offer to the Public Services Association.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: And you see, notwithstanding all of the attempts to twist it and obfuscate the whole situation—yeah, that is “ah” big word, Mr. Speaker—10 per

cent was the instruction to the CPO, and in the true spirit of what this Government is about, we are not going to interfere with negotiations. Corporation sole is not going to dip its hand and try to tamper with the negotiation process, which is enshrined by the collective agreement. The CPO has been given an instruction. The CPO, Mr. Speaker, will sit with the relevant unions and negotiate in good faith and in the spirit of good industrial relations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: That is all. Mr. Speaker, let me now turn—because again, I heard that I was talking about the refinery and shaking. So, I want to make sure that I give enough time to talk about the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. So let me turn to the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Energy. Some of the highlights as to where we will be looking to, to assist the Minister of Finance in ensuring that he is able to conduct and implement everything that was outlined in our budget. First and foremost, crude oil and natural gas production. Heritage Land is forecast to drill eight wells for fiscal 2026, which consists of one exploratory well and seven development wells. The four-class exploration will be drilled within Heritage's newly acquired Preau Block to an average depth of 12,000 feet. The three development wells are planned to be drilled in the Barrackpore fields at a depth of 9,000 feet, while the remaining four development wells will be at an average of 5,500 feet.

Heritage Offshore: Heritage oil production will embark on a five-well drilling programme, and a six-well workover is also planned. Workover activity will continue on a needs basis for fiscal 2026. The upgrade of production receiving facilities is ongoing to accommodate expected production.

Heritage lease operator farm-out enhanced production services and contract

operations: For fiscal 2026, Heritage plans for lease operators to drill 16 development wells and to conduct 33 workover wells. For fiscal 2026 farm-out, operators have planned to drill 11 development wells and to conduct five workover enhanced production service contracts to drill seven development wells and to conduct 12 workovers.

Mr. Speaker, let us look at that for a little while. Drilling activity: rig days in 2015 were 2,849. In 2024, it was 1,234. Mr. Speaker, when those on that side talk about oil and they care about the energy landscape and so on, you cannot get new oil if you are not drilling. The PNM cut rigging time down by 50 per cent; 50 per cent, Mr. Speaker. Because the people on this side know about drilling and know about oil and gas, we are going to ramp back up drilling and ramp back up workover for fiscal 2026.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Not 2027, not '28, '26. Mr. Speaker, let me continue.

T-Rex, the operator, proposed workover plans for two wells in the Cory Moruga block and to drill one appraisal well.

Bahamas Petroleum Company, BPC, plans to conduct one workover and drill seven development wells in fiscal 2026. Let me continue.

Touchstone production operation: The operator plans to drill two development wells in their Cascadura fields in fiscal 2026. Touchstone also operates the Rochard, Barackpore, and the Fyzabad fields, and they are expected to drill two workover wells in that field.

Summit Energy Services Ltd: For fiscal 2026, the operator plans to drill one development well and to conduct one workover.

DeNovo Energy: DeNovo plans to conduct a sidetrack of an existing exploration well to further the exploration of the existing gas reserves, which are

located up dip in the Iguana field, and a final investment decision is pending rig availability, for which negotiations are currently being undertaken.

You see, Mr. Speaker, when the people on that side said that my Minister—my apologies. When the honoured and esteemed persons on that side indicated that my Minister of Energy and Energy Industries “ain come with nutten new”, we ain doing nutten”—I am saying just this one page alone, if I count, is more than 40 wells are going to be drilled or workover within fiscal 2026.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Okay? Woodside Energy: Woodside plans to conduct further studies evaluating the potential development concept for deepwater block 14, and 23(a). The viability of two development concepts for the Calypso project is currently being assessed, which would include one subsea tieback to a shallow-water platform, and compression and a lightweight floating production unit.

EOG Resources: EOG plans to continue the development of the Mento field. The capital cost of the project is estimated US \$614 million, with the gross project operating cash flow being estimated at US \$764.8 million, with the Government’s share of profit revenue of 74 per cent. The development of Mento involves the drilling, completion, and development of 12 wells, and exploration wells in two phases—Mento A platform. Pools and contingent reserves in the Mento development are 373 BCF of gas and 19.9 million barrels of oil. EOG also has plans to develop the Coconut field in partnership with BP, and the first gas is expected second quarter of 2027.

Perenco: Perenco has outlined a robust drilling and well intervention programme, Mr. Speaker, throughout the third quarter at the end of fiscal 2026, aimed at enhancing production and maximizing recovery across its offshore assets.

Shell: Two development wells are being pursued by Shell. These are the Aphrodite project and the Manatee plus project. The Aphrodite project is a single development well, which, with peak production rate at 120 mm SCFD targeting 275 bcf of gas. Mr. Speaker, the total cost for this entire project is estimated US \$1.46 billion.

BPTT: BPTT as the continuation of the Cypre development phase 2 drilling is planned for fiscal 2026.

Hon. Member: Cypre.

Hon. E. Kesar: Cypre—sorry, I am saying “Sipe”. Thank you—for fiscal 2026, with three development wells and four wells in phase 1 of Cypre—and the development is already in production. Infill drilling of wells in the Angelin Field are also expected and to commence production in the second half of 2026. Mr. Speaker, if I were to pause. They were asking, “Where de money coming from? What going and happen? “Where we would get de money? Where dis?” Mr. Speaker, I am simply saying that the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries has been quietly and diligently doing our work to ensure that we put money in—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, Ginger development. Four wells. Development programme in the Ginger field. The first well has already been drilled. The Ginger development will target 358 bcf of reserves with peak production of 275 mm SFD and first gas is targeted for fiscal 2026.

Mr. Speaker, as I continue, we come to Touchstone once again. Touchstone anticipates natural gas from five new wells within the Cascadura field and one well in the Coho field, all in August 2026; same fiscal.

Mr. Speaker, let me just move now. I will turn to some other aspects of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries. The Port of Brighton down in La Brea,

by you, my brother.

Mr. Elder: Yeah, that is by me.

Hon. E. Kesar: The Port of Brighton is a cornerstone project for the 2025—2026 fiscal. The project involves the deployment of a solar photovoltaic—big word—PV system in the La-Brea Industrial Development Company, LABIDCO. This will supply approximately 36 per cent of the Port's conventional electrical load. The load includes lighting, office and building equipment, HVAC systems, and security operations. The project was developed after the 2024 greenhouse gas inventory and the decarbonization study conducted by LABIDCO and aligns with the company's environmental sustainability management framework.

4.30 p.m.

The execution of this project is to span two years with commissioning scheduled for the second quarter of 2026.

May I add, Mr. Speaker, the LABIDCO Port is possibly one of the only green ports in the Caribbean at this point in time, Mr. Speaker. The port itself is also earmarked to become a fully commercial port, but that plan of this is being developed and in a subsequent, hopefully by the mid-year review, we will report, Mr. Speaker.

In addition, I want to turn to deep water. As you know, Mr. Speaker, we had and there has been touted, they have been asking what are the benefits and so on. So, I will go without the preamble, Mr. Speaker, I will go directly to what have been the benefits thus far, as a result of the bid rounds—Exxon, and the other bid rounds.

As a part of the Ministry of Energy's continued efforts to improve the effectiveness and competitiveness of the bidding process, a significantly large data package was made accessible to potential bidders and a payment

of a pre bid fee of US \$25,000. And during the course of 2025's bid round, nine companies paid their pre bid fee of US \$25,000.

Thus far, two major companies with the award of four major blocks were realized for this bid round, which was closed in 2026. The bid fee of US \$40 per block was required on submission of bids, thus the combined pre bid and bid fees received for this bid round was US \$385,000. Cabinet has since appointed a technical evaluation team and they have begun their work already in this month of October.

Mr. Speaker, I will turn now to the issue of NIS and the issue—one point at which I want to make as it relates to NIS and the whole issue of the increase of the age of retirement.

Mr. Speaker, whereas many speakers have spoken and they have given their thoughts, they have provided data and so on, I want to walk this House back to a report that was done September 30, 2019, and received by the then Ministry of Finance, October 19, 2020. And this is the report of the Independent Actuarial Valuation of the Petroleum Company of Trinidad and Tobago Employees' Pension Plan and the Trinidad and Tobago Petroleum Company Limited Staff Pension Plan. This is the report here.

Why am I referring to this report, Mr. Speaker? Mr. Speaker in the executive summary of this report—and if we—just for the record and for the *Hansard*. When this report was laid, it was laid by the then former, former, Finance Minister, the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East. And he did this report when the workers at the time would have said that the two pension plans mentioned here by Petrotrin were in deficit. The first plan, the PEP was in deficit at that time by some TT \$4.7 billion. The then former, former, Finance Minister

indicated that that was not true, and he got an independent review and this was the independent review.

Mr. Speaker, what is interesting—why is this report related to NIS? One may wonder. Mr. Speaker, in the Executive Summary, point 8—this is what it says. It says here, this is:

8. Recommendations

- Taking over all SPP and PPP, the pension obligation and assets, perhaps transferring them to NIS. The use of the investment management and pension payment systems of the NIS could also lead to the reduction in administration costs and professional fees.

It goes further to say:

The main local holdings of, with the view to reduce exposure slowly over the next 20 years to avoid destabilizing the market, explore the possibility of off market bulk sales and swaps for bonds with institutional investors such as TTUTC and NIS.

Mr. Speaker, for the listening public and for those who might not be understanding why I am raising this point, Mr. Speaker, it was the intention of the former, former, Minister of Finance and by extension, the intention of the former Government, to run down the two major pension plans of former Petrotrin workers, run it down, do not fund the deficit, and then after have the balance, the remaining, sent to NIB. That is how they were going to fund NIB, Mr. Speaker. That is how they were going to fund NIB, so that, at the end of the day, Mr. Speaker—and for the record, Mr. Speaker, at the close of Petrotrin, the Petrotrin employees' pension plan, the book value was TT \$9.37 billion. Okay?

And at that time, the actual valuation as of 2022 September the 30th, is \$7.4 billion, Mr. Speaker. And it is projected that by 2033, the fund would have reached its limit and that all pensioners after 2033 would have not been able to get their pension, because the former, former, Finance Minister and the former, former, Government, by the former, former, former, Prime Minister, gave a commitment to fund that deficit—and they want to talk about renege. And they came to the Parliament and told the country that that was not so. And to do that now, they try to justify it by getting a so called independent actuary—yes, to tell them that the fund was in surplus. But the actuary could not lie, he is an actuary. So he had to do it. So he had to talk the truth. Actually, he had to talk the truth.

So, brothers and sisters, we on this side, through hon. Finance Minister, the decision to do what was outlined, as relates to NIS, is as a result of careful consideration of all. It is as a result of careful, careful analysis and putting something in place, just in case, because, Mr. Speaker, anything else—they want to talk about deleterious—if anything else was done, Mr. Speaker, as a matter of fact, their intention was to just leave it just like that, and to come with some plan, some other thing, some strange—because they always build their plans and their strategies that do not take into consideration the impact of the average man and the average person, Mr. Speaker. That is what the PNM has. That is their legacy.

Mr. Speaker, let me now turn to my constituency, the constituency of Point Fortin. Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank—oh, let us get the notes. Mr. Speaker, I wish to continue to thank my Cabinet and Parliament colleagues for all of the support that they have given the constituency thus far.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: I wish to thank, Mr. Speaker, as well, the hon. Prime Minister for the confidence and for the support she has given.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, in the last five months, I will start with—because I said something the other day in an interview, Mr. Speaker, and somebody—one of—I suppose it is some source—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. E. Kesar:—put up something, and “dey say”, pie in the sky. Mr. Speaker, I have in my hand here—

Mr. Elder: “Doh shake, doh shake, doh shake.”

Hon. E. Kesar: “Doh shake? Doh shake, alright. Eh?” Mr. Speaker—thank you. I have here a document.

Hon. Member: Another one?

Hon. E. Kesar: Yes.

Hon. Member: Source.

Hon. Member: Another one?

Hon. E. Kesar: Yes, a document, a document. “Nah, ah good source, ah good source, ah good source, ah good source, ah good source. Nah, not ah—nah—”

Hon. Member: “Not ah hot baccs?”

Hon. E. Kesar: “Not ah hot baccs. Nah, nah, nah.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Something that is good and proper, and interesting and reliable, and more so, Mr. Speaker—

Hon. Member: And productive.

Hon. E. Kesar:—and productive.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: What I have in my hand here, Mr. Speaker, is the evidence of some good, insightful work, after we would have made our submissions and made

our commitments on the campaign to restore confidence in the fence-line communities in Point Fortin and La Brea. We have gotten, Mr. Speaker, after great deliberations and trying to make this thing happen, starting with the Heritage Petroleum Company, to institute a fence-line contractor programme, which will see the return into the Heritage system, some 50 fence-line contractors in Point Fortin, who were unceremoniously removed from the contract system by the last administration, when they “mash up” Petrotrin, Mr. Speaker, and put in the amount of people that I stated before, on the breadline.

You have ridiculous and strange parameters were established to keep out local contractors in Point Fortin and La Brea. Yes. You had strange and very unfortunate and unreasonable parameters created to ensure that only a certain group of persons qualify to do work in Heritage, Mr. Speaker. What you see happening here now, is a levelling of the playing field, a reopening of the door, so that these small and medium contractors, once they qualify, they are able to get work; to bid, and once they are successful, to get work in Heritage, Mr. Speaker. And once this works we will now ask other state companies to look at the model and if it suits their needs and suits their purview and it passes their acid test, to implement the same. Mr. Speaker at the end of the day, this is a Government about creating opportunities for small and medium business people, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: But that is not all, Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister of Housing, Mr. David Lee, he said to me: “I eh know what I do”. But let me tell him, Mr. David Lee, I wish to thank you. You have now created an anticipation to fix a 20-year-old problem, which is Lakeview Housing Development, hon. Minister.

Mr. Speaker, I met with the residents of Lakeview two nights ago, as a result of a tour that took place with the hon. Anil Roberts and the hon. Phillip Alexander

and their teams. And in that—yes—and in that tour, Mr. Speaker, what was unearthed is very, very, very, very troubling and sad, just to say, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, this development has been in existence for quite a while. Mr. Speaker, for 10 long years, the residents have been asking—for 25 years, the development, but the residents—remember, Mr. Speaker, Point Fortin was always under the ambit of the People's National Movement. Yes? The residents of that development, they are unable to get a simple thing as their deed of comfort, to get their deed of lease. And you know why, Mr. Speaker, because the development which has been there for quite a while, it has never been completed.

The residents complained of flooding. They complained of poor—the sewage and the sewer plant being down for approximately eight years now. But you see, Mr. Speaker, because there is a change in administration, in Point Fortin they felt confident enough, because some 250 residents came out two nights ago, and they voiced their concerns, and I have given them the assurance that this Government will begin the healing to fix Lakeview.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: So thank you, hon. Minister Lee, thank you, thank you.

4.55 pm

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, I wish to also highlight, again, under energy, the Atlantic LNG implementing the STEM programme, which is the science and technology programme for young people. Both secondary and primary schools will see some—an average of some 748 students visiting the schools per week and over time, not just schools in Point Fortin, but all the schools in the entire constituency from Icacos, right up to La Brea. Yes?

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank as well the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: The Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, through our communication, has indicated to me that he has given the commitment for the upgrade of all of the fishing ports from Point Fortin to Icacos, and the continued acceleration work to ensure that farmers—their road access and their access to funding for farming continues, and continues at an accelerated pace.

He has also indicated to me, Mr. Speaker, that in the upcoming weeks and months, he is going to be visiting my constituency to sit with the farmers in the main, but more so, there is a Chatham farming development corp, which is the corp—the only officially registered corporative in Chatham, and this is the corporative that the last administration did not want to deal with when they went down to Chatham and in a surreptitious way, took over state lands and did a project that did not include the people of Point Fortin.

That project, Mr. Speaker, people from all over the place got land. I mean, I have no problem, you are a national, but nobody from Point Fortin, no farmer got any land in that—and that is the YAHP project, Mr. Speaker. Right? And I dare anyone to challenge it, because I have the—just like many people, I have the file at—I am sure, Port of Spain South—I have the file. I have the file. Mr. Speaker.

I also want to thank the Minister of Public Utilities—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar:—and indeed, the Minister in the Ministry of Public Utilities and the Permanent Secretary—

Mr. Elder: Parliamentary Secretary.

Hon. E. Kesar:—Parliamentary Secretary, sorry. Mr. Speaker, T&TEC has launched a massive Street Lighting Programme in the south-western peninsula.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: As of the 20th of February, T&TEC would have ascertained 4,887 street lights—September, sorry, 20th of September. I said February, my apologies. “Ah so excited, nah. Ah so excited”. Yes, yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: As of the 20th of September, 2025, 4,887 street lights were counted, identified in that—in the constituency of Point Fortin. Out of that number, 464 lights were off. As of the 1st of October, 2025, Mr. Speaker, the number of lights that remain outstanding and in progress is 161.

Hon. Member: Well done. Well done.

Hon. E. Kesar: Yes, and today is the 18th. Yes?

Hon. Member: That is performance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: In addition to that, there continues—the work is continuing on the Chatham water works plant and I must say, Mr. Speaker, we have a long way to go because Point Fortin has been neglected for the last 40 years, and I say it without apology. There are people talking about potholes and they now say—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker—and “doh talk bout hospital”. Do not talk about it. It is the UNC Government that built Point hospital, man.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: “Doh talk bout that, man. Doh talk bout that. Doh go dey. Doh go dey”.

Mr. Elder: “Is the UNC put dat dey. Is the UNC put dat dey”.

Hon. E. Kesar: “Doh go dey. Doh go dey”.

Mr. Elder: “Is ah UNC Government put dat dey”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: “Doh talk bout dat. Doh talk bout dat”.

Hon. Member: Point Fortin and Arima.

Hon. E. Kesar: That is right. “Doh talk bout dat. Doh go dey. Doh go dey. Doh go dey”.

Mr. Elder: “Ha some shame. Ha some shame. Ha some shame”.

Hon. E. Kesar: Forget that. Forget that. “Doh go dey”. Forget that. Forget that. Forget that.

Mr. Speaker, I also would like to thank the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: The Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, in the months of October—no, sorry, months of August and September visited the constituency of Point Fortin and the constituency of La Brea. In the constituency of Point Fortin, in the areas of Guapo/Gonzales, Techier, Mahaica, Fanny Village, he has already sent his technical team—we have gotten the commitment and he has already sent his technical team, and these grounds and football fields will be upgraded in fiscal 2026.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: In addition to that, Mr. Speaker—“hmm”, this one is troubling. In March of 2025, Mr. Speaker, a contract was hurriedly issued for Coronation Park. Mr. Speaker, let me explain, for the records, what Coronation Park means to Point Fortin. Coronation Park is the largest recreation space in Point Fortin—

Mr. Speaker: May I just advise you that you have just under a minute again. If you—your 10 minutes, that will take you to 5.01, just so that you know.

Hon. E. Kesar: Thank you, Sir. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, Coronation Park is the largest recreation space in the constituency of Point Fortin. Coronation Park is rich in history. There is an indoor arena. There is a swimming pool that was built by Atlantic LNG. There are some broken down netball courts and so on.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. E. Kesar: But, Mr. Speaker, he is right, you know. He said, PNM. He is correct. PNM has it broken down.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. E. Kesar: PNM has it in a state of disrepair.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Yes, he is right, Mr. Speaker. He is correct. He is correct. He is correct to say, PNM. He is correct. He is correct. He is correct.

Mr. Elder: But we will fix it.

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, in March 2025, a contract was awarded to a particular contractor. The scope of Coronation Park—we do not—the public—the sporting public does not understand where that scope came from, but they created something and they rushed and they just gave a contractor.

Mr. Speaker, we have had three consultations thus far and the people of Point Fortin have said openly that they wish to have a proper stadium established in Coronation Park, with a Mondotrack and a proper football field. Because, Mr. Speaker, the great Jereem Richards is from Point Fortin and we would like to name Coronation Park after Jereem Richards.

But, Mr. Speaker, I want—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. E. Kesar: But, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, for giving me the proper advice. I would not say what the advice is, but I want to thank him for still supporting—not still, for supporting the project and in fiscal 2026, we will sit, work it out, but at—they talk about, we are being vindictive and “we take away”—no, the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs knows how important Coronation Park is to Point Fortin, so he left the allocation, Mr. Speaker. And for that, the people of Point Fortin thank the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs for doing that, to ensuring that we get—at least we could start phase one of Coronation Park sporting and recreational facility.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, in terms of thanking my colleagues, I want to thank the honourable—no, two, the hon. Michelle Benjamin—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar:—I want to thank her for—in constant discussions with her, I have indicated to her that if it is one project we would like to see start in the community, it is the construction of the Warden Road Community Centre. Mr. Speaker, the Warden Road community—Warden Road is a very large, widely expansive, highly populated place in Point Fortin. The residents there, for the last 51 years, have been asking for a community centre. And you know, strange, Mr. Speaker, if you know, Point Fortin, even local government is controlled by PNM. So, they have been asking the PNM for a community centre for 51 years, Mr. Speaker. That is no problem. The UNC will build the community centre in Warden Road.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: I also would like to thank the hon. Minister of People, Social Development and Family Services, Minister Vandana Mohit—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar:—for the support she has given the constituency in ensuring that in this very short space of time, with the limited resources that we had, to making sure that Point Fortin was given their just and fair, in terms of social services.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. E. Kesar: [*Laughter*] Mr. Speaker, I would really—as I stand here, as a representative of labour, notwithstanding all that was said on that side, by the hon. Members on that side—and I know the hon. Prime Minister, the hon Minister of Finance and some of my other very esteemed colleagues will respond appropriately, but I choose to stay in my lane this evening here, Mr. Speaker, to make sure—but I want to just end with one little thing, Mr. Speaker, which has to do with the refinery. More details will be given out. More details will be given out. But I want to make sure that for the correction and for the record of the *Hansard*, Dr. Kevin Ramnarine would have submitted the report and it is public now—because he said it, so as I said in another place, I am advised by experts. I am not an expert and I do not tout to be an expert. I know a little bit about a lot. Yes? I know a little bit about a lot, but I am not an expert. And Dr. Ramarine said it clearly, that the committee has recommended a five-phase approach to the restart of the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery, and that is as much I am about to say because the rest will be given to my hon. Minister, Dr. Roodal Moonilal.

Hon. Member: “The lion”.

Hon. E. Kesar: Yes, “the lion”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Yes, yes, yes.

So, in closing, Mr. Speaker—oh, Mr. Speaker, in flipping my notes, I forgot two very important things; two very, very important things, Mr. Speaker, so I need to rewind. Mr. Speaker, as outlined in the budget statement, we have the Chatham youth facility that has been hung up by the PNM for nearly three years, right.

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, let me say it again, the Chatham youth facility that was closed down by the PNM. Let me say it again—

Hon. Members: *[Laughter]*

Hon. E. Kesar:—that was closed down—

Hon. Members: *[Crosstalk]*

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, let me say it again, just in case they were opening their fridge and they did not “hear meh”. The Chatham youth facility that was closed down by the People’s National Movement—yes, that was closed down—

Mr. Elder: Tell them, tell them.

Hon. E. Kesar: Yes?—that was closed down under the guise—

Hon. Member: *[Inaudible]*

Hon. E. Kesar: No, Mr. Speaker, that was closed down under the guise of repairs; “repairs dat cyah finish up to now”. Mr. Speaker, those repairs will be completed and the Chatham youth facility shall be opened in fiscal 2026.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, I just said, where I am from, the People’s National Movement was in charge for 40 years. I am saying, Mr. Speaker, they are no longer in charge. There is a new administration here now.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. E. Kesar: Mr. Speaker, there is also the Point Fortin youth centre, which was MIC before, and the Government Vocational Centre. Again, GVC—evening

classes have been non-existent in GVC for over six years, Mr. Speaker, and I dare them to challenge that. Mr. Speaker, in consultation with the Minister of Tertiary Education and Skills Training, and the Minister of Education, we are going to return evening classes to Point Fortin by the end of November 2025.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: And why that is so important for the records, Mr. Speaker? Evening classes are what persons who were out of school and people who were going to work and so on could have gotten their skills and qualifications in their craft, technical skills and even their engineering—basic engineering qualifications, Mr. Speaker.

5.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, as I close, I would like to say that the constituency of Point Fortin supports the hon. Prime Minister, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, MP, supports the hon. Finance Minister, Minister Davendranath Tancoo—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar:—and supports this Government in our first historical budget for fiscal 2025/2026, and that we will continue to do all that we have to do to move Point Fortin from where it is now to become a city, and not just a city, a city that is controlled by the United National Congress. God bless. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. E. Kesar: Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: Member for San Fernando East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Brian Manning (*San Fernando East*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for an opportunity to return some sanity to this debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker, the Member for Point Fortin stood here in this Chamber and attempted to bend light. He attempted to make things that were not real appear to be real, and things that are not real appear to be real again, Mr. Speaker. So much of what he said was not true that I do not even know where to begin. For the Member to say that the People's National Movement closed down the Chatham Youth Centre has to be the stock joke of the year, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: When this UNC Government came into office in 2010 they shut down every single youth programme in Trinidad and Tobago. That is public knowledge, Mr. Speaker. Clearly the Member for Point Fortin was not around when that was going on, Mr. Speaker.

For the Member to say that the UNC constructed the Point Fortin Hospital is also myth. There is nothing real about it. That statement is about as mythical as the Petrotrin numbers he presented in this Chamber this afternoon, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. B. Manning: They are as fake and fraudulent as the budget presentation that we are here to debate. Mr. Speaker, the Member came here today clearly determined to only spout OWTU fantasy instead of presenting the truth to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. OWTU propaganda, nothing real.

The Member had the temerity, the audacity, Mr. Speaker, the “boldfacity”—

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

Mr. B. Manning:—to talk about a Petrotrin pension fund that is underfunded by more than \$4 billion. That is what the gentleman said. Not one single time did he mention what it is here this Government is going to do about it, Mr. Speaker. If the fund is undervalued by \$4 billion, then I want the Minister of Finance to make a commitment today that this Government is going to place \$4 billion inside of the

Petrotrin pension fund for the former employees of Petrotrin, Mr. Speaker. I hope the Minister says that in his winding up.

Mr. Tancoo: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. B. Manning: Yeah, good look. Good luck. Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to my good friend from Barataria; usually a very good delivery, Mr. Speaker, but, again, it is clear the mandate of those on the other side is to distract from the nonsense and delusion that is in this budget document, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker, this budget document is nothing short of fake and fraudulent. There is not a single economic commentator in this country or out, that believes a single figure in this document, and maybe that is why the document is so bereft of numbers to begin with.

The Minister of Finance stood here on his legs on Monday and spent the first hour of his contribution bashing the People's National Movement. Mr. Minister of Finance, the election the over. It is time to get to work. A budget exercise is a very serious thing and a budget document is a very serious thing, Mr. Speaker. There are people all over this country and this world listening to this budget debate to understand how to make decisions going forward in this economy, whether it is mom and dad deciding how to run their household or businessmen deciding how to invest in their business.

Mr. Speaker, no one can make any sensible decisions reading this document because these numbers are totally fraudulent, and I will justify that in a few minutes. Mr. Speaker, I mean, we look at the revenue numbers here and it is right here in this document. In the last year, Mr. Speaker, fiscal 2025, there was a reported deficit of \$8.7 billion, with revenues of \$50.6 billion and expenditure of 59.3. Mr. Speaker, this Minister of Finance would want us to believe that in just

one fiscal period that he expects to generate total revenues of \$55.36 billion, with a total expenditure of a similar, \$59.23 billion.

Mr. Speaker, a revenue projection of \$55.367 would be near record revenues for this economy, Mr. Speaker, for the last 15 years. Anybody with “two cents” would know that that is just not possible. At the end of the day, we are still an energy economy, Mr. Speaker. Every commentator, internationally and locally, has said that international energy prices will remain depressed going into the near, maybe medium-term future. The very same Member for Point Fortin also mentioned the stagnant production of energy within Trinidad and Tobago. So we have stagnant volume and decreasing international energy prices, but somehow we are supposed to believe that we are going to achieve near record revenues in an energy economy.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance is allowed to be optimistic but he is not allowed to be prone to fantasy, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: This document here that I have, Mr. Speaker, may as well have been written by Dr. Seuss, it is a fairy tale. There is nothing real here, Mr. Speaker, nothing at all, and every single commentator has said so. But you know what is the real problem we have, Mr. Speaker, in this coalition of chaos and confusion, coalition of—[*Laughter*] Let me move on. In this coalition of chaos and confusion, Mr. Speaker, the problem that we have is that we have politicized trade unions as part of this coalition, Mr. Speaker.

The problem with politicized trade unions is that they no longer serve their membership, they start serving themselves and their political masters, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: We have members of trade unions in this Government touting

this budget as a “people’s budget”, the best budget ever. Mr. Speaker, “It is for the poor man”. Mr. Speaker, so many people, so many commentators, and I am going to show with the fiscal measures, this budget is meant to give with one hand and take, take, take, take with the other.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Any rational person reading this document would know that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Scotland SC: The CWU—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. B. Manning: You mentioned the CWU? Right on cue, Member, right on cue.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker, we have Members on the other side—we have—sorry—commentators who have spoken about this budget and we have these politicized trade unions, especially the President of the PSA, that seems to be serving themselves, the leadership of these organizations, and not serving their members.

The President of the PSA could bold-facedly say that, “This is a people’s budget and a win for public servants”. I have not met a public servant yet who believes that this is a win for them. I had consultations with members of several trade unions, and I am going to speak about that in a minute, but let us get back, Mr. Speaker, to the CWU and some of the other commentators on this budget. The Member for La Brea, I believe, our good friend, I understand that he is a former president of this esteemed trade union.

Mr. Elder: Secretary General.

Mr. B. Manning: I apologize, Secretary General of the CWU, Mr. Speaker. But, Mr. Speaker, he says that this budget is a “people’s budget”. Let us hear what his

comrades in the CWU have to say, Mr. Speaker.

I read here from a *Guardian* article, the 15th of October, 2025, this week:

“CWU: Budget overpromises and underdelivers for workers”

The total opposite to what is being said by our good friend from La Brea. I have read several analyses and this one, Mr. Speaker, has to be one of the best that I have read thus far. Let me share some of it with the national community. I was very impressed. It was written by Abraham Diaz:

“The Communication Workers’ Union (CWU) has warned that the 2026 national budget risks worsening cost-of-living pressures and eroding the real incomes of workers, especially those in lower-income and informal sectors.”

I guess they must be collateral damage also, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Time and time again under this Government we are seeing trade union leaders saying one thing while their membership are saying something else and that is the problem that we are having. Politicized trade unions produced leaders who are only looking out for their own political interest and their political masters and not their members, Mr. Speaker.

It goes on, Mr. Speaker:

“In a detailed analysis, the union said the government’s continued deficit spending and growing debt burden could ‘crowd out capital and social spending,’ while new levies—such as...electricity charge...landlord business tax—...”

—property tax by another name:

“...would ultimately pass costs on to...”—the—“...ordinary citizens.”

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance has been making the rounds this week and doing his able-best to put both feet in his mouth as often as possible, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. B. Manning: The Minister of Finance has stated that the measures, the fiscal measures that he placed in this document should not raise the cost of living in Trinidad and Tobago.

You do not have to be an “economics wizard”, Mr. Speaker. If you raise the price, add taxes to everything, is it not going to increase the cost of everything? This is not rocket science. But, again, just like the Member for Point Fortin, they come to this Chamber attempting to bend light, trying to get you to see what is not there and make you think that something is real when it is not real, because it is all a distraction, Mr. Speaker. It is a distraction. Let me move on.

Let me include one more commentary that I read about this budget, and it is coming from—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Manning: Yes. Article by Business Editor, the *Guardian*, Anthony Wilson,

“Is Govt planning to borrow \$19B in 2026?”

Mr. Speaker, this is what it had to say:

“So, by the Minister’s accounting, the projected fiscal deficit for the 2026 financial year would be \$3.865 billion.”

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance is distracting me, please, I would like your assistance.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Look, I want to use neutral language, I think you are just being a little facetious there. Let us go on.

Mr. B. Manning: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I go on:

“In T&T, fiscal deficits have to be funded, which means that anybody reading or listening to Mr. Tancoo’s budget would believe that the Government would need to borrow \$3.865 billion in the current financial year—which started on October 1, 2025 and ends on September 30, 2026—to address the difference between what the Government hopes to collect and what it expects to spend.

Given the borrowing that the Government has undertaken over the last 15 years, many of T&T’s business groups, trade union organisations, and households would have taken away from the 2026 budget the message of astute financial management by the current administration, which presented a budget with a fiscal deficit of only \$3.865...

The budget documents that accompany Mr. Tancoo’s presentation speech tell a different story, however.”

Yeah, get quiet. It is the *coup de grâce* now:

“Those documents—which are available on the website of the Ministry of Finance, for anyone to verify—disclose a fiscal deficit of over \$9 billion...”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: So, Mr. Speaker, even the Ministry of Finance’s own documents do not agree with this budget document that we have here presented by the UNC Minister of Finance. He goes on from here:

“...fiscal deficit of over \$9 billion and borrowing to finance that deficit of close to \$19 billion.”

Mr. Speaker, that is what we are being faced with. This document is a complete fraud. It is a fantasy. It is a figment of the Minister’s imagination. It is not real. It is their attempt to bend light and to distract the people of this country from the realities that we face. Well, you do not have to believe me. You do not

have to believe Anthony Wilson. You do not have to believe anybody locally. Let us take a look at the review by the international and independent S&P Global. Mr. Speaker, several rating agencies and the IMF and others would have deep analysis of this economy on an annual basis. We had a recently concluded analysis by the S&P Global, Mr. Speaker, where they determined that they were going to downgrade the outlook of this country to negative.

Now, during these consultations, they are very intense and they are very in-depth. They will meet with the Ministry of Finance. They will meet with the Ministry of Energy. They will meet with the private sector stakeholders. They will meet with the energy companies. They will meet with almost everyone who is relevant to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker. And then the Minister of Finance would have to speak to them and tell them a story, justify the numbers and figures that he is saying to be optimistic about the future economy of this country, and same economy that he is claiming that we should expect near record revenues in the next fiscal year.

5.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, as the song says:

“I heard he sang a good song,
I heard he had a style,”

But the S&P Global did not believe what he was saying, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Manning: And that is why this economy was downgraded.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Let me read the outlook. Back to reality, yes. The:

“Outlook

The negative outlook reflects our view that there is at least a

one-in-three chance we could lower the ratings over the next 6-24 months.”

Does that sound like record revenues to anyone?

“The country’s fiscal and external buffers have been gradually weakening over time and its long-term economic growth has been low. Despite many efforts, there has been only limited progress by previous administrations in diversifying the economy, leaving it vulnerable to volatile energy prices while output from the oil and gas sector has recently declined.”

Output has declined. But somehow, “Mr. Bend Light”, from the Ministry of Finance, wants us to believe that we are going to have record revenues going forward, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the document is not real. This is a coalition of counterfeits, fakes, and frauds, and we do not believe anything that they say, Mr. Speaker. Not a word.

Mr. Elder: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. B. Manning:

“Institutional and economic...”

—“ah comin’ back to you just now, you know, La Brea. Doh worry, it not over yet.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Manning: “It not over yet.”

“Institutional and economic profile: The energy sector will remain a key contributor to the economy despite declining production over the next few years.”

Mr. Speaker:

“We believe GDP will expand by 1% in 2025 and 2026, reflecting stagnant oil and gas production and continued growth in the non-energy sector.”

Mr. Speaker, the numbers simply do not add up. There is no one locally or internationally who believes a single number in this vacuous, specious and ridiculous budget document, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I move on. I would not bring up the CWU anymore, and embarrass La Brea any further.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker—yes, as I have said, this budget gives with one hand and takes with the other because the budget is really designed for two purposes. It is two things. And that is why so many on the other side, in their contributions, have decided to distract, you have Barataria/San Juan “bussin’ mark”, the other one talking about PNM for half his contribution. They want to talk about everything except what this budget is really about. This budget has two purposes. One, it is payback for all of those who contributed to this UNC Government in the previous election, even if that payback comes at the expense of everyone in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker. I am going to outline that.

The more nefarious purpose of this budget, Mr. Speaker, is to set a path for this Government to access and raid the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker. That is their true intention. That is what they want to do because they know that the revenues that they are seeking are not going to come from anywhere else. They have done a fantastic job over the past 20 years, attempting to undermine and destroy every single PNM revenue-generating initiative. No matter what we did, no matter what it is we implemented, they found a way to destroy it.

The first thing they did as they entered office this time around was to cancel the TTRA, which is the craziest thing I have ever heard, Mr. Speaker. Their fate was sealed from day one. The TTRA was supposed to close a tax gap in this

country of more than \$10billion annually. The TTRA alone could have paid public servants their back pay and their salary increase going forward. But the same PSA President decided to work with this Government, to undermine and destroy the very same TTRA that could benefit public servants. Again, we have leadership in some of the trade unions in this country working against their membership, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I will say in no uncertain terms that the President of the PSA has sold out public servants in this country, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: And I make no apologies for saying that, Mr. Speaker. All they want to do is access the HSF because they know that everything else in this document is not real. Nobody believes it.

Mr. Speaker, let me remind the national community exactly what the rules were for accessing the HSF. The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act section 15,

Government may withdraw from the HSF if actual petroleum revenues fall below the estimated amount in the national budget. This shortfall must be verified against the revenue projections for that fiscal year, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, it is 100 per cent certain that our revenues will be less than the revenues projected, the near record revenues projected in this document. It is an absolute certainty. All it is they want to do is to distract from the reality of what it is they are doing. They are laying a path for them to access and raid the HSF, our children's future and the savings account of this country. Like the Attorney General said previously, Mr. Speaker, "Keep your grubby hands off of our children's future".

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: That is all they want. They have no new ideas, no way to generate additional revenues, nothing, nothing, nothing. So all they want to do is

do the lazy thing and to access the HSF. They spoke about us earlier, taking funds out of the HSF. That was during the COVID crisis. During the COVID crisis, when the revenues of this country fell to zero. There was no economic activity worldwide. And even during that situation, Mr. Speaker, every single public servant in this country was paid in full—

Hon. Member: On time.

Mr. B. Manning:—and on time, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: They “doh” want to mention that. This Minister of Finance has been in office for only a few short months, Mr. Speaker, and what have we been getting? Short pay, no pay; the UNC way. That is the only thing we have been getting from this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Either you are paid late, you are paid short, or you do not get paid at all. That is what the UNC is known for, and we have known that from the start. The UNC is incapable of governing, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. They are incapable of doing it. We see it over and—the local government has virtually collapsed in the last few months across this country. That cannot be denied. We have 10-foot-tall bushes all over this country. They want to criticize and they want to denigrate CEPEP and URP workers in this country, but they are the ones who were actually being productive and adding, adding to the value of this country. And the trade union members here stood here and not one time tried to defend CEPEP and URP workers, who should be their comrades. Why? Because they are up on two legs, Mr. Speaker. “Round neck collar not good enough for dem anymore. Is only jacket and tie”, serving themselves and their UNC masters.

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

Mr. B. Manning: That is what they are doing, while 50,000, 50,000 CEPEP and URP workers join the breadline at one time, and they think that that would not be a problem for this economy. The Minister of the People, Social Development and Family Services probably cannot sleep at night with the amount of requests she has probably gotten for unemployment benefits, tens of thousands of people flooding her Ministry on a daily basis, and they think everything is okay. Not a word from Point Fortin about that. Nothing, nothing from La Brea. La Brea is saying something opposite to his former trade union. Incredible.

Hon. Member: Collateral damage.

Mr. B. Manning: Yeah, collateral damage.

Mr. Speaker, let me remind the people of this country exactly the incredibly fantastic energy prices that the Minister of Finance includes in this document:

“...our oil price assumption of 2026 will be \$73.25 per barrel...”

—[*Laughter*] I will try not to laugh, Mr. Speaker—

“...and our natural gas price assumption will be \$4.25 per MMBtu...”

Mr. Speaker, there is not a single energy analyst in the world that thinks that in this economic environment, where people are moving away from oil and gas, moving away from the energy sector and looking at alternatives, believes that we are going to see an energy price of this magnitude. If you look at the stock markets in the United States and Europe, they are taking off. Why? Because when energy prices fall, it makes it cheaper for businesses all over the world, and it usually boosts economic activity around the world. It is the complete opposite for energy-dependent economies like our own. Somehow, the Minister of Finance missed that day in school. He did not think we would notice. We have. We have. It makes no sense, and nobody thinks it makes sense, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, let me take a look at some of these fiscal measures, Mr.

Speaker. And as I said earlier, this budget was designed for two purposes. Number one was payback. Payback for those who have assisted them in the election, Mr. Speaker. Clearly, when the UNC wins, only the UNC wins.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Manning: Because what they have done here will negatively affect everyone in Trinidad and Tobago, even the very same people who assisted them. They showed them some nice magic beans with one hand, while they are picking their other pocket with the other hand, Mr. Speaker. That is what this Government is doing:

“1. Levy on the Assets of Commercial Banks and Insurance Companies Operating in Trinidad and Tobago”

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance, this week, in his “tour de farce”, where he was trying to defend this budget, says that:

“An Asset Levy of 0.25 per cent, which is to be charged against the assets of commercial banks and insurance companies operating in Trinidad and Tobago.”

—should not affect the general public. Of course, the banking association came out the very next day and said, “It will”. Of course it will. Every single bank—Mr. Speaker, you know I am a card-carrying capitalist, Mr. Speaker. I believe in free market economics. I believe in it. And a tax on assets, usually, you have a tax on performance. The better a company does, the higher they pay in taxes. That is progressive. You get taxes on performance. If they make losses, they do not pay taxes, until they are profitable again, then they return to paying taxes. You have a fixed tax here on one of the more vital industries within Trinidad and Tobago, the banking sector, Mr. Speaker. This will increase the cost of everything. Which business person does not use a bank in Trinidad and Tobago? Every major

organization in this country, the vast majority of our population use a bank. Banking fees will go up across the board. BATT has already said that. They would like to have a conversation with the Minister of Finance. I hope he understands what they are saying. Because I do not understand how any serious government that cares about the people of this country could implement something as ridiculous as this. This will dramatically increase the cost of living across Trinidad and Tobago. It makes no sense. It is a tax on assets, incredible.

Mr. Speaker, I move on. Number two, the landlord business surcharge or the property tax by another name, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. B. Manning: This Government has been so desperate for revenues, that they are willing to go back on their own word. They have been fighting against the property tax for the last 15 to almost 20 years, Mr. Speaker, 15 to 20 years. “No property tax. Axe de tax. Doh tax.” Mr. Speaker as soon as they got into office, their first budget, what do we have? Property tax, Mr. Speaker, by another name. And let me go through some of the details here. It is utterly fantastic:

“This measure requires all landlords to register with the Board of Inland Revenue and pay a one-time registration fee of \$2,500.00.”

So you are getting taxed off the bat. All the talk about it is a tax on income, \$2,500 is off the bat. Before you even do anything or receive any money, \$2,500 as a registration fee, whatever that means, Mr. Speaker:

“The surcharge will be applied as follows:

- (i) 2.5 per cent of the gross annual rental income of \$20,000.00 or less...
- (ii) 3.5 per cent of the gross annual rental income exceeding \$20,000.00.”

Mr. Speaker, the previous government had recommended a property tax that was on the annual rental value, Mr. Speaker. I went to great pains in this Chamber,

over and over, annual rental value. There is absolutely no difference between the annual rental value, or as they put it here, the annual rental income. It means exactly the same thing, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. B. Manning: Now, what we were going to do, Mr. Speaker, on the annual rental value, there would have been a discount of 10 per cent, and then, after the 10 per cent is removed, there would be a property tax across the board of just two per cent on annual rental value. Mr. Speaker, what I am saying here, with a tax on the gross annual rental income of 2.5 and 3.5 that this property tax by another name is even more expensive than the property tax that the PNM presented in the last government, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: So after all the old talk about draconian property tax, people will lose their house, blah, blah, blah, they come here and decide that they are going to implement another form of property tax, at an even higher rate than what the previous government was proposing. They thought we would not see that, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, clearly, when the UNC wins, landlords and renters do not win, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Manning: That is what we are getting here.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker, next the electricity surcharge, incredible. The Minister of Finance wants to believe that a tax on electricity will not increase the cost of living in Trinidad and Tobago. Let me let the Minister in on a little secret, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

And let me read here:

“The surcharge will take the form of a fixed, bill-level charge of \$0.05 per kWh for Commercial Customers and Industrial Customers.”

5.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, that means almost every business in Trinidad and Tobago is going to be hit with this tax.

Mr. Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago is an energy economy. The manufacturing sector is an energy-intensive industry. Trinidad and Tobago's greatest competitive advantage in international business is our ability to generate and produce low-cost electricity, Mr. Speaker. That is why our manufacturing sector is the single largest generator of foreign exchange in Trinidad and Tobago, outside of the energy sector. The Minister of Finance somehow did not know that. Because he adds a tax to the very same people that we have to depend on to generate additional foreign exchange to this economy. This is complete lunacy, Mr. Speaker.

He expects the average person in this country to believe that this will not increase the cost of every businessperson in Trinidad and Tobago. Of course, it will. Of course, it will. But the PSA President is going to say, “We are getting a 10 per cent.” Yeah, you are getting a 10 per cent, but you are also getting your pocket picked at the same time, Mr. Speaker. They are giving with one hand and taking with the other, and they are taking more with the other than they are giving with this hand. The trade union members here cannot tell me that they do not honestly see that. This is a tax on electricity. Who could survive without electricity? The Minister, in his tour this week, is saying you can avoid some of these taxes. How are you going to avoid that? I mean, use a lamp? You know, I do not understand, make sense. And:

UNREVISED

“At current consumption levels,”—and this is important—“this initiative is estimated to contribute an additional \$269 million...”—in—“...revenues.”—to the coffers of the economy. That is \$269 million out of the pockets of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker. This is a tax that is unavoidable and every business in this country will pass it on to the consumer. “Dat doh even make sense”, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, another draconian tax measure in here that will affect everyone in this country: Increase in fees, charges and excise duty. Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance, in his wisdom, decided that there should be an addition to the container processing fees in this country. Mr. Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago is a heavy importer. The last time we checked, I believe we imported about US \$1 billion in food items every year in this country. We are a small country, we cannot produce everything that we consume, so we import a lot. The Minister of Finance in this so-called “people’s budget” decides to add a container processing fee to every container at our ports from \$525 to \$1,050; Mr. Speaker, a 100 per cent increase in the tax on every container that arrives at the port of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, importers did not win with the Government, Mr. Speaker. That will affect the cost of everything. Every single item that is imported in this country, the prices are going up. Expect it, it has already started.

Looking at the other one here, Mr. Speaker, I remember long ago, looking at rum and spirits, the existing tax, \$79.25; proposed, \$158.50; another 100 per cent tax on rum and spirits in this country. Right before the holiday season, right before Carnival, Mr. Speaker. As the Opposition Leader said earlier, clearly, this Minister of Finance is the Grinch that stole Christmas, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: What does this Minister of Finance have against Christmas?

He put a 100 per cent tax on rum and spirits two months before the Christmas season, the holiday season, Mr. Speaker. Even if you are not celebrating Christmas, you are in a holiday and festive season, and right before Carnival; right before Carnival, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the Carnival industry in this country employs so many people, so many; many who would have been displaced in other industries, and it is going to add a severe cost to everyone within the Carnival industry of this country. Mr. Speaker, Christmas did not win under this Minister of Finance and UNC Government, Mr. Speaker, sad to say.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker, these measures all contribute an additional \$1 billion in revenue to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. That is \$1 billion out of the pockets of the average man and woman in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker, right into the coffers of the Ministry of Finance. Incredible. But this is a people's budget, the union members will tell us. Okay?

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. B. Manning: Yeah, the CWU did not say so. The CWU did not say that, right?

The customs duty on luxury electric cars. Let me remind the Minister of Finance that this country is part of the Paris Agreement and we are committed to reducing carbon dioxide emissions and other harmful emissions in this country. The Minister decides to add:

“• a rate of duty of 10 per cent;”

And a:

“• VAT of 12.5 per cent...”

—on electric motor cars.

Mr. Speaker, the previous Government did everything possible to promote

the use of electric cars in this country. One, it reduces our fuel subsidies, Mr. Speaker, which is a huge bill every single year. Two, it protects our environment, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, under this Government, the environment did not win. Why would you add a tax on electric cars when you want to promote the use of electric cars? It is just like what my colleague was saying about the same tax on—

Hon. Member: On the penalties.

Mr. B. Manning:—the penalties for road misbehaviour, Mr. Speaker. That could only be described as blood money. You are trying to make money off of the misuse of motor vehicles on our roads. Where people are dying, where people are being maimed and injured, the Government saw an opportunity to make more money. That is the kind of Government we have, presenting this “people’s budget”.

Mr. Speaker, another one, “Taxation on Single-Use Plastics”, Mr. Speaker.
The Minister of Finance:

“I propose to introduce a 5 per cent tax on the CIF value of these products at the point of importation.”

Mr. Speaker, we understand; we understand that there are too many plastic bottles rampant in this environment. We want our environment clean too, Mr. Speaker. We understand the addition of this tax to collect these bottles. But we hope that the revenues from this measure will be used for its intended purpose and to develop a national recycling system, Mr. Speaker, that protects our environment. Do we trust this Government to implement such a measure? No, we do not, Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, and this too will add a tax to almost every food item in Trinidad and Tobago because it is a packaging tax. If you are selling food in Trinidad and Tobago, it is going to have to be packaged for safety and health reasons, Mr. Speaker.

Moving on, Mr. Speaker. We come to one of my favourite items here, Mr. Speaker, the “Establishment of a Real Estate Investment Trust in Trinidad and Tobago”. Now, Mr. Speaker, while I was at the Ministry of Finance, I spearheaded this project and made the reference to the good people at the SMEO, that this is something that we can do to have non-debt financing in Trinidad and Tobago. And do not worry, Minister of Finance, I know you wanted people to think in this country that you came up with an idea like this, but no one who did not understand what “import cover” meant or “refinancing” could have ever come up anything like a real estate investment trust in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: So, trust me, no one ever thought that. “Yuh safe. Yuh safe. No, doh worry, yuh good”. Nobody ever thought that.

“Mr. Speaker, in Fiscal 2026, we will establish a State-Sponsored Real Estate Investment Trust...a landmark initiative to democratise state-owned assets, strengthen and diversify our capital market and broaden public participation in national wealth creation.

...another bold step to unlock new avenues of non-debt financing.”

Mr. Speaker, let me inform the Minister of Finance because I know he has no idea what this is; no idea.

Mr. Speaker, I have before me a document from April 2025, a Note from Cabinet from the SMEO that I assisted in drafting, Mr. Speaker, because it is concept that I came up with. And he is right, it will democratize the capital market in this country and also revolutionize access to non-debt financing for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. And we hope that it is implemented, Mr. Speaker, properly. Do we believe that they can? No, we do not, but we hope that it is done. And I actually give the Minister of Finance credit for not destroying this

initiative, because it is a PNM initiative, Mr. Speaker.

Cabinet is advised that a real estate investment trust is a company that owns, operates or finances income-generating real estate. REIT pools the capital of numerous investors, which makes it possible for individual institutional investors to earn dividends from real estate investments without having to buy, manage or finance any property themselves.

Mr. Speaker:

It is a matter of consideration for the approval of the establishment of a committee to assess the feasibility and implementation of a real estate trust valued at TT \$5 billion.

Mr. Speaker, a real estate investment trust, as I proposed to this country, Mr. Speaker, could take two forms. One, Mr. Speaker, you can take the revenue-generating assets that belong to the State. And I believe if they are thinking straight, it will be the Hyatt Regency, Trinidad; it will be the Government Campus Plaza; Hilton Trinidad and Conference Centre; plus other state real estate assets. They generate revenues that can benefit investors in this country and also funds, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, what it does—if I am an investor and I want to purchase a \$10 million asset that may be beyond my reach—it takes this \$10 million asset and places it in a special purpose vehicle, then it creates shares. Let us say, it creates 10 million shares at \$1 for one. So, now the average man or woman in this country can purchase shares in this special purpose vehicle and generate a revenue for their investment portfolios. What it does, it democratizes access to investment in this country.

Also, many of our funds, Mr. Speaker, are desperately looking for new assets for their portfolios, much like the NIF—not what the Member for Point

Fortin was talking about. But many funds, like the NIF, are looking for revenue-generating funds because we have been in a low interest rate environment in this country for some time and many fund managers are having difficulty meeting their return requirements for their funds. So this real estate investment trust will do that.

Another form that the REIT will take, that form that I mentioned is much like the NIF that we recommended and brought to the people of this country, and the current Prime Minister, I believe at the time—the current Prime Minister called it “Ponzi scheme”, Mr. Speaker. To date, the NIF has generated hundreds of millions of dollars for investors across Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker. That is proper PNM policy—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning:—and so will be the real estate investment trust.

The next form that it is going to take, Mr. Speaker, and most likely, it is going to package mortgages at the Trinidad and Tobago Mortgage Bank into a special purpose vehicle, it is called a mortgage bank security. The TTMB has about \$6 billion in mortgages under their purview. What they will do is package those mortgages and sell them to institutional investors and also, to public investors in Trinidad and Tobago. There is also a very low default rate on mortgages at the TTMB because most persons, no matter how difficult things get, they are going to pay their mortgages. The last time I checked, the default rate at the TTMB was somewhere in the region of 4 to 6 per cent, Mr. Speaker, making the mortgages there quite ample and ready for something like a real estate trust. Mr. Speaker, this trust is going to create opportunity for investors in this country, for institutional investors and common investors, and will bring this Government more than \$5 billion in non-debt revenue. Mr. Speaker, I hope they use it wisely and Mr. Minister of Finance, you are welcome.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Moving on, Mr. Speaker. We go to the NIF bond. The mere fact that the NIF bond is in a separate section to the real estate investment trust shows how little the Minister understood it.

“Mr. Speaker, in Fiscal 2026, the National Investment Fund Holding Company Limited...will launch a \$1 billion NIF Bond.”

Another PNM initiative, Mr. Speaker. The same initiative that they called a “Ponzi scheme” at the time, is the same initiative that, now that they are in office, they are bringing it back to the people of this country because they are desperate for revenue. Everything in this document reeks of desperation, Mr. Speaker.

5.45 p.m.

They know the situation that the economy is in, that they have created for the people of this country. When the PNM left office, Mr. Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago was the only investment-grade country in Caricom and one of the few left in Latin America and the Caribbean. That is the economy we handed to them and it is because of initiatives like this one. In just a few months, Mr. Speaker, our import cover, which I am sure the Minister of Finance has educated himself on amply by now, has fallen by US \$600 million, and to date there are no explanations from those on that side on what has happened to that US \$600 million. Mr. Speaker, that one single initiative has dropped our import cover down from 8.1 months to 5.4 months of import cover, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the global benchmark for energy economies like Trinidad and Tobago for import cover is six months of import cover. We handed those on the other side an economy with an import cover of 8.1. It is now 5.4, Mr. Speaker, below the global benchmark. Who would they like to blame for that? Why would they need to access \$600 million of our foreign reserves in an economy where they

believe we are going to see record revenues in the next fiscal year? Complete utter absolute nonsense, Mr. Speaker. We will not be fooled.

Mr. Speaker: Time is up. [*Inaudible*]

Mr. B. Manning: I will take it please. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Yes, Mr. Speaker.

Another one, Mr. Speaker, removal of motor vehicle tax concessions for returning nationals, Mr. Speaker. Again, when UNC wins, only the UNC wins. Returning nationals, they certainly did not win, Mr. Speaker. The same Minister of Finance was encouraging nationals from all over the world, come home. Help us to build Trinidad and Tobago, and then he hit them with a tax the same day, Mr. Speaker. The Government is renegeing on everything, every proposal, everything that is done, they have renegeed on it all. It reeks of desperation. It makes no sense. This document is incoherent and it is fake, it is fraudulent, it makes no sense. No one believes a single number, not a single rationale, not a single fact. It is like Point Fortin's Petrotrin numbers. It makes no sense, Mr. Speaker.

Subsidy on liquefied natural petroleum gas or LPG. Mr. Speaker, for years successive PNM Governments have done everything possible to not touch the price of LPG in this country because we realized that many poor families in this country still use gas for cooking purposes at home. Many industrial people will also use LPG for their purposes, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Finance says, I propose to amend the subsidy on LPG cylinders of 100 pounds and above by 50 cents per pound, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, they do not believe that this is going affect every poor person in this country? They do not believe that? How does the Minister of Finance propose that poor people avoid this tax? So they are getting taxed on renting. They are getting taxed on electricity. They are getting taxed on

cooking. They are getting taxed for eating, tax for living. Tax, tax for just being alive. Tax for being unfortunate enough for being in Trinidad and Tobago under a UNC Government. That is all it is. That is all it is. It is tax galore.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: The same Minister of Finance, who they are now calling “Taxcoo”—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning:—for many years he said that you could not tax your way to prosperity, and then he brings a national budget, his very first, his maiden voyage in this Chamber in delivering a budget and he delivers a document full of taxes, Mr. Speaker. That is all there is. There is not a single other revenue-generating proponent in this entire misspent document, Mr. Speaker, and I believe ill-fated document.

Mr. Speaker, safeguarding our national insurance system. Yeah, Point Fortin, it is your turn. It is your turn. Safeguarding our national insurance system. Mr. Speaker, during my time at the Ministry of Finance I had consultations with every single major trade union in Trinidad and Tobago to discuss an increase in the retirement age to age 65, Mr. Speaker. There was no discussion of any increase in contribution at all. It was only about an increase in the retirement age to age 65. Mr. Speaker, take a wild guess how many of those trade unions actually agreed with an increase in the retirement age to age 65? A wild guess. Absolutely none, Mr. Speaker. None. None. None, Mr. Speaker. But Point Fortin, La Brea is going to come here today to say that this is a people’s budget and we agree with an increase in the retirement age, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker, the President of the PSA, who seems to have a lot

to say about me for some reason, wants to talk about everything else except the increase in the retirement age and a 45 per cent increase in monthly contributions to the NIS Fund, Mr. Speaker. Why would the PSA President not speak about that? I hope when Mr. CWU stands up here to speak in this Chamber that he tells us what a wonderful initiative this is.

Mr. Speaker: No one is known here in this Chamber as “Mr. CWU”. You know why I am asking you to withdraw it? And, do not turn your eyes up, because you are the one who is particularly guilty of making complaints. So do not do that. That is entirely indecorous. Do not do it. Withdraw it.

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I withdraw. Thank you so much for your patience.

Mr. Speaker: Yes. You are testing my patience.

Mr. B. Manning: La Brea. When La Brea stands up in this Chamber, Mr. Speaker, I hope he addresses this issue, because all of the same trade unions, and as I said, with a politicized trade union, the leadership only looks out for itself. They stop looking out for its members. There is no one in the public service that is happy with an increase in the retirement age to age 65. It may be necessary but none of them wanted it. And the previous government, at least had the decency to have had consultations with every single union in this country before even considering making a move. Not this Government. They just show up and surprise everybody with it, and then have the President of the PSA say, “This is a good thing”. Have La Brea and Point Fortin cheerleading all the way. We want to have the retirement age moved to 65.

Mr. Speaker, a few short months ago they were saying the exact opposite. When he was President of the CWU he was saying the exact opposite.

Mr. Elder: Secretary General.

Mr. B. Manning: Secretary General, sorry, of the CWU, he was saying the opposite. When the Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development was head of the PSA he was saying the exact opposite. I am sure that Point Fortin when he was in the OWTU was saying the exact opposite. Today, they are all for it. They are all for it, and they want you to believe that they still represent the membership of the trade unions in this country. Mr. Speaker, a time is going to come, a reckoning, when the members of trade unions in this country are going to ask their leaders to remove themselves from this coalition of counterfeits, fakes and frauds, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker, that day of reckoning is coming and coming soon.

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Mr. B. Manning: I am certain of that. I am certain of that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, you have just heard of all of the taxes that have been inflicted on the people of this country. What we are experiencing now, Mr. Speaker, is a self-inflicted recession. Those on the other side only have themselves to blame, Mr. Speaker, with some of the ridiculous measures they have done. They put 50,000 people on the breadline in this country overnight at the same time, right before the opening of the new school term, just before Christmas after they hit them with a festivity tax, Mr. Speaker, and, they are going to hit them with several more taxes. Whatever is decided in the wage negotiations could never cover the additional taxes that have been inflicted on the people of this country, Mr. Speaker. As I said, they give with one hand, they take with the other and they are taking far more than they are giving. The people of this country have to see that, Mr. Speaker.

Over the past 20 years, Mr. Speaker, those on the other side have gone out of

their way to undermine and destroy every single revenue-generating initiative created by the People's National Movement. I will remind you of some. The Aluminum smelter, destroyed; Sandals hotel, destroyed; TTRA, boy, they could not wait. The first thing in Parliament, destroyed. Property tax, "doh" want that. Now they bring it back. Dragon deal, "whoa". No Dragon deal. The Dragon is dead. Dragon deal, let us do it. It makes sense.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: The reopening of the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery, Mr. Speaker, which had already gone through the due diligence process and had been offered to Oando, a Nigerian firm, Mr. Speaker, was ready to go. They shut that down too, Mr. Speaker. They shut it down. Before this election the Government was saying that they were going to give the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery to the OWTU trade union. Point Fortin stood up here today and said nothing about that. The Government promised on several platforms all over the place that they were going to give the refinery to the OWTU, the same organization that borrowed money from institutions in this country to apply for this, and then defaulted on their loans, Mr. Speaker. The same institution. They defaulted on their loans for the application fees to apply for the Pointe-a-Pierre refinery but want us to believe that they could run this multibillion-dollar operation by themselves. Absolutely not. What a joke.

Mr. Speaker, recently the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Modi, was here and he came with several businessmen, several businessmen who were ready to invest in Trinidad and Tobago. What did those on the other side do? They ran them out of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, they have gone to great lengths to undermine every single revenue-generating initiative by the People's National Movement. Today, they are reaping the whirlwind. Today, they are sitting in the hot seat and the music has stopped, and now they are going to pay for exactly what

it is they have done to the people of this country for the past 20 years, Mr. Speaker, and we are seeing it already. Late pay, no pay, that is the UNC way.

Mr. Speaker: Your time is up.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Members, I propose to take the evening break now for—it is four minutes to six. So, I propose to come back at 6.45 p.m. I invite everyone. I intend to have a deya-lighting ceremony in the Rotunda. All are invited to attend, those who choose to do so, but we will suspend the sitting until 6.45 p.m. Thank you very much.

5.56 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

6.45 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. Speaker: Member for La Brea.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Public Utilities (Hon. Clyde Elder): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, let me thank you for this opportunity to contribute and lend my voice to this debate, and let me also say thank you to the people of La Brea for voting overwhelmingly for me to represent them in this august House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And let me also thank all of the citizens who would have taken part in the pre-budget consultation that this Government had prior to the announcement, and prior to the reading of what is this country's best budget ever.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: As I say that, let me express deepest congratulations to the Minister of Finance, Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development,

and their technocrats, and their entire team that contributed to making the preparation of this budget a success.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: As I said before, and I will say it again, Mr. Speaker, “budget for yuh money”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: Mr. Speaker, I did not intend to enter the debate this early, but of course, when I am called, I respond.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: Mr. Speaker, I want to start by saying that I came into this august House based on the hard work I put in to campaign and to be here, and not by my name.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: I had no father “to cut no track for me to run”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: As I listened to the previous speaker and speakers, Mr. Speaker, I am appalled by the level of hypocrisy that comes from that side of this House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: I sat here and I listened to what was an attack really on the trade union movement. In fact, it is a continued attack, “ain’t nothing new, ain’t nothing different”. I heard the Member for San Fernando East condemn and speak about my good friend and comrade Felisha Thomas, President of the PSA, and maybe one of the last remaining, strong remaining union leaders, only because she did not give in to their demands.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: “That’s right.”

Hon. C. Elder: And she stood her ground fearlessly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And tonight I want to say to her, continue to stand your ground, and the reason why they are there, is because of what they did to us in the trade union movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: I want to remind the Member for San Fernando East that while he touts about, how much?—50,000 workers got sent home, that he was part of a government that sent home workers in Petrotrin, TSTT, Caroni Green Ltd—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder:—Government Human Resources Limited, GHRSL, and they did nothing for the workers of ArcelorMittal up to this day, they have not gotten a dollar for the service they gave to that company. They did nothing. But come here as if he has clean hands, to say that we sent home 50,000 workers, “people suffering”, “we so wicked”. What were they? What were they, when they sent home all of these workers in these high-end paying jobs that has now caused the National Insurance Board to reach the state that it is in? Because had they not sent home over 50,000 workers from those companies I called, whose salary attracted contributions that were in the highest bracket in NIS, then maybe the fund would not have been in the state that it is now.

So they created the problem, and he comes and says, “well, we had consultation”, not one of them agreed to raise the retirement age. Misleading the public, Mr. Speaker, to make the public feel as if the retirement age is now mandatory and you can no longer retire at 60, or 61, or 62, or 63, or 64, if you choose. But anybody who chooses to retire at any point in time, they are free to do so.

Under the plan that we have proposed, Mr. Speaker, we have staggered the age for retirement to get your full benefits, to get your full benefits, not for compulsory retirement, you know. You could retire any time you want, but for you to get your full benefits we have staggered that age to say it would be from 65 and we did it over a 10-year period. That is not what they proposed when they consulted with the trade union movement, and that is why the trade union movement said, “no we not supporting it”. They want to do now for now.

But what happens now, Mr. Speaker, is that because workers are in a position to now gauge when they want to retire, and what they need to have in place, they could better plan and prepare for their retirement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And in planning and preparing for the retirement, they are free to go and take out their private pensions with insurance companies—

Hon. Member: Tax free money.

Hon. C. Elder:—and now that pension that they are going to get will be tax free.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: So, they mislead the public to make the public feel that this Government is imposing a compulsory 65 retirement age, and they are going to lose their contributions, and they are going to lose their pension, all that nonsense that they spew from on that side. But you see, the good thing about this country, Mr. Speaker, and it was demonstrated on April 28th, it is that the majority of citizens in this country have sense.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: Because they feel and they treat us as if we are stupid and they alone have the knowledge. They talk down to us. They look down on us.

Hon. Member: Yes. Yes.

Hon. C. Elder: I looked at the faces of Members on the other side, when my colleague from Point Fortin was giving his contribution and some words were mispronounced, “if you see dey face”! Like, “Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, how he could say it like dat”?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Elder: You know why? Because they look down on people.

Hon. Member: Yes, correct.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: We are not ever seen as good enough. Then my friend from—no, sorry, the Member for San Fernando East, “cyah” be my friend—from San Fernando East says two trade unionists come in here. Well, let me say something about that. I was a trade union leader, and I am unapologetic for that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: Mr. Speaker, when I am given a job, I do that job to the best of my ability, and I think I was a damn good trade union leader.

Hon. Member: I think so too.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: I am no longer a trade union leader. I am now a Member of Parliament and a Minister of Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And no matter how much he tries to criticize, and to make me feel as if I should be guilty for being a trade union leader before I came into this House, “dat and God face he will never see”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: So, I came in, in this House knowing fully well that it is expected of me based on where I came from, that I will continue to represent the interest of

workers, and I have not abandoned that. But, San Fernando East, I am sure—let me “doh” say I am sure. I wonder if maybe the former Prime Minister might be turning in his grave—

Hon. Member: Oh, Lord.

Hon. C. Elder:—to see what is passing for an MP in this House here tonight.

Hon. Member: Oh, my. Oh, my.

Mr. Manning: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Elder: You understand?

Hon. Members: Oh, my.

Hon. C. Elder: Then he made some allegations against this Government when he was giving his contribution. He said that they handed us an economy with 8.1 months of imports cover, which is now down to five months. But what he refused to say, is that we handed them an economy in 2015, with over one year of import cover, and they gave us back an economy with less than eight months of import cover. That is what he forgot to say, conveniently, of course.

Then he said that our intention is to raid the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Well, they should be the last to talk about that, you know. They should be the last to talk about dipping into the fund. Because according to the figures presented here. On June 30, 2016, they went into the fund and they withdrew US \$375 million.

Hon. Member: Oh, my. Oh, my.

Mr. Manning: COVID.

Hon. C. Elder: 2016?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Elder: In March 2016.

Hon. Member: Oh, my. Oh, my.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Elder: But you see, again, you see, you see, Mr. Speaker, this is the same—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Elder:—this is the same MP who came in this House and debated the wrong Bill, eh.

Hon. Member: Yes. Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: On March 31, 2017, they withdrew—

Hon. Member: COVID?

Hon. C. Elder:—over US \$252 million from the fund.

Hon. Member: COVID?

Hon. C. Elder: March 31, 2020—

Hon. Member: COVID 17.

Hon. C. Elder:—they withdrew \$79 million from the fund.

Hon. Member: Still COVID?

Hon. C. Elder: June 30, 2020, they withdrew \$600 million from the fund.

Hon. Member: Oh, my.

Mr. Alexander: “Dey was trying to prevent COVID.”

Hon. Member: Oh, my. Yeah. Yeah.

Hon. C. Elder: September 30th, now, Mr. Speaker, I want the public to take note of the months in 2020. I started by saying March 31, 2020; June 30, 2020; September 30, 2020, they went back again, US \$300 million. But before the year was done, they were not finished, they went back again.

Mr. Alexander: For Christmas?

Hon. C. Elder: December 31st.

Hon. Member: Oh, my. New Years.

Hon. C. Elder: Over US \$198 million.

Hon. Member: Old Year's day.

Hon. C. Elder: March 31, 2021, over US \$293 million. June 30, 2021, US \$300 million.

Hon. Member: Cookie Monster.

Hon. C. Elder: September 30, 2021, US \$100 million.

Hon. Member: "Ayye."

Hon. C. Elder: December 31st—well, thank God that "doh happen in 2022, dey ain't go in the fund in 2022"—because maybe it had none. December 31, 2023, over US \$160 million. June 30, 2024, over US \$209 million. That is COVID again?

Hon. C. Elder: November 30, 2024, US \$150 million. And they want to say we "going and put we hand" in the cookie jar? "Dey two foot and all was in de cookie jar."

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

Hon. Member: "Dey stand up in the cookie jar."

Hon. C. Elder: "Dey stand up in the cookie jar."

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Elder: You understand?

Mr. Alexander: "Dey went in the cookie jar?"

Hon. Member: Went inside.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Elder: And you want to come and tell us that the trade unionists in this House will come and say that this was a people's budget. Yes, it was a people's budget!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: I want to tell you again, I make no apologies for being a former trade unionist, eh, none. Yes?

7.00 p.m.

And they went and they quoted some articles from, who you say is my former comrade—

Hon. Member: They went and Google—they Googled it.

Hon. C. Elder: You went and Google. Yeah? But what you did not say—because you quoted that because you like to cherry-pick. That is what they do. But they did not say to us, Mr. Speaker, that the President General of the Joint Trade Union Movement, who speaks on behalf of the unions in this country, in JTUM, said that this was a budget of fresh air for workers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: You did not tell us that. And he did not say to us—because, Mr. Speaker, I was fortunate to be present at the TTMA's post-budget consultation. And the TTMA was in high praises of the Minister of Finance and of this Government for the budget we presented.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: He did not say that. He did not say that.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Member: Yes, yes.

Hon. C. Elder: And then he speaks about CEPEP and URP workers. Yeah? And he said that, not a word from the trade unions in the House. But I want to remind him that they promised every worker that they will take the matter to court. But, Mr. Speaker, they only took matters to court for the contractors who were making the money and not for the workers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Million-dollar contractors.

Hon. C. Elder: Million-dollar contractors to boot. I challenge him to name one worker who they represented up to the Industrial—I challenge him.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: You so care about workers—yeah? You so care about CEPEP and URP workers. Name one worker—in fact, Port of Spain South says, he knows them by heart.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Elder: He said, he knows the workers by heart. Ask him which one of them have a matter in the court, because he cannot. You care about the workers—and they want to lambaste me and always attacking me, “Oh, collateral damage, collateral damage.” But mind you, same Port of Spain South, today, he does not have to consider riding a bike because “gas gone down”.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes.

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

Hon. C. Elder: But I do not want the public to be fooled, eh, not one day did he jump on a bike, eh. Not one day did he go on a bike and ride to court, as he promised to do. But you see, because of this budget we presented, Mr. Speaker, the people of this country could no longer consider using a coal pot, because even though the price of LPG has been increased from 100 pounds and up, the 20 pounds still remain the same. So when they say we are not considering the small man, the small man does not buy 100 and 250-pound cylinders to cook in their house. “Dey does buy de small cylinders because it is ah small man”.

Hon. Member: “He doh know about dat. He doh know about dat”.

Hon. C. Elder: So, this budget was a people’s budget, is a people’s budget, and

we consider all of these things when we are putting the budget into motion. So when you want to talk about small man and about the workers, I wonder if those workers have \$125 million to buy any place in One Woodbrook Place or anywhere else; I wonder.

Now, heavy weather was made about the offer of 10 per cent to the public servants; heavy weather was made by them about that. And they want to say that they offered nine. Well, let me tell the workers and the citizens of this country the facts. The first offer by that wicked, evil, vindictive, former Government was zero, zero, zero. That was the first offer. They moved when there was a big protest—I was a part of the protest through the streets of Port of Spain. They moved, 0-0-1. And then they settled on 0-0-2. For 2014 to 2016, 0-0-2; 2017 to 2019, 0-0-2. What then happened was the former, former Minister of Finance referred the negotiations to the Industrial Court—to the Special Tribunal. When it went to the Special Tribunal, because of their linkages there and because of the threats that they imposed on unions, some unions said, “Yuh see that, I go take that 4 per cent.” And they signed for 2 per cent—for 0-0-2 for 2014 to 2016; 0-0-2 for 2017 to 2019, they signed. Mr. Speaker, 4 per cent is what they got for six years; 4 per cent by the former administration.

The PSA, under the leadership of the current Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, said, “We are not taking that. If we have to fight against your old system, we are fighting against your own system and we are going down dying.” And they fought and they fought and they fought. And they even fought, they fought their own members and they fought against the threat that I would not give a six-year agreement, I will give you a 10-year agreement with the same percentage. That was a threat that was issued to them. Because how they interpreted the Industrial Relations Act, it said that the Special Tribunal could not

give a judgment of less than five years.

So, the head of the Special Tribunal said to them, “Well, if all yuh eh shape up, ah giving all yuh two five-year judgments, yuh know.” So, it will be 10 years, and in 10 years, you will get 4 per cent. So they got frightened and they signed. The head of PSA, Leroy Baptiste, said, “I eh taking dat.” They went and they appealed—judicial review, sorry, judicial review that position and because of that, they are now in a position to say that that was wrong, it should have been two three-year periods. So, they fought that and they won that, but that did not settle the negotiations. They were still with a 4 per cent before them. And despite the pressures that that side perpetuated, with their cronies who were in PSA, “chooking” and niggling and saying, “Sign, sign, sign, ah wa de 4 per cent, ah wa de 4 per cent,” PSA held firm. And today, because PSA held firm, PSA said, “You see that, a political problem deserves a political solution and getting into the politics.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And they joined in the politics and they were promised that once you get us into government, we are going to give you 10 per cent. But we understand that the Government does not just give 10 per cent, there is a process, which the Member for Point Fortin spoke about, that we instruct the CPO, and the CPO then engages in negotiations. Because the negotiations have many other things besides the salary negotiations—the salary part to negotiate. There are other terms and conditions that need to be negotiated, but that does not negotiate from Minister Tancoo’s office, that does not negotiate from inside here, that does not negotiate from the Office of the Prime Minister. That negotiates when the party sits down in free and fair collective bargaining to say, “Look where we reach.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: But you see, you all would not know about that because what you all did was impose and intervene and interfere and disrupt the free and fair collective bargaining that this country had with unions through the CPO. We are not doing that. So, the Leader of the Opposition made heavy weather, “But I am not seeing de money for dem, so maybe dey eh gehin no money.” Well, “yuh cyah see de money if there is no agreement tuh pay ah money yet. How you go see it?”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Elder: So, you see, what “dey does do”, Mr. Speaker, is that they will have a voice note or a text message and that is good enough for them to put aside money. That is not how we operate. Only when an agreement is executed, then the Minister of Finance could say, “Okay, how much does this cost? Let me go and get the money now.” That is how it operates. So when they make heavy weather that they are not seeing the money, how could you see the money? But I think, Mr. Speaker, I spent enough time on them.

Hon. Member: You go ahead, go ahead, go ahead.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: Mr. Speaker, I want to turn my attention to WASA. Let me tell you why I want to turn my attention to WASA. The Opposition will have us believe that everything we are doing in WASA is based on the foundation that they laid in WASA. But it is important, however, Mr. Speaker, before I even begin to mention the WASA scenario, to tell you a little bit about me, not because I am narcissistic or not because of hubris, but I want exemplify, to personify and to send home the point that I want to make about WASA.

I grew up in a little village in Erin called Carapal. In Carapal, I grew up without electricity, without running water, without access to telephone and telecommunication. I studied to go to school by a pitch oil lamp up until

secondary school, mind you, eh. There was a spring, and there is still a spring inside Carapal, that we would build box cart and put, whether it is barrels on the big box cart or buckets on the small one, and go for water and bring it home. I walked to school more than 3 miles, morning and evening, to go to school and to come back home. Why am I telling you all this, Mr. Speaker? I am the telling you this because that side drilled two wells; two wells in Carapal. The first well yielded 450,000 gallons per day, and the second well yielded 50,000 gallons per day. And when the hon. Prime Minister made me Minister in the Ministry of Public Utilities, one of my first acts as Minister was to go in Carapal with a WASA team and a T&TEC team to see how we could bring relief to the people of Carapal, where I am from.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: I asked the WASA team for the plans for WASA. I said, “Let me see the plans of how this water is coming out of Carapal into the water treatment plant and back into Carapal.” They said, “Minister, there is no plan to take that water back into Carapal.” I say, “all yuh mad?” You are taking 500,000 gallons of water a day from a community that never saw pipe-borne water and you never even had the gumption, the audacity, the decency, the humanness to say to the people of Carapal, “We will bring water back for you because we are taking your water.”

Mr. Padarath: That is why they vote them out.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And, Mr. Speaker, I took that WASA team, and we drove, and we measured, and we put a cost to how much it will be to run back water in Carapal for the people of Carapal, because they are people too, they are humans too, they have needs too. Out of the US \$200 and something million that they said that they

got from IDB and wherever else, it is costing TT \$7 million to run the pipe to bring relief to people in Carapal.

Hon. Member: \$7 million?

Hon. C. Elder: \$7 million. That was too much for them on that side to consider for the people of Carapal; too much. But it is not too much for one of their former Ministers and his family to get a \$100 million contract from HDC and from other places. That was not too much?

7.15 p.m.

So, Mr. Speaker, I went into Carapal and I asked the WASA team, to please redo their structure and their plans and their whatever and ensure that pipelines are run inside Carapal for people in Carapal to get water. If that was not enough, Mr. Speaker, a few years ago—there is a trace in Palo Seco Beach Road, called James Street. What they did was that they ran a four-inch line in James Street. Commendable, but what they did not do, is that they did not run the line from where the main line ended to connect to James Street. So, for more than 10 years, for more than that, it was before the administration. “Dem ain’t studying nobody inside James Street yuh kno.” They had an MP, who was a PNM MP for 40 years and that MP did not even consider Palo Seco Beach Road.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: But again, because they have a working MP now, who is a Minister in the Ministry of Public Utilities, we are going to ensure James Street gets water.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And if that was not enough, Mr. Speaker, there is a community in Palo Seco that is called Stol. For years “dey beggin” their MP to help them to get electricity, about 15 houses. Those 15 houses have about 30 children at least,

children “eh” going to school. For years they begging for electricity, not getting it. Again, I took the T&TEC team. T&TEC said, “Minister, we were here already years ago. We cost this job already.” Mr. Speaker, \$253,000 that the current Chief Whip was supposed to look at in conjunction with his MP and say, “We are going to bring relief to these people”. Nothing to date, Mr. Speaker, until we came and I took the T&TEC team, among working with the PSAEL team and I am hoping that because of our intervention that within the next month or two—well no, not a month, because we have to still debate Standing Finance and all that and we have to get releases. But, within the next two months to three months, that the people of Stol could experience electricity in their homes for the first time in their lives.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: I went to another village, Mr. Speaker, Sobo Village. There is a young lady living in a house. Mr. Speaker, if you see the state of the house. First thing we did was that we looked at how best we could improve her condition. I brought the T&TEC team. I want to commend those workers in T&TEC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: Those workers, when they saw the condition, you know what they did, Mr. Speaker? They dipped into their own pocket; took out money and bought all of the materials to wire the house; gave the lady money to go and pay for the connection; worked with the electrical inspectorate; got the house inspected and passed; and, within two weeks the bulbs were lighting in her house.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And yet, I heard their former leader in shock that they lost Point Fortin and La Brea. When you treat people like dirt, like they “doh” matter, at some point in time they are going to break and they are going to retaliate and that is what happened.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: San Fernando East attacking me. Port of Spain South attacking me. No problem. “My back broad”. But, I am sure, Mr. Speaker, that I did not take a safe seat and make it marginal because Makamillion nearly beat him.

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

Hon. C. Elder: But I took a seat that was not even supposed to be a UNC seat and I made it a marginal UNC seat today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And, Mr. Speaker, by God’s grace, and by the will of the people of La Brea, I am going to be in that seat for as long as I desire to be because it is going to be a UNC safe seat next election.

Hon. Member: Safe seat.

Hon. C. Elder: Safe seat and I am sure next election you will not be here—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder:—because Maka coming for you this time.

Hon. Members: Love.

Hon. C. Elder: Love. Mr. Speaker, I heard the Opposition Leader speak about how they never caused workers to be paid late. They never caused pensioners to be paid late, but you see, Mr. Speaker, they must be careful of the things that they say “inno”. Because, sometimes paying somebody late is better than what they did to the workers in MTS. Hear what I say. Sometimes, paying somebody late is better than what they did to the workers in MTS.

Let me explain, Mr. Speaker. When we assumed office in May, effectively it was in May because we just had two days before April was finished, and we went into MTS, what we found, Mr. Speaker, was a system where MTS was borrowing money on a monthly basis just to pay net salary. I did not say salary,

Mr. Speaker. I did not say salary, I said net salary. Let me explain. If a worker's salary in MTS is \$5,000, and deducted from that \$5,000 will be NIS, health surcharge, union dues and any standing orders you may have, credit union, medical plan. And from that \$5,000, you are then left with \$2,000 as a take-home, what MTS was doing, was "giving yuh yuh \$3,000" but the deductions were not being paid to the institutions that it was supposed to be paid to.

So, I was approached, Mr. Speaker, by a young woman—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Elder:—and Port of Spain South, made "heavy weather of the workers" in CEPEP and how they are single mothers and what and what and what. How they are bombarding the Minister of People, Social Development and Family Services. I was approached by a young security officer.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Elder: What she told me was, she said, "Mr. Elder, Minister, I need your help." I said, "How can I help you my dear?" She said, "Right now, I have a car that I am sacrificing to pay for but the bank is telling me that I am owing them more than seven months of deductions on the loan."

7.25 p.m.

I say, "Ah doh understand". She says, "Well, I am getting my pay, but the company is not sending the money from my standing order to the bank." Mr. Speaker, if that young lady had gotten paid two days late and she gets her full pay, that is better than paying her her net pay but yet have the bank calling her, threatening to seize her vehicle because she had not paid in six months when she assumed that the company took out her money and sent it to the financial institution. That is what they left for us. That is what we are dealing with. And I want to say tonight a special heartfelt gratitude to the PS in Public Utilities for the

hard work she puts in every single month to make sure those workers get paid.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And I want to tell the workers of MTS that we are aware of the problem and we are working with the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education and other Ministries to work out a solution and bring relief to their problems because we will fix it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And they come here and they behave as if they love workers, and they love you, and they will take care of you. But oh, God, they do not understand. They do not understand. They do not care about us, the small man. And those things, Mr. Speaker, those things rock me to my core.

I was fortunate, as I move on, to be called by the councillor for Cedros who reached out on behalf of the coast guard and the defence force and anybody else who occupies that Cedros Security Complex. And the place was in total darkness for years. The place is in squalor and we were reached out to, we at the Ministry of Public Utilities, and we were asked for assistance to bring at least some lights on the complex. Mr. Speaker, we in the Ministry, Parl. Sec. Shivanna Sam, MP for Cumuto/Manzanilla, Minister Padarath, MP for Couva South, we could have decided that we were going to fix a playground in my constituency, in hers, in his, in any constituency that we chose. But we saw the need to assist the people on that frontline that security where it has border security issues down in Cedros, and we decided that we would assist.

Mr. Speaker: Member, you only have one more minute. Unless you want your 10 minutes.

Hon. C. Elder: Could I be—

Mr. Speaker: Yes, of course. So that takes you to 7.40.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: Yes, and we decided that we will assist. And we brought some measure of relief to the Cedros Security complex and they now have some lights. And that is what we do. That is what we do on this side. We bring light to people's lives. That is what we do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: So it was easy for us to do that because that is our mandate. That is what we do.

Mr. Speaker, I want to turn now to TTPost. I know you have told me that I have 10 minutes, so time does not permit me to speak in detail about every agency under our Ministry. But I want to say that the postal service continues to play an important role in connecting communities, supporting commerce and in facilitating national development.

But at TTPost, they have been neglected for years by the last administration and tonight I want to say to TTPost that we at the MPU will be working closely with your team to expand the business opportunities, leveraging on information technology so that we can strengthen the operations and drive innovation at TTPost. Because I believe it is a sleeping giant, but it has been so neglected, like everything else in this country that they left for us, neglected. But I want to tell TT Post, as we always say in the trade union movement, help will come when help is needed, because the UNC is here. Mr. Speaker, I do not think I will take the full 10 minutes allotted to me.

Hon. Members: Take it. Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead, go ahead, man.

Hon. C. Elder: But I recalled the words of a former Minister of Finance—I will paraphrase it a bit—when he was speaking about the budget that they presented. I want to just throw back the paraphrased word on that side. “If dey having

gastrointestinal problems with this budget, well, ah doh know wha gonna happen too, wit de next budget.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Elder: Because this budget had them in a frenzy, because you see, no one expected that our Minister of Finance, that his first point of action was going to be a decrease of gas by \$1. No one expected that. As a matter of fact, even the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann’s West has to admit and admitted that it was a good move. He did. “So they come here and they talk all kinda ting, oh, but they giving on one hand and taking back with the next.” What did we take back, really? What did we take back? Let us look at it.

I recalled when the former Prime Minister, father of San Fernando East was alive, he attempted to do his best endeavor to stay away from things like gambling and rum drinking and those kinds of things. In fact, he was building a church. He was building a church and tonight I stood—I sat here and I heard the Member for San Fernando East literally complain that rum and alcohol are going up.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Member: “He like he drinks, boy.”

Hon. C. Elder: But how far could the fruit fall from the tree and he called us the Grinch of Christmas. That is what he said, you know. So okay, the Minister of Finance in his wisdom, said he is going to increase the levy. Okay, and they complained as if they had never done it before. They did it, and they made money from it, and it was okay when they did it. But when we do it, “oh, why allyuh doing dat”. But you see, Mr. Speaker, you could fool some of the people, some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: “And dat is what they does try to do. They does try to fool us.”

But we are better than that. We are smarter than that. That is why we end it there, because we are smarter than that. We do not fool “nobody”. Promises made, promises kept. “We ain’t fool nobody.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: At the rate we are going, Mr. Speaker, I suspect by next year, every single manifesto promise would be fulfilled and we will keep going.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: We have to write a midterm manifesto, yeah. And as a former trade unionist, Mr. Speaker, when I engage with my trade unionist comrades—I still call them comrades. They are still comrades, the sentiment expressed by the people, trade unionists, farmers, the common man, taxi drivers, passengers, they felt as if they thought we could not get lighter than we got on April 29th, but they realized that they were wrong. They felt ever lighter than they felt on April 29th when the Minister of Finance read the budget. They were so happy. They are still happy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: It was a people’s budget and I make no apologies for saying that. It is a people’s budget. Real happiness.

So Mr. Speaker, as I bring my contribution to a close, I just want to make one more point. From Quarry Village to Erin, you have to choose which pothole you want to go down in. Sometimes you cannot avoid it, you just have to choose which one. Right? Choose this one today or this one. Just choose one and my team and I, what we did was that we got some aggregate at our own expense and we went into the constituency and we patched potholes like we were going crazy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: But I want to say thanks as well to—as my colleague and

comrade, Member for Point Fortin did. I want to thank Minister John, because she too would have come into La Brea. Before I could have reached on the site, she was there and I was coming from ten minutes away, and we drove and we went through La Brea and they have identified the areas in La Brea north that the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure—we paid attention to drainage and roads and we will fix it, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And I want to say thank you as well to the Minister of the People, Social Development and Family Services for the relief, as small as it was, that we were able to bring the people for this Divali in the temporary food cards that we got.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And I want to make it known, Mr. Speaker, that it was not given to UNC MPs. It was given to every single MP.

Hon. Member: All, all, all, all.

Hon. C. Elder: So when they talk about they are being victimized and—they are getting things. “Doh make them make yuh feel that they being ostracized, but they is Opposition at the end of the day and we are still treating them like dey is people, better than dey treated the people of La Brea.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Elder: And as I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, I cannot thank enough our hon. Prime Minister for the leadership that she has given this team and to this country and for putting us on a path of progress and success over the next five years. Mr. Speaker, with those few words, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

7.40 p.m.

Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly (*St. Ann's East*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: It is a privilege and an honour to stand to contribute to my eleventh budget debate in this Chamber. I want to thank the People's National Movement for the opportunity. I want to thank the constituents of St Ann's East who have given me the mandate to represent them in this Parliament.

I want to start my commending our Leader of the Opposition, the first female political leader and Leader of the Opposition of the People's National Movement. I want to congratulate her on her maiden contribution. I am sure all of us on this side were very pleased and proud by the contribution that was made by our hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Her contribution was insightful—

Hon. Members: Yes.

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—thought-provoking—

Hon. Members: Yes.

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—well researched—

Hon. Members: Yes.

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—and well delivered. I count it a pity, Mr. Speaker, that our hon. Prime Minister has not been in the Chamber for the day—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—and therefore, she missed that contribution. And I find that a pity because I am sure she would have enjoyed such a sterling contribution from the Leader of the Opposition.

I want to contrast the Leader of the Opposition's contribution with the extremely pedestrian contribution of the Minister of Finance. And I am repeating that, the extremely pedestrian contribution, whose speech was long on slogan—

Hon. Members: Yeah.

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—long on rhetoric—

Hon. Members: Yeah.

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—long on theatre.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: You know, I find the Member for Fyzabad in his contribution, he kind of—I feel like he was emulating another Minister of Finance. I find his contribution was decidedly “Imbert-esque”, if I can coin that word in this Parliament.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: But the presentation of the Minister of Finance was embarrassingly short on quality, competence and substance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: The Member for Point Fortin tried to pass it off as being simple for the average man to understand, but you cannot pass it off like that. It was an extremely poor showing from the Minister of Finance. The Member for Point Fortin said, “You know, it was simple for the simple man.” And one of my constituents messaged me immediately and said, “This is insulting the intelligence of the population by saying that you have to talk baby language for them to understand.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: That is disrespectful.

Mr. Speaker, even the Member for La Brea, his own colleague on the Bench,

said that the people of Trinidad and Tobago are not stupid, so you do not have to break it down to baby food for them to understand. The PNM and Dr. Eric Williams educated the people of this nation and that is why they are not fooled by the antics of the UNC. That is why you can see discussions happening in all quarters and people are paying close attention to the budget. That is why, Member for Point Fortin; that is why, not because this is the first budget presentation they have understood. They have understood many others but they are very concerned by what they are seeing. You see, when people are educated, they can now evaluate and as we say in this country, “dey big and dey have sense.” Great is the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: As the Member of Parliament for St Ann’s East for 10 years and counting, as the head of the PNM’s National Women’s League and as an avid supporter of the PNM’s National Youth League, I have received many comments on the national budget 2025, coming from the different areas.

I want to commend in this House, the budget consultations held by the PNM’s National Youth League—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—young people coming out to discuss the merits of the budget that was presented. You know, the UNC and the Member for Barataria/San Juan, they must understand that while they try to attack the PNM and they try to say “all kind ah ting to buss mark”, I want them to understand that we here are just the hedge, you know. There is a bunch of young people and women in the PNM coming up. So, if you feel you could derail us, it will be like a Hydra. “As yuh cut off one snake—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—“plenty, plenty PNM in yuh blood coming fuh yuh”. So I want them to understand, the derailing will not work.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: It will not work at all because we have many new PNM leaders coming up and they are ready, and “it is snake in yuh tail yuh will get. Yuh will get it”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So, based on the comments sent to me—“when yuh say snake, all ‘gouti jump out dey hole”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Based on the comments sent to me by the constituents of St. Ann’s East, the youth league, the women’s league of the PNM, the UNC’s 2025 budget has received a triple “F” rating: fake, fraudulent, failure.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: The budget was short on essential financial details that everyone looks forward to hearing. Everyone looks forward because they want to understand the details. Imagine other financial institutions—PWC, Ernst & Young—they had to do the Government’s job for them. They had to do their own commentary and provide the figures that were not provided by the Minister of Finance. Dereliction of duty by the Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Where were the detailed macroeconomic baseline projections, real GDP growth, inflation path, et cetera? Where were the explicit revenue and expenditure breakdowns, key revenue sources, oil, non-oil and so on? Where were the debt dynamics and sustainability analysis? Where? Debt-to-GDP ratio and so on, where was all of that? Contingency or risk buffers, sensitivity

analysis? In an environment as fluid as ours, in a geopolitical circumstance as fluid as it is, how is it that the Minister of Finance acknowledged no risk to revenue projections being achieved, and presented no contingencies to mitigate the effects of such risk? No implementation timelines. No implementation schedules mentioned for any of the programmes.

It was loud, but all that we were hearing were vague and open-ended announcements for maximum impact and minimum accountability. It is all well and good to say, "We are doing this," but without a time frame, then no one can account for if you are actually achieving the goals. And, of course, no historical comparisons. We had to go to the books to find that because I guess they did not want to show that there was growth in the economy in the last three years, and none this year, as soon as they were taking over.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Imagine, the Member for Barataria/San Juan was literally begging the Leader of the Opposition to supply those details, when your own Minister of Finance did not supply it in his whole speech. You cannot ask the Leader of the Opposition. And thank God for the PNM Leader of the Opposition who provided those types of details and showed the Minister of Finance what it should be.

The Minister of Finance continues to randomly mention new policies, making it up as he goes along. You stood for three hours speaking but suddenly, you did not have time to deal with the taxation of imported alcohol, so have to deal with that at a later time. Imagine that in a post-budget analysis. Reopening of the hotel school, that was mentioned en passant; en passant. We wait to see the allocation for these things and this is what we are saying, the critical weaknesses in this budget.

Another critical weakness of the budget was the minimal focus on a critical sector, such as education. Education and youth were almost left out of the budget presentation. The focus was miniscule, almost like an afterthought. Eighteen hundred words devoted to education and youth, out of 20,000 words delivered over three hours. That is less than 9 per cent. Yet, the UNC would have us believe, and would have the country believe that youth and education are frontline priorities.

Mr. Speaker, 9 per cent on education, but taxation though, 21 per cent or one-fifth of the time was spent dealing with taxation. Taxation was the single largest thematic area in the budget, bypassing energy, social programmes and, of course, bypassing education. Yet again, the UNC wants us to believe that education is a priority. But it is clear. The UNC priority is tax, tax and more tax. Property tax, alcohol tax, cigarette tax, LPG tax, electricity tax, returning nationals tax, electric car tax, plastics tax. “Like yuh tax fuh yuh age and all, because yuh cannot get full benefits at 60 anymore”, you have to wait until 65.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: The UNC has gone from the “axe the tax” to “max the tax”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: “Axe the tax” to “max the tax”, and that was the focus of the UNC budget 2025. “Dog eat de UNC shame”.

Hon. Members: “Yuh was ah nice lady when yuh was on this side”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Based on the scant courtesy, that is why I cannot be nice. “I eh feel good, I eh hear anything about education in the budget”. Based on the scant courtesy paid to education and youth in the 2025 budget, no one would believe the truth and the facts and the problems that we face in Trinidad and

Tobago, which must be taken head-on by any responsible Government. No one would believe that crime throughout Trinidad and Tobago continues unabated under the UNC Government, fueled by the involvement, as we know, of youth in gangs. We know that. But suddenly, there are no statistics on the TTPS page; statistics up to December 2024 and nothing after that. So we have to just take the UNC's word for it, for the low murder statistics that they are quoting. We cannot verify. There is no independent verification possible because those statistics have disappeared from the pages.

No one would believe that recently, a report showed that 54 per cent of violent crime offenders in Trinidad and Tobago are youths between the ages of 15 to 29. These are the problems that we are facing. These are the problems. No one would believe that the UNC has had to resort to placing police in over 50 schools to try to contain the violence that is exploding under the tenure of this Minister of Education. No one would believe that chronic underperformance is an issue for some schools. Chronic underperformance is an issue for some schools and communities leading to entrenched economic and social disparities. No one would believe that these are issues that a government is facing if they were to see what was presented by the Minister of Finance. Eighteen hundred words out of 20,000. No one would believe that an estimated 250,000 youths in Trinidad and Tobago are not involved in education, employment and training.

You see, when you look at the details of the allocations, that is when the phrase "the devil is in the details" comes to mind.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And the devilish details of this people's budget reveal the true yellow underbelly of the wicked and callous UNC Government. There is denial of equity, there is misrepresentation, fluff, blatant deception and denial of

opportunity.

The first detail: Denial of equity. The UNC callously, heartlessly, uncaringly and wholeheartedly fired 40,000 people, then cut funding to the programmes of the Ministry of Education, designed to support vulnerable and at-risk students. The remedial education programme, designed to help students in schools where they need socio and psycho, economic and counselling. They need to show how to deal with conflict. They need after-school lessons. They need all of this to give equity, to give them an equal chance of academic success and social mobility. That is what that remedial education programme is. What did UNC do? Cut it by 37 per cent, cut the funding by 37 per cent. So, obviously, this programme will not be able to reach as far as it should. Cut the remedial education programme.

7.55 p.m.

You know what is important, Mr. Speaker? Many of the children who are vulnerable students in this programme are children of the ones they fired. So those 40,000 people who were fired, their children lost income from their parents, so their home now has less income, and then you cut the programmes that were meant to help them in school. So they won twice, I guess, if that is winning by the UNC standards. These children won twice. They got a double whammy.

The book grant introduced by the PNM, not a cent allocated to the book grant in the budget. The Minister of Finance himself, during the mid-term debate in 2025 earlier this year, criticized the PNM for not allocating funds to the book grant in the budget of September 2024. The Minister said, and I quote:

The then Minister of Finance announced it—meaning the book grant—and not a cent was put forward. And, so now, it falls to this Government to ensure that children are provided with these grants.

So the Minister was critical that no money for the book grant was put into the budget. So, it is impossible that this goodly Minister would criticize what the PNM did and turn around to do the same thing, even though that is what they did with Dragon gas eh, even though that is what they did with Dragon gas.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: So, therefore, if there is no allocation for the book grant in this budget, it means that the UNC has slashed, cut, and abandoned the book grant programme. Mr. Speaker, 20,000 vulnerable children now have no option to get some—have to go to school, and they have done this after firing 40,000 people, many of them who would have been recipients of that same book grant. So the parents have no job, no money, and now no book grant, and the remedial programme has also been cut. Clearly, that is winning UNC style. This is the Government that cares about children and cares about their education, and that is what is they are touting.

The school feeding programme, slashed by \$10 million, 4 per cent. So after firing the 40,000 people, many of them vulnerable, many of their children who would go to school and get lunch from the school feeding programme, get breakfast from the school feeding programme, you cut that too. So these children, their parents have no salary. The remedial programme has been cut, so less counselling for them, less attention, and less resources. You cut the book grant, so they are not getting that either. And now you cut school feeding, so less of them will be able to benefit from lunches and breakfast in school.

The Vacation Revision Programme, going on for years to help vulnerable at-risk children. Suddenly, in 2025, no more of that. So those students who may have scored under 30 per cent, even under 50 per cent, the help they were getting to advance their educational journey and to bring some equity, that is gone too.

Mr. Speaker, what kind of Government abandons the children who need them most in the way that the UNC has? What kind of Government does that?

Devilish detail number two: Misrepresentation. I have had a number of people asking me to explain this. Because the Minister of Finance stated 13 partner schools, referring to special schools, have been strengthened with \$11 million in support, and I am dealing with misrepresentation. Because what are the facts? The Government has been supporting private special schools for many years. This is not a new programme.

The current level of funding, which was approved in 2024, under the PNM is \$11.5 million. So when the Minister said they are strengthening schools with \$11 million in support, as though it is a new initiative, it is not. It is exactly what has been going on, and that \$11 million figure is what was agreed to under the PNM. And so, that is when we say fake, fraudulent, and failure, because there is no increase in the allocation. It is the exact same thing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Why try to palm it off as something the UNC is doing that is new?

Devilish detail number three: Failed implementation or sloth. I want to take my time to deal with this one; the low IDF of expenditure under the Ministry of Education. You see, the IDF funds are the ones that are used for school repair. In 2024, the Government spent \$98 million from the IDF for school repairs.

In 2025, only \$26 million was expended under the UNC out of \$192 million. So, clearly very low. So there are two things at play, either your payment process is extremely inefficient, or you just have not done the work. And, I want to note that in the midterm, an additional \$83 million was added to the original allocation. And we are seeing in black and white in the budget documents \$26 million spent,

even after the Minister of Education delayed schools by an entire week to ensure that they could complete infrastructural repairs.

So some questions arise based on this abysmal performance of the Ministry of Education's development programme, as evidenced by the failure of the Minister of Education to expend the funds. Because at least one school—so school was delayed by a week, and even after that one school had to go on a shift system, and it was not St. George's Member for Barataria/San Juan. One school had to go on a shift system because of no furniture, even though the Minister delayed schools from opening for one week, and said that all schools were fit to reopen.

Obviously, if the work was done, many contractors must still be owed for work at schools, and this has to be true because they are reaching out to their members of Parliament all over the Bench asking about payment for work done, and they are very worried about how they will get paid.

So if you look at the allocation that is there in black and white, the allocation looks very similar to what was there in the last budget. So with such a small expenditure, it means that if the work was done, there are a lot of back bills to pay out of that same allocation. So the question then arises, if you have all of those bills to pay, out of this current allocation, what then remains for work that is to be done in this fiscal? It means, therefore, that the UNC has deliberately under-allocated the funding required for school repair in 2025, '26. And one wonders if this is part of a bigger plan to underestimate so that the budget deficit is lower than it should be because that is quite a number of millions. But featuring very prominently—even though school repairs must be under-allocated—is a \$100 million for laptops that we heard were coming in August, then we heard they were coming in September, and this is October, and no laptops. Promise made, promise not kept.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: That is why when we say fake, fraudulent, failure, “triple F rating”, these are the things that we are speaking about. I will move on.

Devilish detail number four. The devil is in the details blatant deception, blatant deception: Claiming existing projects as new initiatives, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Lee: You used to be so nice and—[*Inaudible*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: I am still nice. Caroni Central “ah still nice”.

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

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: The Ministry of Education has worked tirelessly to, one, establish an Educational Technology Unit, which is about three-years-old, established by the PNM, and they have been working with the IT department to build out the e-classroom system. That has been the work of years. A lot of records are going in from all of the over 800 schools. They are going into that system. And all of the teachers, 13,000 teacher records, it is going into there. So it is a huge project, and that has been going on for years.

Imagine my surprise when the UNC rebrands this “NextClass”, and then says that it is a new initiative under the Ministry of Education. That cannot be. And that is blatant deception I am speaking about, claiming existing projects as new initiatives. There is no reason for that. If you are continuing a good initiative, as it is an excellent initiative, then that is fine. The PNM is always happy to lead the way and allow the UNC to follow. That is what we do. So therefore, there is no reason to try to deceive the population as though you are making a whole new initiative. This is something under PNM. We are happy that we have started it, and you will continue. Say thank you to the PNM. We are happy to accept the thanks from you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And I come to one that is particularly devilish, Mr. Speaker, a devilish detail. The devil is in the details: The removal of opportunity for youth and professionals. You know, Mr. Speaker, it is interesting because the Ministry of Education under the PNM dealt with ECCE, primary, secondary, as well as tertiary education. I dare say, while it was a lot of work, it was something that was very rewarding and fulfilling. But under the UNC, the Ministry has been split into two. So, I am therefore left to conclude that one good woman is made up for by two men. I take that. Leader, I take that, I take that, I take that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Two men to do the work of one good woman, but that is all right.

So we are looking at the removal of opportunity for youth and professionals. Let us deal with youth first. Under the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training, the OJT expenditure, because it is moved to that Ministry now; formally, it was under the Ministry of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development. In 2024, the expenditure under that programme was \$294 million. In 2025, \$320 million. Yet, in 2026, the estimate we are seeing in black and white is \$275 million, a decrease of \$45 million or 14 per cent.

Now, this is a critical programme for our young people. This is the programme where a lot of our young people get the chance to gain some type of work experience. So how could we be saying that we believe in youth, we love young people, we care about you, when UNC wins, everybody wins, and you are cutting a critical programme like the OJT by 14 per cent or \$45 million? It means that the opportunities for young people—and that is why we say removal of opportunity for youth and professionals.

You can say anything you want, but the devil is in the details. What have

you allocated? It takes cash to care. So we can value then how much you care about our young people when you would cut a programme as critical as OJT by \$45 million. Less youths will have opportunities for employment, and I hope the young people of this country are taking note of what the UNC is doing to them.

And then we move to the lack of opportunity for professionals. Contract employment, the Ministries have split now. But when you look at what was allocated for contract employment under the Ministry of Education in 2024/'25, and what is now allocated, the combined figure between the Ministry of Education, as well as the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training, contract employment allocation has been cut by \$30 million or 15 per cent.

So we see here playing out what was said by the hon. Prime Minister, that they are going to cut contract employment by as much as 60 per cent and, therefore, we sound the warning now to professionals all over this country, all over this country. We have La Brea and Point Fortin, the Members here who are involved in labour movement. I want to know if they are sitting quietly and watching this take place. Because, as you hand the ten per cent, as you hand the \$1 reduction, you are going to have professionals now who are employed at this time who may be facing nonrenewal of their contracts, and it is already happening. It is already happening.

So what are these persons to do now when this Government, who said when they win, you win, when they allocate \$30 million less or 15 per cent less for contract employment. Mr. Speaker, when a government sacrifices investment in the development of our nation's children in order to fulfill populist and unrealistic campaign promises, we must all take notice. It is our job as the Opposition to hold this Government to account, and that is exactly what we will do.

8.10 p.m.

We will ensure that we go into the furthest reaches of those yellow books and expose what is said, and look at what it really means. Because if you say you care, you cannot cut contract workers, you cannot cut youth in the OJT programme, that is not caring, and that certainly is not winning. And when that same Government, while starving our vulnerable children of resources and support, proclaims that students have won, that is an unforgivable betrayal of trust.

You see, some people listen to what the Government says, expecting that the Government will be talking the talk and walking the walk. But it is clear when you look at the allocations, that the Government might be talking the talk, but they certainly are not walking the walk. The UNC has abandoned principles of equity, opportunity, and care. And equity is a serious thing in this country, Mr. Speaker. Because when we have children who are vulnerable, we will always have children who are vulnerable, and it is a government's responsibility to ensure that programmes are put in place to help them, and that these programmes are adequately funded. And when you cut out from these children the opportunity for equity and to have an academically successful career, then you cut out their chance for social mobility.

So many of us could sit or stand in this Chamber and speak about our humble beginnings, the Member for La Brea just spoke about his, but it was the programmes and policies of the Government, and the PNM, because the Member is of the age to be educated by the PNM. It is the policies and programmes of a PNM Government that would have allowed that Member and many others, many others, including myself, to be properly educated, and that is the way.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: That is the way social mobility comes. So it is particularly

disturbing, particularly distasteful, and it should be to everyone when these programmes are cut and our vulnerable children are being left behind. When the UNC won, our children lost. And yellow—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—yellow is the code for fake, fraudulent, failure, triple F rating—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—reaffirmed, Mr. Speaker, triple F rating reaffirmed. I want to move to my constituency of St. Ann’s East. It has been such a pleasure to be in this House and to interact and represent my constituents, and over past 10 years we have worked hard together to deliver community centres, ECCE centres, bridges, roads—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Playing fields—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Right. “Allyuh from St. Ann’s East or what?”

Hon. Members: Yeah. [*Laughter*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: “I doh understand.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: That is why I am here, because I worked hard and my constituents voted me back.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: That is what an MP does. Some of you new MPs will do well to take an example from what a good MP is. Right?

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And we have ongoing projects, we have extensive remedial

works that are ongoing San Juan north, we have the start of the construction of the Maracas Bay ECCE Centre, the start of the construction of the Las Cuevas Community Centre, the upgrade of Fort Abercromby in Las Cuevas, ongoing construction of the Maracas Valley Health Centre, the Port of Spain to north coast taxi stand, there is a particular river wall in Febeau Village and road repair in Mayfair Gardens. Those were ongoing projects, but, Mr. Speaker, during the last couple of months, those projects seem to have come to a halt. And I have been asking my fellow MPs, and they have also been indicating that nothing is happening with projects that were ongoing in our constituencies. And I have been writing to the—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: I am hearing protests, so I am glad to know that maybe things are happening in other places because I am hearing other MPs speaking about the Minister of Works and Infrastructure and the Member for Couva North going to their constituencies and touring with them. So we have been writing to the various Ministries, I certainly have, writing monthly. And, unfortunately, over 50 per cent of my letters have received no response.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And I am asking, I am saying to the Ministers that you are no longer in Opposition, you are in Government, and therefore when an MP contacts you to speak, it is not for themselves, I am not calling to chitchat, I am speaking to you on behalf of 28,000 constituents of St. Ann's East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And therefore, all of us deserve a response. I cannot say for the Member for Couva North. Member for Couva North always responds and tells us that she is taking the request seriously, so I thank her for that. But those

who are not responding, I ask you, please, to respond to us because it is important. And even as a Government Minister, I am sure many on this side—you see, that is why Caroni Central said I am a nice person because I always responded.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And they can say that. I always responded.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And I helped when I could, right? I want to ask the Minister of the People, Social Development and Family Services, particularly, there is an issue at the Aranguez office, the Social Welfare office, there is an issue of staffing. The people of St. Ann's East are reaching out to me, and there are a lot more of them now applying because of the 40,000 persons that have been fired so I am asking, please, Minister, if you could look into this situation, I am bound, duty bound to mention this in this Parliament because it is really causing an issue in the constituency.

And I have a special note for my MP, my MP. I am a constituent of Barataria/San Juan, so I have a special note for my MP.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: MP, you stood up and you quoted some of your projects that you are taking on in your constituency. I want to remind you that north of the Eastern Main Road is Barataria/San Juan, too.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Newalloville is Barataria/San Juan, Sunshine Avenue is Barataria/San Juan, and I have seen my MP walk in my area a couple of times. Bagatelle is Barataria/San Juan, and we crave your attention too. So MP, I am inviting you to come to our side of the constituency too, on the northern side of the Eastern Main Road, because we want our road paved too. I hear he is doing water

projects, we need better water too, right. So we are looking forward to seeing you on our side of the constituency.

Hon. Hosein: [*Inaudible*] Sunday lunch—

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: We want to win.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: We want to win, Mr. Speaker, we want a win too, right. So, Mr. Speaker, we commend the public.

Hon. Hosein: [*Inaudible*] Sunday lunch.

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: We commend the public—“Ah cooking for you, for sure.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: And I know you are a Muslim, so I am making halal. Mr. Speaker, we commend the public educated largely by the PNM for showing the UNC that we will not be hoodwinked. The public is very aware, very discerning, and the public has been speaking out on all channels, social media and regular media. They have been speaking about what they notice in the budget and the disparities that they have seen, and some of that will come out when my fellow speakers get up to speak. We, on the PNM side, reaffirm the triple F rating that the UNC has received for this 2025 budget, which, as somebody told me, Mr. Speaker, is little more than fakery in the bakery.

We stand with over 40,000 citizens and their children who continue to suffer under the hands of the UNC, and we call on the UNC to help the most vulnerable. We note that the Member for Fyzabad said that the hon. Prime Minister will be addressing this, and we look forward with anticipation because we know that these people need help, and we hope that the hon. Prime Minister would have spent the day that she was not in the Chamber today, we hope that she is somewhere finding a solution for the problem. Even though the Member for Siparia would have been

the head at creating the problem, we hope that today she was engaged in finding a solution for the firing of 40,000 vulnerable citizens in one fell swoop. So, we are looking forward to the contribution of the Member for Siparia and what comes in there.

But we know, Mr. Speaker, we know that we are in for a rough ride with the UNC Government as always. There was never really a chance that the UNC would do very well, you know, but even on this side, we are surprised because we did not think it would be so bad. We are all disturbed by the recklessness that we are seeing and the poor governance that we are seeing. And I imagine the nations of the region, and anyone who listened to the contribution of the Prime Minister at the UN, I imagine they are similarly concerned. But the country should have no fear, the People's National Movement is here. What the UNC—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—has broken, the PNM will repair.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Trinidad and Tobago will soon return to a government that cares. I will say it again, Mr. Speaker, because it needs to be heard. The country should have no fear, the PNM is here. What the UNC has broken the PNM will repair.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Trinidad and Tobago will soon return to a government that cares. Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Members: Tobago. Yes, Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for Tobago West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Joel Sampson (*Tobago West*): Mr. Speaker, allow me to express my sincere and humble thanks to the persons of the Tobago West and by extension Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson:—for their overwhelming support of my tenure as their Member of Parliament for Tobago West. I would also like thank my family and my constituents for their continued prayers, support and encouragement. Mr. Speaker, I also take the opportunity to thank the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Minister of Finance, for the Government's maiden budget presentation in this parliamentary term. Building Economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies: this is a budget title that seems to speak directly to the situation of Tobago and all marginalized groups in this society because they have refused the gospel of the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Mr. Speaker, allow me to address and frown upon the flippant disregard for parliamentary privilege by the Opposition Leader to spew the PNM propaganda. I had the painful experience of subjecting my hearing domain to the Opposition Leader's clear, structured, and balisier-fueled contribution to the budget. Let me tell the Opposition Leader, the people of Tobago are not foolish.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Under the former government, Tobagonians had to endure mamagism and fiscal wickedness of the highest order.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: As I sat here listening to the contribution of the Member, the former education Minister, I say to the current Education Minister, you have your

work cut out. Because I understand why the schools are the way they are today, and this state of—*[Inaudible]*

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. J. Sampson: Mr. Speaker, the Opposition Leader mentioned tourism in her contribution, and I remember the former government fighting the THA in every way to crash our tourism economy as a means of punishing the Tobago private sector. You see, the election licking they received in 2021, 14 to one, that defeat could not have been possible without the support of the Tobago private sector. So while the secretary for tourism and the Chief Secretary were fighting to improve airlift, it never returned to pre-COVID levels because of the refusal of the PNM Government to support tourism in Tobago.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. J. Sampson: Mr. Speaker, the Chief Secretary promised to cancel one of the British airlift contracts to sponsor the local airlift. That was refused. Mr. Speaker, the travelling public clamoured and cried to no avail. The Tobago Chamber urged and prodded, no response from the PNM. But through communication and collaboration, my colleague for Tobago East and I, within one month of the UNC's Government in office, additional flights were scheduled for Tobago. That is performance.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. J. Sampson: Not to mention the airport, Mr. Speaker. They were willing to sweep \$400 million cost overruns under the carpet.

Hon. Members: "Oooo!"

8.30 p.m.

Mr. J. Sampson: In what universe, Mr. Speaker, a project undertaken by the UNC has a 400 million cost overrun and near riot has not taken place in the media,

in the streets and in this House? “Airport Gate” would have been the former Prime Minister’s cry and all seated opposite would have lustily joined in.

The makeshift opening ceremony, dubbed “virtual completion”, was far from complete. The *Newsday* article of August 16, 2025, titled: “No date set for opening of ANR Robinson Airport”, cited the then Finance Minister stating that the first plane will land in July:

“...barring unforeseen circumstances...”

Hon. Member: He did not say what year.

Mr. J. Sampson: By August, inspections and corrections to scope of works had not been completed and agreed. Asphalt paving of the taxiway, installation of ITC systems and the management of the commerce of the land side of the airport were still outstanding. It is a crying shame, Mr. Speaker, that tourism international arrivals declined under their watch and now they have already started pointing fingers at the UNC for not solving the problems they spawned fast enough. Mr. Speaker, a new word has to be created to describe this level of insincerity.

Not to mention, Mr. Speaker, the partial reason for the election loss was the mishandling of the land acquisition for the airport—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson:—and this former Minister of Finance boasted that they saved \$40 million-plus in moneys identified for compensation. Meanwhile, Mr. Speaker, the THA did the honourable thing by assisting with settling the displaced residents and supporting their relocation efforts and developing humane arrangements for their mortgage solutions. But the Opposition would come in here and talk “all kinda thing”. They have no shame. If there was an acronym for no shame, it would be PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition in her contribution described the NAR Government as one, which brought this country to much pain. To attack the NAR is to attack its leaders, the hon. ANR Robinson, may his soul continue to rest in peace. Make no mistake, Mr. Speaker, the first time we had political instability of this level was in 1970, during the Black Power Movement struggles. The PNM was in power and brought pain to society. They brought more pain to the country when they squandered the decade of the OPEC oil boom years and the pain felt, again, left the country in ruins. So, the NAR was left to clean up the PNM mess.

The PNM continued most of the policies of the NAR in the 1991 to 1995 period, and when they got a chance to govern in austerity, they called an early election and that is how we had the 17-17-2, which brought the UNC to power. When the austerity, created by this former Government, was facing the then former PNM Prime Minister, he too called an early election and this time, there was no tie. The UNC is now in power and the TPP in Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: The pattern here is clear, Mr. Speaker, the PNM cannot govern in tough times but they can point fingers and mamaguy the population.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Tough times make it hard to hide mismanagement and fraud. Tough times call for equity and respect for all classes in society. Tough times call for integrity in public life and tough times call for any political party other than the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Mr. Speaker, there is the talk and notion in the air that CEPEP and URP will be closed down in Tobago after the election. I want to make it

pellucidly clear to the persons in Tobago, that URP and CEPEP are under the remit of the Tobago House of Assembly and not under a political contract. URP falls under the Division of Infrastructure, Quarries and Urban Development. CEPEP is under the Division of Community Development, Youth Development and Sport.

When we took office in 2021, we restructured the programmes, reshaped them and meaningful work is being produced through these two areas. There is the concrete furniture workshop. There is the woodworking furniture workshop. There is the agricultural unit that produces some form of income and revenue to help sustain them. So, when they speak about, “No moneys allocated,” the moneys that we received before for CEPEP and URP was minimal and we had to supplement these programmes from unspent balances. We received \$9.2 million for CEPEP, \$18 million then for URP. In reality, to run URP costs \$65 million. To run CEPEP was \$37 million.

When we took office, URP workers were being paid \$79 a day, with no added benefits, no sick leave, no holidays, no casual leave. All that is gone because of the Farley Chavez-led THA Executive that would have given them all the benefits they needed. So, Tobagonians in CEPEP and URP, there is no need to worry. You are going nowhere. You are under a structure—a proper structure—and not a political contract.

Mr. Speaker, the former, former Prime Minister, a Tobagonian by either boat or birth. From him, what we got was hate, Mr. Speaker. We saw bitterness. Mr. Speaker, we saw acrimony. Mr. Speaker, we saw animosity. And Mr. Speaker, we saw a man totally out of control.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Like a raging bull.

Mr. J. Sampson: Tobago had opposed the former, former Prime Minister, Mr.

Speaker, and he became very angry. We opposed him to the worst defeat in the THA elections and he became a raging bull. We were warned.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Mr. Speaker, I am truly humbled to be able to stand for all the people of Tobago West and Tobago, and ever so proud to walk a different path to that of my predecessor. You see, Mr. Speaker, my predecessor was duly elected for two terms under a political party, mastering the art of illusion, smoke and mirrors, and downright oppression. According to her, “Nobody lives there.” They have no regard for the electorate once intoxicated by political power, after artfully deceiving the electorate to vote for them, only to crash the economy nine years later. Mr. Speaker, if the PNM’s art of collapsing an economy was something new, it would have been pardonable, but history painfully reminds us of the forked tongue of those in opposition today.

Recall, Mr. Speaker, it was the late Prime Minister Williams who came to Tobago, while preparing for elections in 1956, spoke the language of the Tobago struggle, echoed our disenfranchisement, saying that Trinidad was oppressing Tobago. He closed it off, Mr. Speaker, by saying that Tobago had exchanged British imperialism for Trinidad imperialism.

But wait, Mr. Speaker, wait. It took 20 years and the virtual collapse of the Tobago economy in the face of economic boom in Trinidad, in the decade of the OPEC oil price hike, to force Tobagonians to unite at the 1976 polls, defeating the PNM. Then, Mr. Speaker, all hell and fury broke loose in Tobago. Weaponizing the Cabinet of Government, the PNM ensured that Tobago had to pay. We had to be re-imperialized, re-colonized and re-oppressed.

But the voice of reason preceded the current Member for Siparia in this budget. Former MP Rafique Shah, in the debate for internal self-government in

1977, stated that Eric Williams and the PNM behaved like colonials, bringing the Bible in one hand and the gun in the other hand. To vote for them, you will get whatever the PNM Bible offers you, and you could not complain. Take that and cool it, or better yet, take that and be loyal. Vote against them, and then the metaphorical gun came out, firing of workers, shutting down programmes and weaponizing the Treasury against the population. That is the PNM style.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: They did that in 1976, they did it again in 2001, and again, in 2021. For every single year the PNM remained in power, Tobago's outlook suffered.

The PNM is famous, Mr. Speaker, for taking a prosperous economy and running it to the ground, losing political office only for other parties like the NAR and UNC to rescue the country, making the tough economic and governance decisions they had no penchant for making. Governing under tough circumstances and managing public expectations during structural adjustment is something very alien to the PNM.

Mr. Speaker, I urge the population to disregard the false doctrine that will masquerade for a PNM debate against a powerful maiden UNC budget presentation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: We know very well, Mr. Speaker, they have no ethics about them. They are shamelessly lurking to take power away, after this Government is seeking to rescue a mismanaged economy made bankrupt from the plunder of the public purse, like the \$5 billion flagged by the Office of Procurement Regulation, or the \$3 billion-plus which forced the Auditor General to be unable to form an opinion on the country's accounts.

At the end of this, my maiden contribution to the budget, it is my hope that the population gets this message and return the Tobago People's Party to power in upcoming elections in Tobago and similarly, the UNC in Trinidad for future elections.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Tobago now gets to see that promises are kept by this Government, and Tobago, and the country at large, stand to benefit. Make no mistake, Mr. Speaker, the majority of this money to be spent in Tobago will generate multipliers in Trinidad. So, when Tobago wins, Trinidad wins.

For this reason, Mr. Speaker, my budget response is aimed at breaking the chains of PNM propaganda and releasing Tobago from the captive mindset of an oppressive PNM. Tobago's development remains in the shadows of a bankrupt PNM ideology of developing Trinidad first and letting the crumbs trickle down to Tobago. This UNC budget recognizes Tobago as an integral part of the national economy and focuses on T&T first.

If anyone cannot recall, the records of this *Hansard* will remind all and sundry today, Mr. Speaker. It was the Comrade, the hon. Rafique Shah, in 1977, who reminded this House that the PNM had no development strategy for Tobago. The first PNM's "People's Charter" boasted of, and I quote:

Trinidad's ability to develop Tobago will show the world vast superiority of nationalist government to colonial administration.

This PNM paternalism relegated Tobago, a passive backwater on the altar of over-centralized political and administrative power in the PNM Cabinet.

Fast forward to 2024 and the official policy had not changed, Mr. Speaker. Let me prove this from the closing statements in the last two budgets read by the former, former Minister of Finance and you be the judge.

In 2024, the Finance Minister said, and I quote:

“Madam Speaker, I expect that the broad economic and macroeconomic...”—achievement—“in Trinidad will now assist an improving economy in Tobago...”

And to make it pellucidly clear, 69 years later, the same PNM doctrine was written in last year’s budget. This was his comment on Tobago, and I quote:

“Madam Speaker, I anticipate that the strong economic and macroeconomic performance in Trinidad—characterized by sustained GDP growth, high employment levels...low inflation—will contribute to an improved economy in Tobago.”

8.40 p.m.

This is trickle-down economics favouring big businesses and leaving it to benevolence that the wealthy ruling class will hand out a living to the poor and working class. This is a crowning indictment on the PNM and its inability to accord the basic rights to the people of Tobago, and to invest in the revenue-earning capacity, and the productivity on the island, after more than five decades in charge of public policy.

Mr. Speaker, this was the written text of the budget in fiscal 2022.

“Madam Speaker, it is well known that Trinidad and Tobago there is a mature hydro-carbon province.”

The text continues:

“We shall also examine the relevance of the existing suite of fiscal incentives, licensing regimes and production sharing contracts in terms of providing sufficient motivation for oil and gas companies, to bid for blocks and engage in exploration and production, while at the same time ensuring that the citizens of Trinidad get their fair share of revenues from our natural

resources.”

As experienced as he is in this House, and in politics he recovered the Freudian slip as a typographical omission, but to Tobagonians, who have had to live with the underrepresentation of hydro-carbon assets in Tobago waters, this is a further indictment on the PNM.

The point is, Mr. Speaker, we have an Opposition claiming the budget is fake, that Tobago's allocation is mamaguy, that internal self-government is not mentioned. Mr. Speaker, when every elected Member in this House in 1977 rejected the first Motion for internal self-government for Tobago, it was the United Labour Front that stood with Tobago. I wish to recognize them all. The hon. Haffezar Khan, St. Augustine; the hon. Paul Harrison, Caroni East; the hon. Ramesh Lutchmedial, Chaguanas; the hon. Kelvin Ramnath, Couva South; the hon. Winston Nanan, Tabaquite; the hon. Nizam Mohammed, Princes Town; the hon. Errol Mc Leod, Oropouche; the hon. Boodram Jattan, Naparima; the hon. Raffique Shah, Siparia; the hon. Basdeo Panday, Couva North. Today, this group of comrades in the UNC has joined the pioneers in placing Tobago on an even footing in the developing of Trinidad and Tobago by delivering a budget of 5 per cent of the national allocation and 6.3 per cent overall accounting for six schedules of allocations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: How difficult was that? It was too painful for the PNM to send this money to Tobago, even when there was a PNM Administration in the THA. Do not even mention internal self-government. The PNM is fixated on central power. Had it not been for the NAR, we would not have had the advancements in the Municipal Corporations Act, 1990 for local government. No matter what the PNM says, look at their actions.

This Leader of the Opposition, who is dismissive of the THA allocation, was the Minister with responsibility for planning and development. She and her Prime Minister sabotaged the advancement of the THA adoption of the Town and Country Planning function.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: They muzzled all officials, and she wrote to the Chief Secretary to inform him that his function that she had in law according to the Town and Country Planning Act, was now to pass through the Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, while that was happening the Tobago region had the highest number of Town and Country Planning refusals in the country, thus stymying development and investment prospects. Moreover, they stopped the appeals panel from hearing appeals in Tobago until it came to a head at a town hall meeting in Bethel. Mr. Speaker, this former Minister of Planning and Development whilst was standing silently as Tobago was being oppressed by her Leader, still came to Mount Saint George to campaign against David Joseph Thomas in Tobago East. She campaigned with the \$70,000 a month man to continue their oppression of the people of Tobago, and they still lost.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: I must agree with Sen. Anil Roberts. Somehow the balisier indoctrination include, surgical removal of shame, ethics, conscience and good sense.

Mr. Speaker, the PNM developed two iterations of the comprehensive economic data programme in 2006 and 2012, to develop Tobago under the theme “Clean, green, safe and serene”. Most of the CEDP 1.0 remain unimplemented due to PNM negligence and mismanagement. The CEDP 2.0 also remained largely unimplemented and it lapsed in 2017. There was no revival of a development

strategy for Tobago for three years until we approached the 2020 election. This medium-term policy and planning framework did not cater for the social sector. The environment or branding of Tobago as an environmentally dependent tourism economy.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, under the Tobago People's Party-led by the hon. Farley Chavez Augustine, the Tobago development strategy, "The Greatest Little Island on the Planet", was developed in the first term in office. The TPP-led Administration moved a Motion to adopt the strategy in May of 2024, fully aligning it with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, and setting the stage for this year's THA budget entitled "Accelerating Growth, Anchoring Fiscal Stability".

Mr. Speaker, we need a dictionary and encyclopedia to help us describe people who have selective and self-righteous outrage when any other government does anything far lesser in office. You will swear that the world is coming to an end. Emailgate, Landate-gate, Piarco-airport gate, FIFA-gate, and the myriad of corruption and government missteps are described as "the PNM is not perfect, we made a few mistakes". He spoke inelegantly. We did not listen to the population, and "stick break" in our ears. Mr. Speaker, we have a saying in Tobago, "If meh know yuh are ah tief, meh nah geh yuh meh pus for hold". To translate, we know the PNM has a track record of bankrupting the country, and weaponizing the Treasury. We should not give them that opportunity again.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Mr. Speaker, the Tobago House of Assembly submitted a fiscal package for consideration by the hon. Minister of Finance. The recurrent request comprised personal expenditure of 787.3 million, of which we received 757.7 million or 96.2 per cent. Under Goods and Services, the THA requested 809

million and received 788.6 million or 97 per cent. For Current Transfers and Subsidies, the THA requested 1.07 billion and received 1.1 billion or 110 per cent. Mr. Speaker, the UNC Government delivered to the people of Tobago what the PNM refused to do in over two decades.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: They did this just within a few months in office. Mr. Speaker, the key areas highlighted by the THA as areas of priority include the following: Tourism and the Creative Sector, Agriculture, Infrastructure, Digital Technologies, Human Capital Development, Education and Training and the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Sector. The Division of Tourism requested 179.5 million and received 176.8 million or 98.5 per cent. Agriculture and Food Security requested 188.6 million and received 191.5 million or 101 per cent. Infrastructure requested 381.7 million and received 357.9 million or 93.7 per cent. Education requested 476.5 million and received 479 million or 100.5 per cent. In reflecting the national priorities the Government has made a historical allocation available to the THA to address the fiscal mayhem left by the PNM.

Mr. Speaker, this Government has been breaking chains of PNM bondage before the budget for the people and the economy of Tobago. In five short, but immense, months we have tangible improvements and progressive conversations as it relates to air bridge support and the increase in the number of flights between Tobago and Trinidad, which the PNM refused to do, citing high subsidy costs.

Technical support from IADB, mid-term review support and a further \$134 million for the THA, inclusive of decision-making support. Town and country planning, land law reform consultations with the office of the Chief Secretary. The granting of blast and export license to Studley Park Enterprises Limited. Non-objection for the THA to borrow on its own credit-worthiness, and now a

budget of 5 per cent allocation to the THA which shatters all the old talk they were planning to make. The only thing left for them to do, is to resort to the old playbook of race-bating and code words.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: The new code word is, “Trinidad contractors”. When Trinidad contractors linked to the PNM built a wing at Scarborough Secondary School that could not be utilized, no problem. When Trinidad contractors that led to cost overruns in the Scarborough Public Library, the Shaw Park Cultural Complex, the Cove Eco Industrial Estate and Business Park, the Scarborough General Hospital and the L’Anse Fourmi link road, no PNM in Tobago had a word to say. I am taking this opportunity to clear the ear for the last time.

Mr. Speaker, there is no perfect budget, there is no perfect Minister of Finance, and there is no perfect Prime Minister, but this budget comes as close to perfection as we have seen in the history of the Tobago House of Assembly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: It addresses the needs of the normal citizen, the persons struggling to make ends meet. The World Bank publication in 1995 is still relevant: “Trinidad and Tobago: Poverty and Unemployment in an Oil-Based Economy”. Today, we have to have a budget aimed at addressing poverty in all its form. According to the UN STG 1. The population understands that poverty is hell, but PNM has its people living in paradise where the Porsche they did not transfer is nice and clean, they are eating nice.

Mr. Speaker, persistent poverty is still the largest obstacle to development in this country. We welcome initiatives to address period poverty, education, and digitalization and a refocus on the health of the population. It is a pity that once again, a levelheaded and patriotic government now has to address poverty and

inequality through a budget geared specifically to fairness and equity. Mr. Speaker, the comparison is glaring for all to see, to hear and to feel the effects of a government of the people, for the people and by the people.

Mr. Speaker, I continue to urge the UNC Government to collaborate with the Tobago House of Assembly, be respectful to one another, so that we can move mountains because the Tobago House of Assembly have big dreams. We have dreams of becoming the greatest little island on the planet, and in order to achieve that, the support is necessary from the central Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Mr. Speaker, it gives me every ounce of satisfaction to stamp my approval and support for this budget on behalf of my constituents and every reasonable resident in Tobago. Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Dominic Romain (*Malabar/Mausica*): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, and to share a few thoughts on the theatrical production that we got on Monday entitled T&T First: Building Economic Fairness Through Accountable Fiscal Policies. But, Mr. Speaker, before I go there, it seems every time that I make a contribution in this House, I always have to start by correcting for the record misinformation that is shared by some Member opposite. Today is no different. The Member for Baratania/San Juan, it was not him but he had advised us in his contribution to stop going out and misleading the public with bogus information. “Doh worry this time, it wasn’t you”.

Mr. Speaker, while you were absent from the Parliament earlier, there was a comment that was made to the Leader of the Opposition with respect to the

construction of the Arima Hospital from the Member for St. Augustine who indicated to the Member for Arima that she received a whole hospital and did not say thanks. Thanks to who?

Mr. Speaker, permit me to read this article, *Newsday* dated the 10th of June, 2020 entitled:

“Arima Hospital \$200 million under budget

Health Minister Terrence Deyalsingh said the newly opened Arima—

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]—cutting ribbon.

Mr. D. Romain: Mr. Speaker, please I seek your protection.

“Health Minister Terrence Deyalsingh said the newly opened Arima General Hospital was completed under budget to the tune of \$200m. He said there was no reduction in the square footage or number of beds from the original design.”

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Romain: Oh, good grief—anyway, Mr. Speaker:

“He said designs were substantially completed in January 2016,”

Mr. Speaker, who was in office? Who was in Government January of 2016?

“...construction started in March 2016, the topping off ceremony for the roof took place on September 20, 2017, and the project was handed over on June 4, 2020.”

Mr. Speaker, the sod turning ceremony for the Arima General Hospital took place on the 7th of May, 2015 exactly four months before they were voted out of office on September 7th. So unless there is another hospital in Arima, or unless they built the Arima General Hospital out of Lego, the UNC did not build the Arima General Hospital, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: Similarly, Mr. Speaker, the Point Fortin Hospital for the Member for Point Fortin. *Express* article dated May 26, 2017:

“Where is the new hospital

Residents fed up with promises...

For more than 50 years, the people of Point Fortin have been promised a proper hospital in their region. But despite plans and promises, government after government has failed to deliver, and Point Fortin residents have had to make do with a less than ideal facility which they describe as more of a health centre than a hospital. Hopes were raised in 2015, when just a few months before the...”—21st of May, 2015, Mr. Speaker—“...the...People’s Partnership...”—would have—“...turned the sod...”—for the hospital.

“Now exactly two years since the sod-turning, there is little visible sign of progress at the site. And residents are beginning to wonder just when this new hospital will be delivered and if it will be in their lifetimes. The Sunday Express visited the site last week and spoke with people in the surrounding areas who were far from optimistic about the timely construction of the new hospital.”

So again, Mr. Speaker, the UNC did not build the Point Fortin Hospital, but I would not be surprised, Mr. Speaker, if we hear a few months from now that they probably built the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex, Mr. Speaker, that they built the Central Block, or typical, Mr. Speaker. So I just wanted to correct that record.

So let me get, Mr. Speaker, to the theatrical performance. But I just wanted to just touch briefly on the contribution of my friend from Tobago West. A good guy, Mr. Speaker, I always enjoy his contributions. But I think he was a bit unfair to the People’s National Movement in terms of the contributions that they would

have made to the Tobago economy over the last four years. And in the last occasion when he spoke, Mr. Speaker, and I spoke after him, and I made the point, Mr. Speaker, that Tobago's development would have been challenged over the last four years because of the relationship or the antagonistic relationship that existed between the current THA, Mr. Speaker, and the then Central Government. We know the battles between the Chief Secretary and the former Prime Minister. From day one, the PDP—then the PDP, then the TPP made it clear that the PNM was the enemy. And that was the way that they operated with the PNM.

So, the Member would have said that the People's National Movement would have tried to destroy tourism in Tobago. But Mr. Speaker, it was the last administration that purchased three brand-new ferries for the sea bridge. After they inherited two ferries from the People's Partnership, which they inherited from the Manning administration, and both ferries, Mr. Speaker, one was in the ICU and the other one was in the HDU. And it took the PNM to spend money to repair one, and the other one unfortunately could not be salvaged. And when it is the former administration would have purchased those three new ferries, Mr. Speaker, there was no end of criticism from the other side.

In fact, Mr. Duke would have claimed that the *Galleons Passage* was “ah ole boat” that they bought from China. That is what they claimed, Mr. Speaker, but it improved the sea bridge because I noticed in his contribution he did not talk about the sea bridge, he spoke about the air bridge, and how there have been improvements with the UNC.

But just last night, Mr. Speaker, one of the two secretaries for tourism, so I do not know if it is Secretary Boris or the other secretary—

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

Mr. D. Romain:—who was lamenting the fact, Mr. Speaker, that Tobago Carnival

is just around the corner and despite discussions with authorities in Trinidad, they have not been able or have not been successful in getting additional flights, Mr. Speaker. But the Member did not make any mention of that. It was the last PNM administration, Mr. Speaker, that also spent \$50 million in Tobago during COVID providing funding for bed and breakfasts and hoteliers in Tobago to be able to upgrade their plants, Mr. Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain:—so that when the borders were reopened, Tobago would be able to welcome tourists in improved circumstances. And Members opposite had a problem with it. They were saying, “the borders closed, no tourists coming, so why allyuh spending \$50 million in Tobago, and dat money could be better spent in Trinidad to provide food support”, Mr. Speaker. So it is unfair to make that claim about the last administration when it pertains. It was the last administration that brought Sandals twice to Tobago, Mr. Speaker. And we still have—and now we saw recently, where the second resort that Tobago was supposed to benefit from, has now gone to St. Vincent and the Grenadines as well. Another opportunity for Prime Minister Ralph Gonzales to laugh at Tobago, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Bodoë: Laugh at Tobago?

Mr. D. Romain: Yes, when he laughed the last time and he made the point, he said, “what Tobago lost we have gotten”. And he has now gotten the second facility.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: And you have a Senator, Mr. Speaker, on the other side who would take to social media and again spread the propaganda and misinformation that they spread the last time, which caused citizens in Trinidad and Tobago to rally against the project, claiming that the Government then was going to borrow a

\$1 billion to build these two resorts when nothing could be further from the truth.

The Member for San Fernando East can back me up on this, Mr. Speaker, that the then administration was planning to use a public-private partnership model, where the former Prime Minister would have advised at a post-cabinet press briefing, that letters would have been sent out to several private sector companies in Trinidad and Tobago, inviting them to partner with the Government on that project. And the first company he mentioned, and I never forgot that press conference, he said ANSA McAL declined, but Republic Bank, Guardian Holdings, NIB, Massy Group, among others, all expressed, Mr. Speaker, a willingness to partner with the Government on the construction of that project.

But I think the PNM's problem, the biggest problem of the last administration, Mr. Speaker, was public relations. We did a lot but we did not tell the people. We assumed the people would know and that is why we are on this side, Mr. Speaker. But we will use the opportunities that present themselves to tell the people.

Mr. Speaker, coming to the budget. "Hmph." Overview of the domestic economy, page 10. "Under the PNM, 70,600..."—people lost their jobs. Mr. Speaker, I read that about 10 times. I could not believe it.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. D. Romain: And I know it must have been difficult for the Minister to put that in this document. Because for the last seven years, Mr. Speaker, since the closure of the Petrotrin refinery, Monday night forum after Monday night forum, 100,000 people fired, 200,000 people fired, 250,000 people fired. So to see 70,600 fired in 10 years, Mr. Speaker, versus 50,000 in five months.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: That is 10,000 a month under them, 500 a month under us, Mr.

Speaker. But they care. They love people. “Half of me belongs to you”—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain:—“the other half I give to you. There have been Prime Ministers before me. There will be Prime Ministers after me, but there will never be a Prime Minister who loves you as much as I love you”, Mr. Speaker. And that is how they show love, 50,000, Mr. Speaker, of the nation’s most economically vulnerable on the bread line.

Mr. Speaker, I do not know if Members opposite do not have constituency day, but I do every week. And at the end of almost every constituency day, Mr. Speaker, I am physically, mentally, emotionally, and at times financially drained. Week after week, Mr. Speaker, people come to me, persons who, up until the 28th of April and a little after that, were employed. They could afford to pay their bills, put food on the table, and send their children to school. Now, every week, Mr. Speaker, I feel like a psychologist. When I sit in my office and big men and women come to me, Mr. Speaker, in tears because the landlord served them notice, Mr. Speaker. They do not have food, they had to ask for help to get passage to come to my office, Mr. Speaker. They do not know where the next meal is coming from.

Mr. Speaker, during the July/August vacation, many people were messaging me on Facebook, asking for help to buy school supplies, to buy school books, Mr. Speaker, never ending. And up until yesterday, it was the same thing, Mr. Speaker. One young lady came, young mother of two, renting her two-bedroom apartment, rent \$3,500 a month. Her salary is \$3,900, Mr. Speaker. Were it not for the good graces of her mother assisting her, she does not know what she would have done. But she came, Mr. Speaker, hoping that I could help her to be able to get an HDC rent-to-own accommodation because she says the \$3,500 is just too

much, and the landlord has given her notice that he is going to increase the rent, because of the landlord's surcharge, Mr. Speaker. Property tax, by any other name, is still a tax.

Mr. Speaker, let us look at our foreign reserves:

“At the end of calendar year 2014, Trinidad and Tobago's Net Official Reserves stood at US \$11.497.1 million, equivalent to 12.9 months of prospective import cover.”

I found it interesting that they chose financial year 2014 and not 2015, since the People's Partnership Administration was in office for most of 2015.

So I decided to visit the Central Bank website, Mr. Speaker, and I found why they used that, because just one year later, while they were still in office, that figure fell by almost US \$1 billion, Mr. Speaker. When they came in, Mr. Speaker, the 31st of May, 2010, based on the Central Bank data, the country's foreign reserves stood at US \$10.477 billion. The 31st of August 2015, one week before they demitted office, it stood at US \$10.5395 billion, Mr. Speaker. So over five years, three months, and 14 days, it grew by just US \$95 million net, Mr. Speaker.

So while for the last 10 years they have been beating their chests, patting themselves on the shoulder for the how many billions they would have left in 2015, the majority of that is what they inherited from the Manning administration, Mr. Speaker, in 2010. Shame.

Reduction in the price of super gas by \$1. Mr. Speaker, I have two questions for the Minister of Finance. It is unfortunate he has left the Chamber. The first question I want to ask him is, when did he come to the realisation that the citizens were being overcharged unfairly? As he says on page 11, and I read:

“The previous PNM government has been unfairly overcharging citizens for

super gasoline.”

The PNM demitted office on the 1st of May, Mr. Speaker. The Minister sought to address this situation on Monday, the 13th of October, five-and-a-half months in office. This overcharging was so egregious, so wicked, so spiteful, but the Minister had no problem, Mr. Speaker, in having citizens continue to pay this overcharge for another five-and-a-half-months. Why did he not bring this measure, Mr. Speaker, four months ago, back in June, when we had the mid-year review? Why did he not bring it then, so that citizens could have enjoyed at least four months of the benefit of this measure, Mr. Speaker, unlike now, where they have hardly been able to enjoy it for two days, Mr. Speaker, and we have all of these other measures announced, which has basically undermined the benefit to come from this. But it was a good initiative. We will admit that. We have no problems on this side admitting that, Mr. Speaker. Any initiative that could improve the lot of the citizens of this country, we will support, even if it comes from that side, Mr. Speaker.

The second question I want to pose to the Minister. Did that \$1 reduction in the cost of Super eliminate the entirety of the overcharge, the surplus, Mr. Speaker? Such that the Government is now paying a subsidy on super? Or is there residual surplus, Mr. Speaker, which citizens are still paying, such that the Minister could have afforded to reduce by \$1? So, are we still paying a surplus? I would like for him to tell the country that, Mr. Speaker.

9.10 p.m.

And if we are, it means that there was room for him to reduce it by even more, and he chose not to, but instead to maintain the surplus.

Mr. Speaker, page 12:

“After years of underperformance, natural gas production is projected to

recover from current levels of approximately 2.6 billion cubic feet per day (bcf/d) to over 3.2 bcf/d by 2027.

As new fields come online, the development of the Manatee field alone, with estimated reserves of..."—over—"more than 2 trillion cubic feet of gas, will be groundbreaking for our economy."

Mr. Speaker, thanks to the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: While the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West was engaging in what the former Prime Minister referred to as "shuttle work" between Port of Spain, Washington and Caracas to make this happen, Mr. Speaker—and we are glad that it could find its way in the budget statement this year, that they recognize the significance that this is going to have on our economy.

While the Member was doing that shuttle work, Mr. Speaker, Members opposite, while they were on this side, were more concerned with how many times he went to Venezuela, who he met with, what they talked about and how much taxpayers' money was spent on his travels. Mr. Speaker, that was their main focus, and not how it could benefit the country, but we are happy that good sense eventually prevailed.

"We will ensure that productive sectors have access to foreign exchange.

We have installed new boards at the First Citizens Bank and the Exim Bank, and we will move to install a majority of directors at Republic Bank Limited."

Mr. Speaker, that last statement has me a bit concerned. Because when I look at the quality of some of the persons who have been appointed to boards year to date, I have little confidence, and I am sure many of the shareholders in Republic Bank do.

Mr. Speaker, let me give you an idea of a Facebook post from someone who was recently appointed as a director of the EximBank:

“Why that short dwarf eh hush he Douen crooked teeth Mouth! He couldn’t find \$500M to continue CDAP. Where Dr. Hon. Bodoë find the money and expand the list to give better drugs to 300,000 citizens? It was under ur ladder? Nasty PNM”.

Mr. Speaker, a Facebook post from an EximBank director. This is the quality of people that they are appointing to state boards.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: How are persons supposed to have confidence in that, Mr. Speaker? And it seems as if some of these directors fail to understand that the supporters of the PNM are citizens too. So, when we see Senators referring to PNM supporters as “rabid dogs” and “flocks of corbeaux”—yes, Mr. Speaker, but they love equity and fairness. All right?

Mr. Speaker, under “Institutional Strengthening: Accountability and Renewal”, the Minister says:

“When I assumed Office, I found State Enterprises in a state of absolute decay with multiple examples of corruption, abuse of Office, lack of accountability and lack of transparency.

This is confirmed by the last Report of the Procurement Regulator, which stated that \$5 billion in contracts were illegally awarded by Ministries in one financial year.”

Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate that the Minister saw it fit to make reference to that and put it in the budget statement. Because I think it is an unfair indictment on the many public servants who worked hard during that period to try and abide by the requirements of the procurement legislation.

Mr. Speaker, at that time, I was a member of the Board of the National Trust, and I can tell you the challenges that we faced as a Board to be able to execute projects as a result of the implementation of the proclamation of the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act. Because the reality is that when that proclamation took place, unfortunately, the infrastructure was not in place at several public bodies for an effective rollout.

And so, we found ourselves challenged where the Act required that contractors be registered with the OPR. But when we put out RFPs and we got tenders and we opened it and we did the checks, we realized that a lot of the contractors were not OPR registered because the Office of Procurement Regulation at that time was having challenges with respect to registration. They were doing the registrations and the prequalification.

As late as I think it was—maybe October or November of 2023, it was reported that the Office of Procurement Regulation had almost 9,000 applications inside for registration and prequalification, and they had only covered less than 800. And so, if we were to abide by the letter of the law with respect to the issuance of contracts for ongoing projects, then the public service would have ground to a halt.

So, what we ended up doing, Mr. Speaker, was to rely on our prequalified list of contractors—persons who were accustomed to doing work for the Trust. And we knew these people. We had a relationship with them. And so, while the teething problems were being worked out, contracts were issued, Mr. Speaker, because we had no other choice. It was either to park up these projects. Because for a time, we had been waiting on releases from the Ministry, and when the releases came in, we had to do the work.

Some of these projects were started and were being done in phases, and as

moneys were released, we had to continue the work. And that, I am certain, was the lot of several public bodies. So, to give the impression that all of these different state entities were engaging in the illegal award of contracts, as if there was some sort of corruption, that was not the case. And I am certain the Minister is aware of what the situation was, which precipitated the need for us to engage in that, Mr. Speaker. So, I just wanted to correct the record, again, as it pertains to that.

Mr. Speaker, much has been said about CEPEP and URP, so I do not want to belabour the point, lest somebody stand on a Standing Order about tedious repetition. So, I am not going to go there. But we were told, Mr. Speaker, that the Prime Minister was going to deliver her contribution this evening, in which she would have made a statement with respect to the future of CEPEP and URP workers. I think they were perhaps the most anxious on Monday to hear what their future would be. Because over the last couple months, there has been a lot of speculation that maybe CEPEP might come back in a different dispensation and so on, and these people are anxious because they need work, they have bills to pay, they have children to send to school, they need to maintain a roof over their heads, and they are tired of begging, Mr. Speaker. So, we too on this side were hoping to hear from the Prime Minister tonight.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, regardless of whenever the Prime Minister makes her statement, it is going to be a little too late for some people. Just last week on social media, there was a picture of a young father, a former CEPEP worker—again, out of work—having to resort to stealing three cans of Enfamil to feed his kids, Mr. Speaker. That was all over social media.

And I must say the supporters of Members opposite were very unkind when you read the comments in some of these posts about this; that if he knew he could

not support children, then he should have used contraceptives and all of this. Mr. Speaker, the man was taking care of his kids before. He was meeting his responsibilities. He lost his job as a result of this caring, benevolent Government, and like so many thousands of others like him, found himself in a situation where desperation set in, and he had to do that. Maybe he just got tired of begging and getting noes, Mr. Speaker. But that is just one.

Mr. Speaker, I refer to a *Newsday* article dated Friday the 22nd of August, 2025:

“Job loss worried ex-forestry worker, says his widow

The widow of Richard Cooper, the 51-year-old father of three who was found unresponsive at his home on August 19 in San Fernando, says that although she is mourning, she hopes to figure something out soon to provide for her children’s welfare.

The grieving mother of two, from Cane Street in San Fernando, acknowledged the hardship caused by the government job cuts nationwide, saying the uncertainty continues to weigh heavily on affected families.

‘I will figure something out because I have my children to take care of. Eventually, I will find a job because I love to work’...

She stressed that it was vital for them to have a proper education.

The widow confirmed that Cooper’s autopsy is expected to be done...

The widow, 45, who asked not to be named, said she was deliberately avoiding the news and social media since Cooper’s passing.

‘I do not want to see comments from people who do not know what they are speaking about...’

Although she had not seen the statement issued by Opposition Leader Penelope Beckles on the death, she agreed with sentiments that linked the

emotional toll of job loss to mental strain and feelings of hopelessness.”

Mr. Speaker, this gentleman took his life because he was fired from the National Reforestation Programme. He could not find another job because he is competing with tens of thousands of others. And the weight of job loss and not being able to support his family, something that he was able to do, at least up until the 28th of April, Mr. Speaker, was just too much for him to bear and he took his own life.

So, it does not matter what statement the Prime Minister makes on what the future of these programmes are, Mr. Speaker, this woman’s husband is not going to come back, these children’s father is not going to come back, and they have to go on without him, unfortunately, Mr. Speaker. But I suppose for some people in the Chamber, he is collateral damage.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: Mr. Speaker, I move to “Wage Negotiations and Job Evaluation Exercise”, page 27:

“After nine long years of stagnation, we are committed to finally bringing all parties back to the bargaining table to address this long-overdue injustice.

On the completion of the bargaining process, we will work with Republic, First Citizens Bank and the National Insurance Board to find a comprehensive solution to discharge this national obligation.”

So, Mr. Speaker, before, the Member for La Brea, in his contribution, was telling us, “Well, all yuh want to know where de money” and “Yuh cyah find de money before yuh do de the negotiations,” and so on.

[MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

But, Mr. Speaker, I noticed they mentioned they would be working with the National Insurance Board. Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The National Insurance Board, along with First Citizens and Republic Bank,

I assume to find the funding to satisfy that commitment. Madam Deputy Speaker, are they talking about the same National Insurance Board referenced in this document that is almost broken, that has no money, that is on the brink of insolvency, and in a few years may not be able to pay pensions, but they are going to use the funds of that same National Insurance Board to pay back pay to public servants and to facilitate the recurrent expenditure of the new salaries? “That maths eh maths in”, Madam Deputy Speaker. So, I look forward to hearing more about that.

Meanwhile, the same Republic and First Citizens Bank are now saddled with a surcharge as well on their assets. So, a chunk of money—they are now faced with an additional sum of money—a large sum, as a matter of fact, that they will now have to pay to the State, but the State is going to be leaning on them to find the financing to satisfy their election promise of 10 per cent. We wait to see how that pans out.

“Group Health Plan”:

“I would like to share some additional policy decisions that this Government will undertake to improve the lives of all public servants, teachers and Central Government daily-rated workers.

Upon assuming office, I must say that I was shocked to learn that our retirees in these groups are removed from the UNIMED Group Health Plan precisely when medical issues are more likely to arise.

The need for Health Insurance becomes more critical.

Accordingly, I have instructed that an appropriate Request for Proposal be prepared and issued to seek proposals from the market for an option that allows our retirees and their families to retain membership in the public sector health plan.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to tell the Minister that as an insurance industry practitioner—I am also the President of the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Insurance and Financial Advisors, so I am well familiar with this plan. Because I have a number of clients who are involved in this plan who, from time to time, would come to me to tell me about the challenges that this plan presents, that some of them are still trying to get reimbursement claims from since 2023. A lot of them. We would have seen just five months ago, it was reported that this plan is some \$80 million in deficit, and so, the Minister wants to put a further burden on this plan to provide health care. A wonderful initiative. But clearly, it has not been thought out. While they are going to invite proposals, I want to tell them that the insurance industry is already treating with that issue.

Because a lot of persons, because of the challenges that they are experiencing with this UNIMED plan, have gone on to purchase their own personal insurance plans. And you have a lot of credit unions that are now also the distributors of health plans for several different insurance companies' group health plans, which these retirees are now subscribed to, and they are getting their reimbursements in time and they do not have to wait two and three years to be able to do so.

I just wanted to let the Minister know that, that it is being dealt with. So whatever proposals he may seek, “doh put these senior citizens through dat nah, please”.

“Fiscal and Other Measures”:

“1. Levy on Assets of Commercial Banks and Insurance Companies Operating in Trinidad and Tobago.

Commercial banks and insurance companies, due to their large size, profitability and capitalisation, have reported sustained earnings, high

liquidity ratios and strong asset based growth. Conservative lending practices and favourable monetary conditions have driven these outcomes.

Despite this, the average citizen continues to be subjected to unreasonably high fees and near-zero returns on their savings and investments.”

“Against this backdrop, I proposed to introduce an Asset Levy of 0.25 per cent, which is to be charged against the assets of the commercial banks and insurance companies operating in Trinidad and Tobago.”

A tax by any other name is still a tax.

9.25 p.m.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in my capacity as the President of the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Insurance and Financial Advisors, last Wednesday—Wednesday gone—I was fortunate to have been invited to a seminar at the Hyatt for managers and the leadership of the insurance industry. I was also fortunate to be sitting at a table with some of the heads of the leading insurance companies in this country and the discussion came up about this very issue. And, I could tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, based on what was said, the preliminary numbers have been crunched, the conversation is being had and the increases are coming. It is just a matter of how much and when. So the policy fees will be going up.

So, despite the fact that the Minister is pleading with these entities to share the burden and encouraging the citizens to push back, Madam Deputy Speaker, they are not prepared to do that. The increases are coming, because at the end of the day, these companies have an obligation to their shareholders. Alright. Their shareholders are not just those who purchase their shares, but to their customers and clients as well, who are participating policies that depend on these companies making profits to build their cash value. So that when the Government seeks to

pick the pocket of these entities, Madam Deputy Speaker, you are, in fact, robbing the citizens as well.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Republic Bank has an asset base of \$127 billion. In the space of one year, it went from 118 to 127, Madam Deputy Speaker. I see the conservative figure posted here by the Minister that they expect that this is going to generate \$575 million annually. Madam, Deputy Speaker, the assets of these companies grow every year, and if you are going to charge them a quarter percent on assets that grow every year, the figure could never be \$575 million annually. Madam Deputy Speaker, it is going to grow. Republic Bank alone at \$127 billion in assets, that works out to \$317.5 million, in one year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Republic Bank is one of the companies that is in the NIF, and the shares that were held by the Government that are pledged to the NIF, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Member: Not NIB?

Mr. D. Romain:—and NIB—earns some of that profit. So that when the Government chooses to implement this and you pick the pocket of the bank, Republic Bank, and you take \$317 million out of their profits, you are robbing the shareholders of NIF because that money would have gone to them or a portion of it. So these persons who would have invested their money, some of them senior citizens who are looking to get additional income to support their retirement expenses, Madam Deputy Speaker, now find themselves in this situation. Never envisaged when they chose to invest their money, despite the fact that they were told it is a Ponzi scheme and “doh” invest, they chose to disregard that advice, and today they are happy, for the last seven years. Every year they have been receiving their dividends twice per year.

But the Government, the Minister, sought to paint a picture as if these banks are predatory and harsh and they do not give back. Madam Deputy Speaker, Republic Bank, again, has a programme called Youth Link—I was a beneficiary, a product of that—where they take school leavers. It is a six-month apprenticeship programme where you get paid a stipend every week, Madam Deputy Speaker, and you get trained in all different facets of banking, and at the end you have a graduation. As a matter of fact, that programme also has a component where you are required to start and manage a small business. And then, they have a graduation ceremony at the end, and the like. Madam Deputy Speaker, you are quite likely to get employed by the bank at the end of that exercise. I was, and I remained with the bank for about seven years.

Republic Bank has a programme called the Power to Make a Difference, where for the last 20 years they invested over \$300 million in community development. My alma mater, and that of the Member for Caroni East, St. Mary's College, is the beneficiary of that programme, where they would have purchased a bus to be able to transport students to different sporting events, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Republic Bank supports Exodus steel band. At a time when NGC just pulled sponsorship from three bands, Republic Bank maintains sponsorship of Exodus, and probably, I am sure, contributes to others as well. First Citizens Bank sponsors the Sports Foundation Awards every year, among other things. So the banks are giving back. They are engaging in corporate social responsibility. So to give the impression that the banks are wicked and predatory and they deserve this, Madam Deputy Speaker, is completely and totally unfair and disingenuous on the part of the Government. It is a convenient excuse for them to pick the pockets of the banks as well, and they are going to pass on the cost as well, Madam Deputy

Speaker. So you are going to see it in increased banking fees, possibly, increased loan rates. Even though I saw the Central Bank Governor recently announced that he intends to increase deposit rates, but as a former banker and a former Minister of Finance, he ought to know how that works, or at least we would hope he does. Right. Because the money has to come from somewhere to pay these additional deposit rates, and more than likely, it is going to come from higher loan rates.

The landlord business surcharge; interesting one. Again, a tax by any other name is still a tax. I got a call yesterday morning from an 87-year-old woman from Tobago. I will not call her name because my colleagues opposite might probably know her, and she asked me not to mention her name. Madam Deputy Speaker, 87 years old and she still drives. She made it a point to tell me that and her car uses super. Right.

Under the PNM's property tax regime, she has a property that she currently rents, and that property was assessed as having an annual rental value of \$42,000, Madam Deputy Speaker. Under the PNM's property tax regime, the calculation is 42,000 minus 10 per cent, you know, for any moneys that you would have spent to maintain and upgrade the property. Because, the Government then recognized that, because some of the money from that income that you are going to earn will be put into that, so we give you back something for that. So, that is 42,000 minus 10 per cent, Madam Deputy Speaker, and then you apply the 2 per cent charge. Her property tax was \$756 for the year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, under what the Government now proposes her property tax, or, sorry, her surcharge—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. D. Romain:—is \$1,050 and she has to pay the \$2,500 to register. So in the first year, she is going to pay over \$3,500, Madam Deputy Speaker. So what she is

paying in one year under them, it would have taken her five years to pay that under the PNM's—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain:—draconian, harsh, wicked, oppressive property tax.

I encourage every other landlord, do the math. Not that difficult. You know how much you paid in property tax last year. Do the math. It is very simple. There is no deduction, there is no consideration for what you would spend out of what you receive to improve the property for the year. So it is very simple. Just find 3 ½ per cent of what you would have gotten for the year and compare it against what you would have paid under the People's National Movement, and you will see who really cares about the people, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Electricity surcharge. Again, a tax by any other name is still a tax, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Manning: More taxes.

Mr. D. Romain: Yes, more taxes. The effect of that, well, it is being discussed here today, Madam Deputy Speaker, we know prices are going to go up. Because the landlord who owns the mall, who now has to pay the surcharge, the landlord who now has to pay this increased electricity rate, the landlord who now has to pay increased NIS contributions, the two-thirds, because of that increase as well, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is just too much for one to bear. Despite the fact that they are making a lot of money, they are in the business to make money. Business owners spend their days trying to figure out how to make more money for their benefit, not how to make more money to pay the Government. And therefore, if the Government's policies impacts their ability to earn more, well, you simply pass it on to your tenants.

We have walked through the mall, I think all of us have, and you see these little kiosks where they sell these accessories for cell phones, and I often wonder how are these people making money? Because every time I pass there, Madam Deputy Speaker, I never see anybody there. If they make two, three sales for the day, they are probably happy, just enough to cover the rent and maybe pay some of their personal expenses. Now they are facing the possibility, the real possibility, of their rent going up. So, I would not be surprised if in a month or so, I walk through the mall and I see some of these kiosks no longer there or they are empty. But that is the policy of the loving, caring, benevolent, generous government.

Well, the increase in custom duties and luxury cars. So I will bypass that. Careless driving, penalties on offences. Madam Deputy Speaker, this administration, when they were on this side, were very critical of the demerit points system. It was wicked and oppressive. They felt that everything the last administration did was wicked and oppressive. But I point to the issue of careless driving and my colleague for Port of Spain South would have raised the issue. How do you define careless driving?

Quite recently, Madam Deputy Speaker, we saw where the Government would have recognized and rewarded five police officers for issuing close to 5,000 tickets; 5,000 fixed penalty notices for various traffic offences amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars. What message did that send to the police service? There is benefit in writing tickets and the more you write, you could get rewarded. Madam Deputy Speaker, \$15,000 for careless driving. So, when police officers issue tickets and it is left at their discretion to determine what careless driving is, it is going to have a lot of people, poor people, struggling people, Madam Deputy Speaker, some of them who no longer have their drivers' licences, but 15,000.

Driving or being in charge of a vehicle while blood alcohol levels exceed the prescribed limit. Madam Deputy Speaker, you know what is interesting about this one? The Prime Minister would have indicated that their issue with the demerit points system was that it was unfair because you were charging the people a fine and issuing them demerit points. But if memory serves me correctly, driving with high blood alcohol levels, that is one of the six charges that they left the demerit points system on. So if you are now charging people \$15,000 and demerit points does that not defeat what the Prime Minister was saying, the reason why they were against the demerit points system?

Hon. Member: Double jeopardy.

Mr. D. Romain: Double jeopardy, the same thing they were complaining about. So you remove the demerit point system—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member—

Mr. D. Romain: Yes.

Madam Deputy Speaker:—you have two more minutes of regular time. Would you like—

Mr. D. Romain: I will avail myself of the extra.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Okay.

Mr. D. Romain:—Madam Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: But I would not be so uncharitable as to call it hypocrisy. White jacket, black jacket, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The subsidy on liquefied petroleum gas, Madam Deputy Speaker. You decreased the subsidy on the 100 pound cylinders and you left the 20 pound the same and then you say when UNC wins, households wins. How? Because you did

not change PNM policy? Well, okay, we could buy that. But I fail to understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, how, really—but big change.

Again, the entities that most likely would use the 100 pound cylinders are the restaurants, so likely their prices are going to go up as well. But as the Minister of Planning says: If you go to a restaurant and they increased their prices, go home and cook. Make sure you have food in your house. Alright.

Hon. Member: After they send you home.

Mr. D. Romain: Yes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I did not realize my time was running so. I wanted to touch on something, again, coming back to the issue of the settlement of the wage negotiations, in particular, the 10 per cent and the big, you know, the big song and dance that the Government is making about the 1 per cent reduction in the price of “super” and the impact that is having. Right? Sorry. Yes, you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to say to the public servants who may soon be receiving their back pay for their 10 per cent because I heard the President of the Public Services saying that she intends to wrap up negotiations and so on, that her Members could have the money in their account by Christmas.

We are in the middle of October, so we are looking at about just over a month, maybe two months, for the Minister to go and find the money because Ms. Thomas “not” playing. She wants her money and she is ready to settle. But when they get their back pay, Madam Deputy Speaker, and when they get their new salaries, I just want to remind such persons, particularly, those who earn less than \$7,500 a month, that you will be paying less income tax on your back pay, thanks to the Member for Diego Martin Northeast.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: You will be paying less income tax on your new salaries, thanks to the Member for Diego Martin Northeast.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

9.40 pm

Because you see, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Member for Diego Martin North/East, in his capacity as Minister of Finance, increased the personal allowance by 20 per cent of what he met it at, in 2015, from 60,000 to 72,000, and then he realized that was not enough, so he came back and he increased it a second time by another 20 per cent and they did not riot, so he increased it by a third time, by a further 10 per cent. So, 50 per cent, over eight years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: You know what that means, Madam Deputy Speaker? That the Member for Diego Martin North/East and the former PNM administration would have provided income tax relief to hundreds of thousands of citizens in this country. Many of them no longer paying income tax at all and many of them paying significantly less, and how did he do that, Madam Deputy Speaker, by increasing the personal allowance over and over, and over, and over, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: But they would not give him credit for that.

Hon. Member: At all.

Mr. D. Romain: Because I am pretty sure the tax savings that many citizens in both the public and the private sector, benefiting from that initiative, is plenty more than they are benefiting from the reduction in the cost of super, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I now turn to the issue of the amendment to the NIB rates, Madam Deputy Speaker. A laudable initiative. As I said, I have no problem in acknowledging a few good things that the Government has done. Unfortunately, the Minister was very uncharitable, Madam Deputy Speaker, when he spoke about this issue and gave the impression—in fact, he said that the PNM was aware of this issue since 2020 and they did nothing about it. They kicked the can down the road and sat on their hands, when nothing could be further from the truth, because evidence would show, Madam Deputy Speaker, that consultations were undertaken, which was one of the requirements and stipulations recommended in the ninth actuarial report, Madam Deputy Speaker. Right. Because we needed to involve the people and the Prime Minister, then the Leader of the Opposition, also agreed with that.

But, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is interesting I came up across an article dated 29th of April, 2022:

“Tancoo: “Unwise to raise the retirement age
Increasing the...”—minimum—“age from 60 to 65 will lead to an increase
in national insurance payments, claims Oropouche West MP Davendranath
Tancoo.”

Hon. Members: Wow.

Mr. D. Romain: Yes. Tancoo, noted that the NIB—

“He said Imbert had said the National Insurance Board (NIB) was not in
crisis because it had enough money to last 22 years before being exhausted
at its present rate.”

Mr. Birchwood: That is what he said?

Mr. D. Romain: Yes.

“Speaking at the...(UNC) virtual meeting...Tancoo criticised Finance Minister...Imbert for poor economic management of the country, resulting in the suffering of the people.

He said people will be denied the opportunity to retire at 60 and simultaneously being asked to pay more in a time with an increased cost of living.”

Hon. Member: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Romain: Yes. “Mm-hmm.”

“He said that the Government’s answer to building a greater National Insurance Fund, from which to pay benefits to citizens contributing to it, is to deny them access to their funds.”

Hon. Member: [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Romain: No rocket science. Yes.

“Tancoo said it takes no genius to realise that the way to increase the value of contributions is not to penalise workers, but to increase the number of workers in permanent, well-paid jobs...raising the number of employers contributing to the system.

‘That is not rocket science, that is common sense. It is similarly common sense that what the Government needs do then is to create the environment for greater confidence in the economy, so that investors can come in and create jobs,’...”

Mr. de Nobriga: Always want some somebody else to do it.

Mr. D. Romain: Yes. It is unwise to raise the retirement age, but then—

Mr. de Nobriga: But then, let us do it.

Mr. D. Romain: Let us do it. Yeah. “Mm-hmm”, typical, Madam Deputy Speaker. But what this really is—and I understand why it needs to be done,

Madam Deputy Speaker, but more needs to be done. Again, as somebody who is a practitioner in the insurance industry, we advise clients everyday, “matters of retirement planning”.

In fact we have an acronym that we call “BIGCRIMES”. If you want to engage in retirement planning, you need to engage in BIGCRIMES. What is “BIGCRIMES”? Banks, insurance, government, credit union, real estate, rental property—Madam Deputy Speaker, income funds, mutual funds, equities, small business, side hustle. So, we talk to people about this and we tell them do not depend on the NIS alone.

But what the Government is doing here, Madam Deputy Speaker, is essentially, they have successfully been able to reduce the NIS pension from \$3,000 to \$2,500. But, as I said, Madam Deputy Speaker, more needs to be done, because all you with simply do, with this one measure, is to give a lifeline to the fund, a life jacket. But the time has come, Madam Deputy Speaker, for us to look at relaxing the legislation or amending the legislation as it pertains to constraints for investing, because as it currently stands, the investment fund of the National Insurance Board could only invest in certain things—a certain amount in certain things. And perhaps the Government needs to consider relaxing those constraints to allow the NIB fund to able to adopt an investment model similar to that of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, which is able to take advantage, Madam Deputy Speaker, of the performance of international equities.

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Romain: No US?

Hon. Members: Nope.

Mr. D. Romain: “Ah”, well, there is that. There is that too. But, Madam Deputy Speaker, what is quite likely to happen, it would be foolhardy for anybody to wait

until they are 65, in 10 years time when this thing becomes fully rolled out, it would be foolhardy for anybody to wait until 65 to take a pension of \$3,000. Why? Well, first of all, \$3,000 in 2025 is not \$3,000 in 2036. So, far less for \$2,500 in 2036. If you choose to wait until age 65 to get a pension of \$3,000 a month in that five-year period that you are waiting, you receive nothing and you forfeit \$162,000 in pension income, as opposed to, if you take the \$2,500 at age 60, all you would lose in that five-year period between ages 60 and 65, is \$30,000 and it is a no brainer.

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Romain: [*Laughter*] So, that is what is going to happen, Madam Deputy Speaker. Everybody is going to opt to take it at 60, and then what is the additional incentive—and I want to pose this question to the Minister, because right now, what obtains, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that, if you receive \$3,000—and perhaps the Member for Chaguanas East, can assist me with this one. If you receive \$3,000 from NIS and that is your only income, if you can qualify and you apply for the senior citizens grant, you can get the difference I think of up to \$2,500 to take you to the income ceiling of \$5,500, if you qualify.

So, then obviously people will think, well, if I take the \$2,500, then I could apply for the senior citizens grant and get \$3,000. So, I am still getting the \$5,500 anyway, which just shifts the burden of that additional \$500 from the NIS to the Consolidated Fund, which means the Government is now going to have to find money to fund that additional. So perhaps the Minister could tell us in his windup, if that is what is going to take place, if that is permissible, if you are going to increase the bracket in terms of the amount of money that a person could qualify for under the senior citizens grant, so that they do not lose. But as I—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Romain: Oh, Lord. My apologies for that. But we have discussed this, Madam Deputy Speaker, because clients have been calling me and asking me to explain. In fact, a lot of people were of the view that they had to wait until 65, they were not aware that the option presented itself that you could take it at ages 60, 61, 62. Madam Deputy Speaker, the one main benefit I see coming from this, is that persons who upon the attainment of age 60, who do not have the required number of contributions to qualify for a pension and would otherwise have qualified for a lump sum, they now have a five year lifeline in which they could continue to work, to be able to accumulate the necessary contributions, so that they could qualify for the pension at age 65. So they are the ones who are more likely, Madam Deputy Speaker, to avail themselves of that option to wait until age 65.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the period poverty intervention, again, excellent initiative on the part of the Government. I say that, Madam Deputy Speaker, because quite recently, again, another CEPEP worker would have visited me—former CEPEP worker and she would have been—

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member, your time has ended. I will allow you one minute to wrap up.

Mr. D. Romain: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, just one more thing, VAT on food items. I just wanted to indicate, Madam Deputy Speaker—a joke twice is never nice, the Government tried that before, it did not work, Madam Deputy Speaker, in 2012 or thereabouts they would have done that and I just want to refer Members to—I just want to refer Members, Madam to an article—

Mr. Hosein: You have 60 seconds.

Mr. D. Romain: Yeah, but you just took a few. “Ease meh up.” Yeah.

“VAT on Food Flops

Seven months after Government slashed Value Added Tax (VAT) on 7,000 food items, president of the Supermarket Association...Vernon Persad has admitted that the benefits consumers enjoyed from this initiative have since been eroded. Co-ordinator of...NGOs”—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member—

Mr. Romain:—“Hazel Brown...”—has—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member, your time has ended. I thank you for your contribution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for San Fernando West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Michael Dowlath): Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to congratulate you on making history today. On behalf of the Government, I congratulate you on being the first hijab-wearing woman to sit in the Speaker’s chair in this honourable House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: As I begin my contribution, I want to extend warm congratulations to hon. Minister of Finance, on the outstanding presentation of his maiden national budget, a budget built on responsibility, restoration and renewal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: I also salute our hon. Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, whose visionary leadership and unwavering commitment to integrity inclusion and innovation, continue to guide this nation towards a brighter future.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: This budget, Madam Deputy Speaker, signals a new era of delivery. For too long our children and teachers were forced to operate within a

system weakened by neglect. Under this Government, that neglect has ended, we are restoring what was broken, rebuilding what was abandoned, and renewing confidence in public education.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: I heard previously that two well-educated, experienced gentlemen were sent to do the work of one woman, but that was because of the experience of our hon. Prime Minister—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath:—when she saw the mess that was left at the Ministry of Education.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: I also want to recognize the people of San Fernando West, starting from Sunset Cove to Marabella West. I extend my heartfelt thanks for your steadfast support and confidence, your trust in me as your representative, for giving me the opportunity to stand here today, not only as your Member of Parliament, but also as Minister of Education, to ensure the priorities of our schools, teachers and families are reflected in this national budget. While every community across Trinidad and Tobago would benefit from this transformation underway, it is your continued faith that strengthens my resolve to deliver on behalf of all of us.

But tonight, I want to say finally, education has woken up in this country from nine and a half years of slumber.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, when we came into office, we met an education system weakened by years of neglect, mismanagement and misplaced priorities. What is the difference between the last administration and

this one? They neglected, we repaired, they ignored, we acted, they left decay, we restored readiness.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: And you know the crux of the matter is very simple, they cannot accept that every single primary and secondary school reopened on time, repaired and ready.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

9.55 p.m.

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: The Opposition has, once again, tried to mislead the national community by suggesting that the Ministry of Education extended the school vacation because of poor planning. The truth is the complete opposite. I might even say, Madam Deputy Speaker, in my 35 years of experience as a practising educator, I think I have a reasonably good idea of how the school year runs. When we came in, we found that the calendar was unbalanced. Disrupted curriculum delivery would have forced us to add an extra week in the next academic year just to maintain the required 39 instructional weeks. It was 15 weeks for the first term, 12 for the second, and 12 for the third term. So, this Government corrected that mistake. We introduced a balance of 14 weeks for the first term, and 12 and 13 for the third term to ensure fairness in curriculum coverage, teacher workload and student preparation.

So that additional week during the July/August vacation was not a delay. It was to support academic balance and mental and emotional balance for our students and teachers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: But I want to talk a little bit about the July/August vacation repair programme. For the first time in the history, 279 major repair

projects across primary and secondary schools were completed during—
[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Parallel to that, 179 emergency repairs were done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: First time in the history, a total of 458 projects were completed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: In 2024, it was 159; in 2023, it was 59.

Hon. Member: “Nah”.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: These works addressed leaking roofs, rewiring, sanitation, classroom restoration, ensuring that when September arrived, every primary and secondary school was opened on time.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Opposition Leader referred to a shortage of furniture but conveniently ignored the real cause. For nine and a half years under their administration, not a single structured furniture procurement programme was implemented—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath:—not one, Madam Deputy Speaker. They left our schools in a state of neglect, without desks, teachers without proper classrooms. Madam Deputy Speaker, we acted immediately, launching emergency procurement to meet the urgent needs of our schools, while parallel to that, a large national furniture procurement exercise was already in progress with the MTS. Our Government does not make excuses, we deliver results.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, the Opposition talks about a book grant they themselves killed.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: They had it in their budget but made no allocation whatever; no allocation at all, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It was our hon. Prime Minister and this Government that stepped in during the 2025 mid-year review and provided 20,000 book—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath:—and supply grants to children in need, and that is the truth. While they talk, we act.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: While they neglected, we delivered. And now we are going even further, introducing free AI textbooks in mathematics and language arts to reduce costs for parents and modernizing learning for every child.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, free AI books. They left empty promises, we are building an education revolution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, I heard about the vacation remedial programme. The Opposition claims this Government stopped their remedial programme. This is false.

What they left behind was not a coherent programme at all. It was an overpriced, poorly managed patchwork called: Re-engaging for Success. It was riddled with outstanding bills, no proper monitoring and no measurable results. The report they themselves commissioned laid it bare, and these are the findings:

Over \$3.5 million in unpaid stipends to teachers, another \$1.3 million owed for snacks, a further \$10.5 million in pending costs, and still no verifiable impact data, no evaluation reports, and no clear project objectives.

Hon. Member: Shame.

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: There are four missing reports: One from Student Support Services Division; for that project from guidance counsellors, the second one; the third from school social workers; and the fourth from restorative practice facilitators.

There was no framework for tracking whether the thousands of students reached improved levels in literacy or numeracy. Madam Deputy Speaker, they spent millions, left the Treasury in arrears, and delivered no monitoring, no accountability and no outcomes. That is not remediation, that is mismanagement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: By contrast, this Government has taken decisive, data-driven action. We have replaced that broken model with the Priority Schools Project, a system built on evidence, structure and sustainability. This includes 56 secondary schools and 187 primary schools, which have now been identified and targeted for intensive support based on academic attendance and behavioural indicators.

The programme integrates literacy and numeracy recovery, structured student support, teacher training, parental engagement and school leadership development, all monitored with clear key performance indicators. Madam Deputy Speaker, even the staff previously hired under the so-called “remedial initiative” have been redeployed into these schools, now working under clear supervision and measurable objectives.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Opposition’s remedial programme was an

expensive illusion, over a year of bills, no accountability, no results. This Government has replaced waste with a result-oriented transformation agenda, ensuring every cent spent reaches the classroom and every intervention produces measurable change. As the hon. Prime Minister has said, “We met a system broken by neglect. We are fixing it with action, not excuses.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, accountability is not a slogan for this Government, it is a standard. At the Ministry of Education, we have developed a system of bi-weekly reporting to track major initiatives. There are three pillars to the priorities for our 2025 to 2030 strategic plan: The first is—the child is first, the second is parent empowerment, and the third is system strong. These three pillars drive the Ministry’s vision, mission, and every strategic action we must take to transform education in Trinidad and Tobago.

Let us focus first on the children. Every child must be seen, supported and successful. That is why we have prioritized early screening and intervention for children, ages four to six; strengthened literacy and numeracy; and advanced digital readiness across all schools, ensuring every learner has the tools to thrive in a modern world.

The second focus, we are not treating parents as bystanders. They are treated as daily partners and so, we are developing a national parental training and support programme and a parent portal. We will be equipping families with the skills and resources to guide learning and discipline at home. Madam Deputy Speaker, for the fiscal year 2026, the Ministry of Education’s allocation is approximately \$5.466 billion, comprising of Recurrent, \$5.08 billion; Development Programme, Part A, \$186.2 million; PSIP/IDF, Part B, \$199.75 million. These resources are now driven by our three areas of focus: Children, parents and the system.

Recurrent Expenditure secures classroom delivery and leadership. The Development Programme keeps continuity with focus, early year upgrades and infrastructure, including the parent portal. The PSIP/IDF concentrates capital where it unlocks learning fastest, school readiness and restarts, connectivity and classroom Wi-Fi, AI-enabled devices with accessibility, ECCE, special education upgrades, and TVET labs.

So, let us consider, Madam Deputy Speaker, our focus on students. Our first pillar: Safe schools and discipline. Madam Deputy Speaker, between 2022 and June 2025, schools recorded over 22,000 suspensions, including approximately 3,700 fights, and this is what we found. This is what we met. Madam Deputy Speaker, 458 assaults involving weapons, 879 cases of sexual misconduct. Madam Deputy Speaker, policies existed, but implementation was inconsistent and many times, non-existent. The Ministry of Education, at that point, seemed to be suffering from learned blindness, probably because the people did not riot yet.

What we did, Madam Deputy Speaker, we immediately set about conducting a comprehensive review of the National School Code of Conduct. We have embedded a clear zero-tolerance policy for serious infractions, paired with restorative parts for integration. This exercise is now complete and roll-out is scheduled to begin shortly. Further, Madam Deputy Speaker, in collaboration with the Ministry of National Security, the school-oriented police officer initiative is operational—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath:—two stationed officers at 50 high-risk secondary schools, with routine support to 10 primary and 10 additional secondary schools. National sensitization began in September 2025. We have also standardized termly incidents reporting, so discipline data now feeds Student Support Services Division for

earlier targeted intervention. Madam Deputy Speaker, we are fixing it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, another initiative targeting our children directly is universal screening, founded on the principle that when students are assessed early, we are in a better position to address any challenges to their learning. What we found were many learning challenges with our learners or students—vision, hearing, speech, language, growth, developmental—and when these are detected too late, they show up as weak, literacy, numeracy, behavioural concerns and poor school attendance.

What are we doing about this? Universal screening of ages four to six is integrated across the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services to create one pathway, from screening to referrals to support. It is a multi-tiered system. And so, Student Support and Ministry of Health referrals lead to a better diagnosis. In cases where screening identify students who require in-class assistance, referrals will trigger review for the student aid programme.

10.10 p.m.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the prioritized needs include, autism, ADHD and neurodevelopmental challenges, speech, language and specific learning disorders, hearing and vision impairment. Where approved, student aides will be arranged. Student aides will be trained to support classroom routines and behavioural plans. Madam Deputy Speaker, we are fixing it. When UNC wins, everybody wins. Every child wins, whatever their disabilities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Another area of focus on our children is Early Childhood Care and Education. What we met were expired contracts, manual registration,

gaps in child developmental data and centres awaiting repairs or expansion. What we did was we renewed the ECCE contracts for teachers, launched a national online registration portal, digitized child development assessment, rolled out parent transition programmes and coordinated with the Ministry of Health on wellness screening. Fixing it with actions not excuses.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, we have looked at school nutrition and the health of all our students and learners. Another area of focus is school nutrition and healthy learners. We believe that healthy children learn better. We are strengthening what works, and fixing what does not. What we met; the 2017 nutrition standards that included the ban on sugary sweetened beverages. That worked in some schools. What are we doing? We are not replacing, but we are building on the 2017 standards. We are keeping core protections, we are clarifying practical rules on portion sizes, ingredients like sodium and fats in pre-prepared packaged foods, providing a vendor and school tool kit, and we are aligning all these standards with the school feeding programme. We are linking health with physical education and science so that our learners will make better choices. We are working on a water first campaign, and we are linking all of our nutritional standards as we include school gardens and farm-to-school options. Madam Deputy Speaker, we are fixing it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am turning now to that hot topic of laptops in school, connectivity, AI, and digital skills. What have we met? The previous administration ended the secondary school laptop programme, widening the digital divide at the point of entry into secondary schools. Connectivity and Wi-Fi performance, we found were unsatisfactory. We did an audit of 130

secondary schools and we found speeds of 172 megabytes per second, download, 71 megabytes per second, upload. Madam Deputy Speaker, 121 of the schools were below our target that we set of 500 download and 250 megabytes per second, upload.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what we met simply could not facilitate the roll out of the laptop programme as we saw it. So what have we done? We have embarked on delivery for 130 schools an upgrade to 500 download, 250 megabytes per second, Internet broadband. And in addition, we have added 454 primary schools to this programme. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, we are ensuring that we are providing the right conditions to facilitate the roll out of these 18,000 laptops by the end of this term.

In addition, we have looked at accessibility for special needs students, and these include screen readers, magnifier zoom, dictation voice access, high contrast, and large cursor modes. Where assessed, students will receive assistive kits, for example bone conduction headsets, portable speakers, braille display, book reader, note-taker, and high-contrast large print keyboards. This is to ensure equitable access to digital learning. Madam Deputy Speaker, we are delivering results, not just promises.

As we continue, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want us to look at the implementation of AI and digital skills programmes in our schools. We are laying a strong digital foundation. AI literacy and respect for academic integrity, responsible digital citizenship, creative computing and basic data skills will be taught, all of these guided by teachers and not driven by machines. To date, 12,771 educators have been trained in AI-ready tools.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we move on to the pillar of parents; parental involvement. We see parents as partners. We have initiated a national parental

training and support programme, turning parents into partners. We are reviewing existing programmes, and we are developing a programme to train our parents to work with their children to ensure that they can achieve their academic success. In addition, we are developing a digital Parent Portal. When we say we are focusing on the parents, we are giving families the tools to stay informed. When we assumed office, parents faced a maze of scattered information on registration, placement, attendance, behaviour, support services and learning resources. There was no single, reliable source to turn to. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, we got to work, and we are designing that national Parent Portal to unify access to all information for our parents.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, when we assumed office, we found a leadership crisis. Acting arrangements had become the norm, vacancies piled up, school supervision was weakened, discipline slipped, and curriculum leadership faltered. Let me give you some examples. At the secondary level, there were vacancies for 83 principals out of 125, 59 vice-principals out of 125, vacancies for 264 heads of department, and 219 deans. At the primary school level, there were vacancies for 223 principals out of 451, 62 vice-principals out of 110, 118 heads of department out of 158, 253 senior teachers out of 331, and 2,041 teacher vacancies out of 7,206. I did not know so many people were acting in the system. Like I said last time, we do not know if they were from Hollywood or Bollywood.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Even in our government-assisted schools, there were 122 teacher vacancies. Madam Deputy Speaker, we did not come to make excuses; we came to fix it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: We began working closely with the Teaching Service Commission to prioritize administrative appointments and to reduce long-standing delays. We are strengthening our human resource renewal strategy to focus on workforce planning, vacancy tracking and leadership development. To stabilize technical/vocational education in our secondary schools, we created 165 contract TVET teacher positions, which are now deployed across secondary schools in the areas of electrical, mechanical, hospitality, agriculture, and building technology.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, this Government believes leadership matters. That is why we are working on filling approximately 455 primary and 414 secondary posts. We found that leadership crisis and we are putting captains back on the bridge.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: When we focus on the education system, we focus on stability, accountability and excellence in every school.

As I conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to say that this Government is a government that plans. Promises made, promises kept.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: There are several other large initiatives that are being pursued by the Ministry of Education, and they include the reintroduction of the CAC, the Continuous Assessment Component of the SEA.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Secondly, the after-school study centres. Thirdly, the priority schools project. Fourthly, the Adopt-A-School Programme. Fifthly, reforming schools supervision for success. And, sixthly, developing a leadership

academy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I conclude, I want to thank the people of San Fernando West for their commitment and for their patience. I want to say that there are many initiatives in this budget that will benefit the daily lives of the people in San Fernando West. The removal of VAT from essential food items.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Infrastructure projects in San Fernando West, partnerships with the Ministry of Public Utilities, ensuring reliable electricity and water access for all residents. I want to thank the Minister of Health for his improvements at the San Fernando General Hospital—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath:—plans for the inclusion of the cath lab—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath:—and the infrastructural developments. I want to thank the Ministry of Culture and Community Development in partnering with us. I want to say that in San Fernando West, we are taking a holistic approach to developing health in the community, the educational objectives of our schools, infrastructure, and we are ensuring that no citizen is left behind in San Fernando West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

10.25 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: When the UNC wins, San Fernando West wins.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, this budget is more than numbers, it is a declaration that education is the cornerstone of national transformation. We met a broken system, we are fixing it with action, not excuses.

Promises made, promises kept.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. M. Dowlath: Madam Deputy Speaker, when the UNC wins, everybody wins. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Laventille East/Morvant.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Christian Birchwood (*Laventille East/Morvant*): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I rise today for the very first time in this honourable House to contribute to the debate on this Appropriation (Financial Year, 2026) Bill, 2025 tabled by the hon. Minister of Finance, Mr. Davendranath Tancoo. Madam Deputy Speaker, please permit me to begin by extending heartfelt congratulations to you on your elevation to the Chair—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood:—along with the Speaker of the House. Now, I know this is extremely late, better late than never, and I suspect that a lot of my colleagues would agree that the honeymoon has already passed, given the amount of exchanges we have had in this Chamber, very heated. But this moment is deeply personal to me, it marks my maiden contribution to this illustrious Chamber.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: It is also, more importantly, an opportunity to give a voice to the people who sent me here, the resilient, resourceful, and resolute residents of Laventille East/Morvant.

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: To them I say, thank you for the honour and the trust you

have placed in me. Your strength, your faith, and your unrelenting belief that better is possible, you continue to inspire me each and every single day.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I take my seat in this new parliamentary arrangement with the UNC, the United National Congress now at the helm of the Government and the PNM, the People's National Movement serving as the loyal Opposition, I am reminded that every budget debate must be more than an exchange of numbers. It must be at its core, a conversation about fairness, opportunity, and national purpose. And so today, I seek not to quarrel, but to clarify; not to condemn, but to contribute. I do not seek to score political points but to strengthen national understanding of what this Appropriation Bill means for the real people in real communities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: And lastly, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to send some special love to the people who have always given me support, my siblings, my beautiful wife and my precious children.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: She is always with me. Madam Deputy Speaker, every community in Trinidad and Tobago deserves a fair share. A fair share of investment, a fair share of opportunity, a fair share of dignity, and I would remind everyone in here that Laventille East/Morvant is no exception. We do not ask for favours or handouts, we ask for partnership, equity and recognition that the nation's prosperity must lift all citizens and not some first and others later. I just want to throw some words out there, justice, fairness and opportunity. These are—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. C. Birchwood:—nonpartisan goals. That is the objective here today. Madam

Deputy Speaker, I would like to start by saying that I carry a few principles as an engineer. I was trained not to bring any problems without solutions, so you may find that I exercise my training in this contribution, I cannot help that.

Now, the hon. Minister of Finance presented a budget framed around transformation and resilience. He cited projections for job recovery, entrepreneurship and digital inclusion. Now, these are laudable goals, but the reality on the ground in Laventille East/Morvant still tells a harder truth. Unemployment and under-employment remain chronic challenges, the issue is not only how many jobs are created but where they are created and for whom. Madam Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance, in his presentation, stated that Estimates over the past decade show a contraction of nearly 70,000 jobs, and labour force participation has fallen from roughly 62 per cent to below 55 per cent. Well, Madam Deputy Speaker, I believe we must measure the true impact of this Government and their employment initiatives against those numbers, and this is how we hold them accountable.

Where in this new budget are the targeted apprenticeship programmes and community job centres that connect young people from high-need districts directly to projects funded by the State? I call on the hon. Minister to ensure that as infrastructure and development programmes roll out across the north-west corridor, the labour comes from the surrounding communities. We want our welders from Morvant, our tradesmen from Mon Repos, we want our joiners from Cipriani Avenue, 1st Cassia, and 2nd Caledonia. We want our young graduates from Success Laventille Village.

My people on the ground, Madam Deputy Speaker, have already begun to report a lot of contrary. So without this deliberate linkage between public spending and local participation, these employment funds risks are becoming

distant line Items rather than engines of empowerment. And, Madam Deputy Speaker, as we move from the historic URP and CEPEP models toward to the newly announced employment fund, we must guard against bureaucracy and ensure fair access for single parent household, micro-entrepreneurs and youth start-ups.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: Madam Deputy Speaker, the people of Laventille East/Morvant, we are patient people, we know what it is to wait. We know what it is to wait for a road to be repaired, for a bridge to be secured, a drain to be cleared. Infrastructure is not supposed to be an abstract statistic, it must give dignity to those on the ground, it must. And like the Opposition Leader would have originally stated, where there is good legislation to be supported, we will do so and we may acknowledge a few from time to time. We acknowledge and appreciate the work completed in previous fiscal years, including projects like the Morvant to Maritime Roundabout upgrade, the Diego Martin Exchange, the Curepe Exchange, highway widening and creations all over the country, the hospitals built et al. All championed under the former Minister of Works and Transport and completed under the PNM Government.

So while we do acknowledge these jobs, there is always more to be done. There are secondary roads in 2nd Caledonia, Bottle Alley, Cassia 1, portions of Sawmill Avenue, 7th Avenue, 8th Avenue, some of them are in need of rehabilitation. So tonight, I am going to take the opportunity to call upon the Ministers and the current administration to prioritize these projects within the new Public Sector Investment Programmes. Furthermore, the 6th Avenue Malick Community Centre, we insist that this must be added to the list of your priority builds, among the 10 community centres mentioned in this year's budget.

Our young people need safe, well-equipped spaces to learn, perform and dream, much like many children in communities all across this beautiful country. Infrastructure, Madam Deputy Speaker, is not just concrete and steel, it is the confidence and safety, it is how a nation signals to its citizens that they matter. Madam Deputy Speaker, another issue that exists in my constituency, and a lot of constituencies, is the lack of pipe-borne water in sections of the community. Though we have seen steady and real progress in many pockets of various communities in Laventille East/Morvant, that is, under the leadership of former Minister Marvin Gonzales, there are still some families that spend hours tracking water trucks, or filling buckets, much like the Member for La Brea expressed he did while he was growing up. It is my opinion that that time should be given to education, work or even rest. We acknowledge that the hon. Minister spoke of WASA reform and digitization and we can admit that some of these measures may be necessary. Yet, technology is meaningless if the pipes themselves are non-functional or non-existent.

Pockets in Coconut Drive, Madam Deputy Speaker, 2nd Caledonia, Never Dirty, we are patiently waiting to see if the words spoken earlier this week by the hon. Minister remain on the *Hansard* for the rest of eternity or will it be brought to life. We are waiting and we are watching. In light of the reversal of the earlier WASA transformation plan that brought relief to many, this House deserves some clarity on the Government's short to medium-term strategies, and like I said earlier, you may see some shades of the engineer in me, we ask questions. Will there be replacement of aged mainlines in high-low zones? Will there be community storage tanks, or truck-borne water scheduled for the hard hit areas and is this Government prepared to consider additional desalination capacity to secure long-term water independence for the capital region? Are you all prepared?

10.40 p.m.

Madam Deputy Speaker, these are the immediate tangible realities of Laventille East/Morvant: Employment, infrastructure, water. They are not abstract policy issues. They are the daily tests of whether this budget truly serves the people.

In the next part of my contribution, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will turn to the national dimensions of this Appropriation Bill from ministerial accountability and the unemployment fund, to justice reform and environmental stewardship, all through the lens of equity and opportunity. Madam Deputy Speaker, having spoken to the practical realities of Laventille East/Morvant, I now turn to the broader policy and governance landscape that frames this year's budget.

Now, the 2026 Appropriation Bill, as presented by the Minister of Finance, sets out to chart a new course under a new administration. It speaks of fiscal discipline, targeted relief, digital reform and inclusive growth. Once again, these goals are laudable, yet, Madam Deputy Speaker, the measure of a budget is not in its vocabulary but it is in its credibility of execution. The public is not only listening to what the Government promises, they are watching how it intends to deliver, and I can guarantee you, Laventille East/Morvant is patiently waiting and they are looking.

I say all this because budgets, they rest on trust. Citizens must believe that resources they contribute, through taxation, will be managed with fairness, prudence and obviously, transparency. Our parliamentary democracy, much like the United Kingdom's, is built upon the doctrine of ministerial responsibility. Now, in the UK, this doctrine is codified and periodically reviewed under the Ministerial Code, grounded in seven principles of public life, selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Here in

Trinidad and Tobago, however, we have allowed this cornerstone of good governance to rest largely on political discretion. The UK recently empowered its independent adviser on ministerial standards to start enquiries without the Prime Minister's consent. Now, this simple reform enhanced public confidence and isolated the process from partisan interference.

By contrast, our own oversight architecture is still heavily dependent on the goodwill of the Executive. If the authority that appoints is also the authority that judges, the outcome will always invite a level of suspicion. I therefore urge the hon. Prime Minister and her Cabinet to consider establishing an independent ethics and standards commission, backed by statute, to investigate and report on breaches of ministerial conduct. Such a body would not weaken the Government, and if you believe it would weaken the Government, I beg you, look into the mirror. I, however, believe it will only strengthen our democracy. So, let me be clear, this is not an indictment on any single Minister. It is a call for institutional renewal, so that the future governments of whatever colour will face constant and credible scrutiny.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Minister has announced a \$310 million unemployment fund, intended to support displaced and underemployed citizens, following the alleged contraction of labour markets over the past decade; alleged, a safety net for those who fall between the seams of social welfare programmes. But once again, the public deserves clarity on its operational design. As I said earlier, we engineers like to ask questions: Who qualifies? Who is eligible, and how is eligibility determined? Will there be a means test that excludes the working poor? I have seen a lot of this in my constituency for the past five and a half months, and I can say that boldly. This is why we ask questions.

Hon. Member: "All yuh in power since '56, so—[Inaudible]"

Mr. C. Birchwood: Without transparent guidelines, application processes, criteria and oversight, once again, this fund risks becoming a headline without hardware. I also note that this fund follows the phasing out of the URP and CEPEP programmes. Those initiatives, whatever their flaws, they provided stability for thousands of households.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: All of these hard-working people have been referred to as “collateral damage and ghosts”.

Hon. Member: “Huh”.

Mr. C. Birchwood: Madam Deputy Speaker, they refer to them as “ghosts”, yet they see me daily at my office in need of aid. Madam Deputy Speaker, whenever this topic comes up, I get kind of touchy because it reminds me of an old cartoon. I am sure all of us know it, “Scooby-Doo”. Ironically enough, at the end of each episode, all of those ghosts were revealed to be real people; all, every episode, all of the time. I can say tonight, they are all real people, Madam Deputy Speaker. I see them at my office. Much like Malabar/Mausica would have mentioned, they come with real issues having faced a real problem.

The new fund must, therefore, be scalable, accessible and regionally fair to prevent communities, such as Laventille East/Morvant, from failing and falling behind. Perhaps the Minister could consider linking the unemployment fund to certified training opportunities, so that support is coupled with upskilling, rather than passive relief. That is if what this Government perceived it to be. That approach could convert temporary welfare into permanent empowerment. Like I said, we engineers come with problems but we also come with solutions. That is how we are trained. So, I ask the question again: Do you have the ability to do this? Are you even interested in doing this? Madam Deputy Speaker, I took the

time asking those questions, as these are the simple elements that directly correlate to the betterment of society, and that includes the reduction of crime.

Madam Deputy Speaker, now, fewer matters stirred the nation's conscience more than safety. The Government's stated intention to revisit the home invasion and self-defence Bill, popularly described as the "stand-your-ground" legislation, it demands sober—and I will say it again, it demands sober, evidence-based dialogue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: In a society where too many lives are lost to violent crime, the instinct to protect oneself and one's family is understandable and undeniable, but legislation must be balanced and not reactionary.

Our legal tradition inherited from English common law already recognizes the castle doctrine. This is the right to defend one's home using reasonable force. The question before for us is: How to modernize that principle for today's realities without encouraging vigilantism or unequal protection? A comprehensive approach should connect these legal reforms to the budgetary allocations for policing, youth-crime prevention and judicial backlog reduction. To legislate self-defence without funding prevention is to treat symptoms and not the disease.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: Madam Deputy Speaker, one life lost to violent crime is one too many. On matters of national security, there must be no party politics, only country first.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: Our young people are the ones that stand to suffer if we continue this route. I noticed the budget introduced the foundation-for-life programme, an initiative aimed at youth, skills and mentorship. Once again,

Madam Deputy Speaker, the intent is noble, but intent must be matched by scale and access. We ask questions. By now you get the gist of this. We engineers are built very, very different. How many placements are budgeted? What proportion is allocated to high-needs areas, such as Morvant and Caledonia? You see, without clarity, this programme risks being another pilot project, rather than a policy that brings real change. We must move beyond annual cycles of small grants and launch a national skills acceleration concept that unites the Ministries of Education; Trade, Investment and Tourism; and Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development, private sector partners and community organizations. Solutions. Let each apprenticeship and internship count towards recognized certification. Let the budget align for training and translate into careers and not just workshops.

Madam Deputy Speaker, now, if our young people are not suffering through violence and inequalities, they now suffer on our nation's roads. Road safety has become a public health issue all of a sudden. The planned activation of the Demerit Points System is a welcomed step towards accountability, but its current design leans heavily on punishment, rather than prevention. Under our scheme, accumulation of 10 to 14 points within three years triggered a six-month suspension; 14 to 20 points leads to a one-year suspension. Internationally, many districts combine such penalties with rehabilitation options: Mandatory defensive driving, drivers' psychology courses that allow for point reduction was the theme of the offering today. Recommendations, questions, solutions.

I therefore recommend to the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, explore partnerships with accredited training schools and insurance providers to subsidize these courses. The goal must be behavioural change and not just revenue collection. There has been upwards of 55 road-related deaths, Madam Deputy

Speaker, immediately after the Prime Minister insinuated that there will be a scrapping of the Demerit Points System.

10.55 p.m.

There has been no cry for the driver's safety thus far, just new fines. Hopefully, the Government would pay close attention to road safety, and advise many of their Members to stop blogging while driving and pay closer attention to the roads, it is not that important. Madam Deputy Speaker, our citizens, after traversing safely home, they now face a landlord tax. The Government has announced the reintroduction of the property tax, now re-branded as the "the landlord tax".

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: Words may change, but execution matters. Any tax on property must be guided by a clear valuation methodology, fair categorization of property types, and an effective appeals process. Otherwise, we risk widening inequalities rather than closing them.

It is commendable that the Minister has ring-fenced exemptions for low-income households, at least directly. However, we must ensure that medium-sized enterprises, retailers, service providers, and small manufacturers also pay their fair share so that the burden does not fall disproportionately on homeowners or small landlords.

Finally, Madam Deputy Speaker, I turn to the issue of dumping and littering, which continues to scar our landscape and endanger public health. The budget refers to enforcement funding, but the real change must come from consistent public education and visible compliance mechanisms. We recall that past administration from Basdeo Panday's measure on derelict vehicles, to earlier PNM initiatives on plastics. They made ambitious pronouncements. The missing link?

Implementation and monitoring.

This Government has now opened the doors for aged vehicles to enter the country and further contribute to our CO2 emissions crisis. Once, again, Madam Deputy Speaker, popularity does not equate to efficiency. It does not.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: Therefore, once again, the engineer is peeping out. I proposed the creation of an environmental compliance unit within EMA to coordinate data collection, enforcement, and citizens reporting. Use technology, mobile apps, geo-tagged evidence, and AI analysis, to bring environmental accountability into the modern age.

I have a daughter that suffers with asthma. So, asthma and respiratory alignments are counting—these children are counting on us to make clear air a right, clear and clean air a right, not a privilege. I do not believe these matters should be politicized, just sorted, and executed. Madam Deputy Speaker, these are not partisan observations. I will repeat. There are not partisan observations. They are the building blocks of good governance. Whether it is accountability, employment, safety, or the environment, the central theme remains constant. Laventille East/Morvant and indeed all of Trinidad and Tobago, we deserve our fair share.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in every democracy budgets are more than ledgers of revenue and expenditure. There are statements of national intent. They tell our people not only what we will spend but what we stand for. In recent years, political rhetoric has often divided us: north and south, rich and poor. But, the citizens who sent us here, they are always colour blind. They are colour blind when it comes to good roads, they are colour blind when it comes to reliable water, decent jobs, and safe communities. So, let us, therefore, make inclusion not a

slogan but a practice. Let the new employment fund, the housing initiatives and the SME grants all be distributed with data driven fairness. We need to ensure that this is done so that every constituency from Mayaro to Morvant can see itself reflected in the national's stories.

Given the recent revelation of the local government financial allocations, I hope this request is not a far-fetched goal. I do not have to point out that there exists geo-geographical disproportionality in Trinidad and Tobago. The blind can see this. The data is there for those who wants to do the research as well. It is there. This is what I mean, Madam Deputy Speaker, of a fair share. It is not charity. It is equity in policy. Too often, each incoming administration seeks to reinvent the wheel. Policies that were functioning are discarded, projects rebranded, public confidence eroded. I submit that true progress requires continuity with accountability.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: So, for example, where the former Minister of Finance, Mr. Colm Imbert, established sound fiscal framework, for example the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund rules or digital procurement systems, let us preserve and improve them. Likewise where the new Minister introduced reform to employment, taxation, or social protection, as stated by the Opposition Leader, once it is good legislation we will support once its serves the nation interest. If it does not, if it does not.

This is the spirit in which I stand today, constructive, vigilant, and patriotic. Madam Deputy Speaker, the next generation is watching. They are watching this Parliament more closely than we think. Earlier today I saw a school sitting up there. They measure us not by how loudly we argue, but by how effectively we deliver. For them opportunity lies not only in textbooks, but in technology,

innovation, and entrepreneurship. Once, again, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is about everyone getting a fair share.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: Madam Deputy Speaker, public service is not about position, it is about purpose. Whether on Government Benches or in Opposition, our duty is to restore faith in governance itself, and that begins with how we speak to one another in the Chamber. [*Member laughs*]

Hon. Member: You talking boy?

Mr. C. Birchwood: One second, one second, one, second. Madam Deputy Speaker—

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

Mr. C. Birchwood: [*Member laughs*] Yes, thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Technology.

Mr. C. Birchwood: Technology, technology, technology, technology. One second. “Ah know allyuh want more.” Hold on. One second, I know you want more. Hold on. Hold on.

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

Mr. C. Birchwood: Right. I therefore—“or you doh have a bag? I wah a bag, and the grey matter that you left, doh worry.”

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: I therefore give the assurance that my contributions will always be firm but respectful, critical but constructive, and always guided by the conviction that Laventille East/Morvant and its progress cannot be separated from Trinidad and Tobago’s progress.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I close, allow me to return where I began, with

gratitude. To the people of the Laventille East/Morvant who lifted me from among them and sent me here, thank you. To my colleagues on both sides of the House, I look forward to vigorous but respectful debates. To the Minister of Finance, I would hope that you seek to balance reform with restraint, and I recommend continued consultation with all stakeholders. I advise this, Madam Deputy Speaker, as we in Laventille East/Morvant, we understand clear that you require both sugar and salt to bake one cake.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. C. Birchwood: Many of us on the ground, we believe that you have only included salt in this budget. So, this House—they can take that figuratively or literally, it is entirely up to you.

This is my maiden contribution, it is offered in humility and anchored in belief that leadership is not about volume, but about value. So, let us together move this nation beyond survival, move it towards a shared success, towards a Trinidad and Tobago where no community, no to citizen, no child feels forgotten. Laventille East/Morvant deserves its fair share. When Laventille rises, Trinidad and Tobago rises as well. Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Laventille/East Morvant, I congratulate you on your maiden contribution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Public Utilities (Ms. Shivanna Sam): Madam Deputy Speaker, it is my esteemed privilege to rise today to deliver my inaugural contribution in this honourable House, and I do so with profound humility and a deep sense of responsibility. May I commence by extend my

sincerest congratulations to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as the first hijab-wearing woman of the Islamic way to sit in the Speaker's Chair.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Your elevation marks a significant milestone, especially for women. Madam Deputy Speaker, with the immense satisfaction and profound joy, I congratulate our Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, whose unwavering leadership, love, bold vision, and policies have guided Trinidad and Tobago through both challenge and positive change. Also to my colleagues on the Government Bench, your experience and commitment continue to inspire me as we work together to deliver meaningful change in our beloved twin island.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Madam Deputy Speaker, may I also extend my sincere commendations to the hon. Minister of Finance on his maiden budget presentation, as well as the hon. Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, their respective teams, and Ministries for the clarity, dexterity, ingenuity, and discipline in which the national budget for the fiscal year 2026 was prepared and presented.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.10 p.m.

Ms. S. Sam: Madam Deputy Speaker, the improvement of the lives of every single citizen of Trinidad and Tobago is at the heart of this budget and as such, it is a privilege to join this debate today from this side of the House. But above all, Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank my constituents of Cumuto/Manzanilla, including those who took the time to participate and contribute in our budget consultations, because, Madam Deputy Speaker, their forgotten voices were the stimuli for this fair, human and progressive budget.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: To my constituents of Cumuto/Manzanilla, your faith in me is truly humbling and I stand here as your advocate. I stand determined to represent your hopes, needs and the future with energy and conviction. My promise to you is that every word I speak and every decision I make in this House is a promise to honour the trust that you have all put in me.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Madam Deputy Speaker, this budget, themed: Building Economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies, was truly one for the people, exemplified by transparency, commitment to promises and empathy. This budget shows our Government's moral commitment to inclusion, transparency, national renewal and it is entirely development focused. Madam Deputy Speaker, let me be bold enough to say it is one that will undoubtedly be remembered. A fair budget that considers all of our citizens but more importantly a budget that was easy to comprehend, and I dare say appreciated by all, even the PNM supporters. Because, Madam Deputy Speaker, when the UNC wins, everybody wins.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Madam Deputy Speaker, as a proud daughter of Cumuto/Manzanilla, I stand here mindful that I am not only here to contribute to today's debate from a public utilities perspective but to also speak for those whose everyday lives are frequently distant from the halls of Parliament. That is, the farmer in Biche battling rising feed cost and predial larceny; the mother in Caratal who stretches every dollar to feed her family; the teacher in Sangre Chiquito who continues to serve despite a lack of infrastructure; and the young university graduates in Manzanilla unfairly affected by limited or no internet connectivity.

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Speaker, this budget speaks to them. This budget affirms that they too

belong to the story of national progress. This fair budget is for the people, not just a particular class or group of persons as was the case for the last nine and a half years under the PNM government, where only a select few benefited. But never again and not under this Government, because, Mr. Speaker, when UNC wins, everybody wins.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, the mess and turmoil we inherited at the Ministry of Public Utilities from the last administration have set back this country significantly. But, Mr. Speaker, the accountable fiscal policies and strategies presented by the hon. Minister of Finance will ensure the repair and progress of our country's economic stability and the efficient provision of public utilities. Mr. Speaker, we will fix it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Our Government's fiscal strategy is a clear testament of the love we have for our people. We saw the challenges that plague our land and delivered on solutions. Mr. Speaker, this budget was targeted outward to invite global opportunity without forgetting to ground itself deeply into the needs of our people.

Mr. Speaker, for far too long social and environmental considerations have been treated as secondary to our core operations in public utilities. That time has passed, Mr. Speaker. Today, we reaffirm a critical shift in how we view and manage our public utilities. Mr. Speaker, the truth is, all utilities go beyond the provision of water, electricity, waste management and connectivity. They are necessities for social, environmental and national development. Every project undertaken, every policy crafted must reflect a balance between service delivery, environmental stewardship and social responsibility. Mr. Speaker, this means strengthening our efforts to protect our natural resources, reduce waste, promote

renewable energy and support communities in need. It means ensuring that our operations create opportunities for citizens particularly our youth, while safeguarding the environment for generations to come. This UNC Government is willing to face the reality of the perilous situation we inherited and take corrective action.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: The Ministry of Public Utilities has been allocated \$3.395 billion for this fiscal year. Renewal is the agenda and, Mr. Speaker, this budget through its accountable fiscal policies does just that.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to identify some of the instances of corruption, mismanagement and wastage which this Government inherited upon assuming office and which this budget seeks to correct. Mr. Speaker, take for example, the Trinidad and Tobago Meteorological Services, more commonly called the Met Office, which plays a vital role in national safety, development and daily life. Within the six months that our administration has been in office, several meetings and site visits have already been conducted with the Met Office, far more than was ever done within the last 10 years under the PNM government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: And what we discovered was deeply troubling. Mr. Speaker, to the blatant mismanagement and neglect of the Met Office by the PNM, we are now required to take corrective action. For far too long, a Met Office has been left to take the blame for delays, outdated information and insufficient warnings during critical weather event. They have been expected to protect lives, safeguard property and guide national planning, yet for the past nine and a half years they were provided with outdated equipment, insufficient resources and minimal support. This inaction placed communities, farmers, infrastructure and businesses

at risk and undermined public confidence in a critical national agency. During the short time we have been in office, Mr. Speaker, we listened, we acknowledged the gaps and today I can proudly say that through successful collaboration with the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence we are taking decisive action.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: The procurement of a Ranger-X5 X-Band simultaneous dual polarization weather radar system will be purchased and will be installed in Piarco.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Something that the last government could not do. This acquisition marks a turning point for Trinidad and Tobago's ability to anticipate, monitor and respond to severe weather. Mr. Speaker, this budget allows us to do that, because when UNC wins, Met Office wins.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, this cutting-edge radar will revolutionize weather monitoring, allowing us to differentiate between rain, hail, thunderstorms with strong winds, flash floods and even tornadoes while filtering out irrelevant signals such as birds or debris. The radar will provide high resolution, real-time data which will enable timely warnings to save lives, protect communities and help our emergency agencies respond faster and smarter.

Mr. Speaker, the Ranger-X5 will also integrate seamlessly with the TTMS app and social media platforms, providing citizens with live weather update, interactive radar imagery and instant alerts. For the first time ordinary citizens, businesses and critical sectors will have access to real time actionable information. Mr. Speaker, this is not just a technological upgrade, it is a commitment to finally giving our Met Office the tools and support it deserves. Emergency responders,

including the ODPM and local media, will now have access to accurate, up to the minute weather data improving coordination, disaster preparedness and public safety across the nation. Mr. Speaker, for years the Met Office endured neglect. Today, and through this budget, we are giving them the resources, recognition and authority to finally fulfill their mandate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: This is how leadership works, listening, acting and ensuring that the safety and well-being of citizens comes first.

Mr. Speaker, when we assumed office, one of the very first issues brought to our attention was the deplorable state of working conditions at the Met Office, particularly, the fact that many of the air-conditioning systems were not functioning, air conditioning systems. Dedicated staff were expected to carry out their duties in unbearable heat under conditions that were neither safe nor suitable for productive work. Mr. Speaker, we took immediate action working hand in hand with the team at the Ministry and resolved this issue swiftly. But this was about more than fixing air condition units. It was about restoring dignity, respect and morale to the men and women who serve our country every single day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Because, Mr. Speaker, when UNC wins, workers win.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, when we came into office one of the most troubling matters brought to our attention as well was the staffing crisis at the Met Office. This is an agency that serves as the first line of defence against severe weather. Yet, despite its critical role it had been systematically neglected. Mr. Speaker, although there was approval for a restructure of the Met Office, no action was taken to fill the vacancies. As a result of the incompetence of the last

administration, the Met Office was left understaffed, overstretched and unable to operate at full capacity. Mr. Speaker, this neglect had real social consequences. When the Met Office is short of personnel, it directly affects the timeliness and accuracy of weather forecasts and warnings; communities receive advisories late; farmers cannot plant their crops with confidence; the aviation, maritime and energy sectors are exposed to greater risk and most importantly the public's trust in one of our most essential services begins to erode.

Mr. Speaker, we could not allow that situation to continue. In the way this Government operates we listen, we engage and we act. Together we identified solutions and we are now moving forward with measures to fill vacancies, strengthen human resources and modernize the working environment at the Met Office.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, our approach is simple, respect the professionals who serve this nation and equip them to perform at their best. The Met Office deserves more than words of sympathy. It deserves action, support and investment. And that is exactly what we are delivering through this budget.

Mr. Speaker, I now turn to one of the most important structural reforms in our energy and utility landscape. The realignment of the Power Generation Company of Trinidad and Tobago, PowerGen, from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, to the Ministry of Public Utilities. Mr. Speaker, this strategic realignment is not just a bureaucratic change. It is a bold decision by this UNC-led Government to take back control of our nation's power generation, to ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago have access to reliable and sustainable power to meet our growing domestic, commercial and industrial demands. Mr. Speaker, it is a matter of legal accuracy, operational logic and national interest.

Mr. Speaker, let us be clear. The Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission, T&TEC, under the T&TEC Act is the sole body legally empowered to manage generation, transmission and distribution of electricity in our nation. PowerGen and Trinidad Generation Unlimited, TGU, are independent power producers that generate electricity for sale exclusively to T&TEC under long term power purchase agreements. In other words, T&TEC is the single buyer, the sole system dispatcher and the heartbeat of a national electricity grid. Given this structure it is both logical and lawful that PowerGen and TGU fall under the same ministerial portfolio; the Ministry of Public Utilities which holds oversight for T&TEC.

11.25 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, in less than one month since the reassignment of PowerGen to the Ministry of Public Utilities, we have been inundated with calls about the challenges at PowerGen. Like any responsible Government, we engaged the management of PowerGen with the view of establishing whether there was any truth in the issues being raised. Mr. Speaker, these issues ranged from a drain in our foreign exchange reserves, safety issues in contravention of the OSH Act and employee stagnation. But, Mr. Speaker, we will fix it. And we at the Ministry of Public Utilities intend to work with the PowerGen team to fully examine the issues brought to our attention.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, I now wish to focus on the critical role of state agencies in investing in our children and youth, which lies at the very heart of our national progress in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, there must be corporate and social responsibility.

In August 2025, the Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago,

TSTT, under the strategic and astute leadership of the hon. Prime Minister and the Minister of Public Utilities, demonstrated what corporate and social responsibility looks like in practice through its Future Leaders Internship Programme, which benefitted 600 young citizens across Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Member: Six hundred children, young people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Under the theme, “Powering the Next Generation: Future Ready. Tech Driven. TSTT Inspired”, the initiative offered training in digital skills, professional development and real workplace experience. Importantly, participants received a stipend, ensuring access and inclusion for all, because opportunity must never depend on financial means. Mr. Speaker, this is social responsibility with purpose, a state enterprise using its influence and expertise to empower young people and strengthen the foundation of national growth.

Mr. Speaker, some have, asked whether a three-week internship is long enough to create a lasting change, or whether helping 600 young people is enough when so many more are still waiting for opportunity, but we must remember, Mr. Speaker, every national transformation starts with a single deliberate step. What matters is that we have begun. While others talk, Mr. Speaker, we have taken tangible action to equip young people with skills that matter in the real economy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, this programme does not end at training. It is the first step in building pathways to sustainable jobs and livelihoods. It gives our young citizens more than exposure, it gives them hope, direction and a bridge to future employment. Mr. Speaker, that is why I am pleased to announce that in 2026, under the Ministry of Public Utilities and through this budget, this initiative will be expanded across the public utilities sector, increasing participation from 600 to

approximately 5,000 young people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: And, Mr. Speaker, this expansion goes beyond numbers, it creates a national pipeline for sustainable job creation. Participants will gain practical experience in technology, customer service, logistics, engineering and environmental management, which are sectors that form the backbone of our economy. Mr. Speaker, through partnerships with state enterprises and the private sector, we are building a system where training leads to opportunity, and opportunity leads to employment. This is how we shift from temporary interventions to lasting empowerment, by merging skills development directly to the future world of work.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, corporate and social responsibility must walk hand in hand. Corporate responsibility cannot only focus on compliance, it must ensure that every dollar spent, every decision made and every project undertaken reflects integrity, fairness and transparency.

Mr. Speaker, social responsibility, on the other hand, is about purpose and focuses on how our organizations give back to the communities they serve, through inclusion, education and empowerment. And, Mr. Speaker, as we move forward, this Government will be calling on all agencies and state enterprises to review and prioritize their corporate expenditure, to ensure it directly aligns with the Government's broader mandate of sustainable development and social upliftment. Corporate budgets drive national progress and support initiatives that strengthen communities, empower our youth and create long-term value for our citizens because, Mr. Speaker, when UNC wins, the youths win.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, the success of TSTT's, Future Leaders Internship Programme and the planned expansion under the Ministry of Public Utilities demonstrate what is possible when public institution lead with vision and compassion. Mr. Speaker, our hon. Prime Minister always reminds us that when we invest in our children, we are investing in sustainability, stability and prosperity, and when we empower our young people, we secure the future of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, I want now to turn to an area close to my heart and of critical importance, environmental action. Mr. Speaker, as we advance our fiscal and developmental agenda, this Government remains deeply conscious that economic growth must go hand in hand with environmental sustainability. One of the most pressing issues where this balance must be achieved is in the management of our water and sanitation systems. Mr. Speaker, for too long, Trinidad and Tobago has operated without a comprehensive long-term waste water policy. At present, over a dozen ad hoc policies and regulations govern different aspects of waste water management. This fragmented approach has limited coordination, hindered investment and constrained our ability to plan effectively for sustainable growth.

Mr. Speaker, recognizing this gap, this Government, with the support of the Inter-American Development Bank, has initiated the development of a national wastewater and sanitation master plan. Mr. Speaker, this plan is a major step forward, a unified strategic framework that will guide the construction, expansion and modernization of wastewater infrastructure over the next two decades. Mr. Speaker, it includes the development of a national wastewater policy, supported by a legislative and regulatory review, a national wastewater strategy, and a process

and institutional review to strengthen governance and service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, the master plan will prioritize affordable, environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient solutions, such as waste water reuse for agriculture and industry, resource recovery and the introduction of low mechanical nature-based treatment technologies, suitable for a tropical environment. Mr. Speaker, it will also strengthen institutional and regulatory frameworks to improve governance, accountability and technical capacity within the sector, because, Mr. Speaker when UNC wins, the environment wins.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, this Government considers wastewater management to be as crucial as access to potable water. Mr. Speaker, we cannot claim water security, while untreated waste water continues to threaten our environment, public health and marine ecosystems. Mr. Speaker, through this master plan, we will expand sewage coverage, rehabilitate outdated systems, and promote sustainable practices that protect both people and planet.

Mr. Speaker, this Government adopts a holistic approach to solving the long-standing problems in waste and waste water management. We recognize that these challenges, from outdated infrastructure and limited sewage coverage to inefficient waste disposal and environmental degradation, are deeply interconnected. Mr. Speaker, together with commitment and collaboration, we will build a utility sector that not only meets the needs of today, but also safeguards the promise of tomorrow, a sector that is efficient, equitable and environmentally responsible.

11.35 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, the allocation of \$250 million for rural electrification and grid upgrades, including the installation of 8,000 LED streetlights, will illuminate communities that have been left in the dark, literally and figuratively.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Meanwhile, the \$75 million investment in renewable energy projects marks a historic and welcome pivot towards clean energy, ensuring that our national growth remains environmentally responsible and physically sustainable. Promises made, promises kept.

Equally significant is the decision to cancel the failed WASA transformation plan, which resulted in preserving 3,700 jobs while redirecting \$30 million in savings to frontline service improvement. Already, Mr. Speaker, the results are visible with enhanced water supply to regions that were forgotten. Mr. Speaker, Carapal now receives an additional 1.5 million gallons per day. Navet's output has increased by 600,000 gallons and supply in Siparia has risen from every nine days to three times weekly, while Maracas Bay has risen from two days per week to five. Promises made, promises kept.

Mr. Speaker, for the first time in years, we see systemic changes and improvements rather than antagonizing ribbon-cuttings. Mr. Speaker, a \$50 million smart metering project will improve building accuracy and reduce water loss while addressing the exact inefficiencies that for years went unacknowledged by the previous administration.

Mr. Speaker, while others talk about the digital transformation, this Government is doing it. TSTT's \$200 million fibre-to-home expansion will finally connect rural citizens to reliable broadband and digital opportunities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: It will bring online education, telemedicine and entrepreneurship to areas like Cumuto, Biche, and Sangre Chiquito, communities that the last administration's so called development agenda treated as after-thoughts and second-class citizens.

Mr. Speaker, let us not forget where we came from. Under the last Government, public utilities became a byword for corruption, for waste, and for neglect. WASA's supposed transformation plan ended in chaos with inflated management, political hiring and unpaid contractors. T&TEC was left burdened by over \$4 million in gas debt, while citizens endured outages and rusting infrastructure. But, Mr. Speaker, rest assured, this UNC Government will fix it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, turning to my constituency now. The people of Cumuto/Manzanilla, like citizens across Trinidad and Tobago, deserve the same standard of service as anyone living in the Port of Spain or San Fernando. This budget recognizes that truth and addresses it accordingly. We are reforming from the ground up, ensuring that no home, no school and no business is left disconnected.

Mr. Speaker, earlier on I heard the Leader of the Opposition try to make reference to Cumuto/Manzanilla, and that is actually comical and deeply ironic. The Member for Arima has suddenly developed an interest in what happens in Cumuto/Manzanilla, but for years, this very constituency was forgotten, neglected and left without proper investment under successive PNM administrations. When roads were impassable, when farmers could not access lands, when our children were studying by candlelight and when water came once every six months, the PNM was silent. Where was the concern then?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Shame.

Hon. Member: "Dey concerned now. Dey like Bachannal."

Ms. S. Sam: But we know the only reason for this sudden concern is a desperate attempt to score political points, which they clearly lack given the results of the last

general elections.

Today, instead of addressing their own legacy of neglect, the PNM seeks to create destruction and drama over internal administrative matters within my parliamentary office. These are not issues for the front page. They are routine internal decisions made in the best interest of maintaining efficiency and service to the people of my constituency, something that last administration would know nothing about.

Mr. Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I did not examine my constituency through the unclouded lens of this budget. Agriculture has always been at the centre of Cumuto/Manzanilla. It is one of the main sources of economic activity. More than just a means of subsistence, it has become a part of the very culture of my constituency. This budget reaffirms agriculture's importance as a sector for growth and a defence for our country's resilience.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister of Finance has laid before us a financial plan that rewards industry, supports innovation and empowers the working class. For Cumuto/Manzanilla, where agriculture is both heritage and livelihood, the measures introduced are a stepping stone for progress. Mr. Speaker, lowering agricultural input costs stabilizes domestic food prices, improves trade balances by replacing imports and fortifies the price transmission chain.

Mr. Speaker, food production is being positioned as an investable technologically advanced enterprise rather than a welfare sector with the introduction of hydroponic systems, greenhouse incentives and irrigation support, signaling the start of agricultural modernization. Farmer's burdens would be immediately reduced in a number of ways. The removal of VAT from feed for pigs, cattle and poultry, hydroponic and agricultural machinery is a big win for the farmers.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: For small and medium sized farmers who have long struggled with narrow margins and fluctuating costs, these actions result in an immediate benefit and increased productivity. Mr. Speaker, hydroponic farming would better utilize square footage so that farmers with smaller parcels of land can now yield larger produce. Because Mr. Speaker, when UNC wins, farmers win.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, the intention to increase access to farm roads and irrigation are initiatives that are critical for communities like Cumuto/Manzanilla , Caratal, Sangre Chiquito and Biche where the fertility of the soil cannot make up for the infrastructural challenges. Mr. Speaker, such actions would boost the output and productivity in these areas, and it shows the clear intent to foster food security by investing in infrastructure, technology and training.

Mr. Speaker, the Government has prioritized land regularization programmes and agriculture leases. In Cumuto/Manzanilla where families have inherited plots without official registration, this is especially important. Our youth can now see agriculture not as a daily struggle but as an opportunity that can build into an enterprise with dignity, sustainability and potential for generational wealth. In fact, during our pre-budget consultations, land security and regularization was one of the main concerns raised by farmers. Mr. Speaker, promises made, promises kept.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, this is a people's budget. It acknowledges that progress must be felt in the kitchen, not only in these halls of Parliament. The \$1 reduction in the price of gasoline and the removal of VAT on essential food items are acts of quiet but profound justice.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: For the mother in Biche who drives her children to school, this means increased savings. Mr. Speaker, these measures tell our people that this Government is listening, not only to the elites, but to the everyday citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, this Government does not care about political stunts and laughable ribbon cuttings as the Members across from us. What we care about is governance grounded in compassion. That is what this budget delivers. Mr. Speaker, the foundation of development is the issue of infrastructure. The wanton disregard for rural infrastructure has long been a problem for the residents of Cumuto/Manzanilla. This budget finally addresses infrastructure in a methodical and responsible way. This Government has set aside over \$1.1 billion to the Ministry for Works and Infrastructure to modernize rural roads, bridges and highways. Mr. Speaker, the people of Cumuto/Manzanilla were neglected and left to languish for the past nine and a half years under to cruel PNM Government. To that, we say no more, because Mr. Speaker, when UNC wins, everybody wins.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, imagine over \$500 million was spent on a highway that needed to be repaired immediately following the PNM's ribbon-cutting ceremony yet, my constituents of Cumuto/Manzanilla have had to drive on roads that can only be described as craters. Mr. Speaker, in order to guarantee that local and rural communities experience noticeable benefits, 93 distinct projects for landslip stabilization, bridge rehabilitation and rural road maintenance have also been improved by this Government because when UNC wins, rural communities finally win.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, I am compelled to address a matter that is an ongoing fight in my constituents' lives, the ongoing flooding crisis. Communities in Cumuto/Manzanilla see fresh damage every year due to excessive rains, which ruin crops, isolate households and erode both land and morale. A lasting preventative solution is long overdue and this Government has finally taken strong action in that regard. Mr. Speaker, in fiscal 2026, the flood mitigation and erosion control programme will invest \$238.6 million to provide long-term relief from flooding and erosion. Promises made, promises kept.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, dredging and desilting watercourses, embankment construction, other structural defenses in high-risk locations are the focus of the flood mitigation and erosion control programme. Only because of the will of this Government, the Caroni River rehabilitation project is almost finished and pump house upgrades will increase the country's ability to regulate flooding.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, improving drainage is a public health and community stability issue, not just an engineering one. Flooding causes health risks that persist long after the waters subside, interferes trade and interrupts education. Mr. Speaker, this budget's multi-year comprehensive strategy is therefore both humanitarian and timely. Promises made, promises kept.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, one of our Republic's most naturally blessed areas is the eastern half of Trinidad's coastline, especially the area that includes Manzanilla. It is an ecological gem with enormous potential for sustainable development because of its expansive coconut plantations, profusion of wetlands and rich wildlife. Mr. Speaker, this area has remarkable flora and fauna. Our

coastline is a place of international ecological interest.

The Nariva Swamp is the largest freshwater wetland in Trinidad and Tobago and is designated a Ramsar site. The Nariva wetlands and Manzanilla forest are home to a number of endangered species such as the West Indian Manatee, the Red Howler Monkey and many migratory birds. In addition to being a source of pride, this natural legacy has the potential to spur economic growth through ecotourism.

Mr. Speaker, the incursion of sargassum along the Manzanilla coast has impacted local livelihoods, small-scale tourism businesses and fisheries, posing an environmental and economic problem. As highlighted by the hon. Minister of Finance in the budget presentation, equipment provided by partners such as Japan and the USA would help tackle sargassum and coastal cleanup efforts to bring back the area's natural attractiveness because Mr. Speaker, when UNC wins, sustainable development wins.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

11.50 p.m.

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, this Government is also investing in natural capital by directing \$298.9 million towards eco-tourism and coastal management, transforming environmental resources into long-term economic value. In addition to protecting biodiversity, effective sargassum management and eco-tourism infrastructure build a low-carbon growth industry that may draw green investments and climate finance. Mr. Speaker, our people will be able to take advantage of the country without destroying it, thanks to our tourism strategy, which places equal importance on preservation and promotion. It will encourage small business, generate respectable employment and establish Cumuto/Manzanilla as a paradigm for balancing rural beauty with national advancement.

Mr. Speaker, education continues to be the foundation around which all

ambitions must be constructed. This budget's allocations reinforce the Government's attitude that no child should be denied opportunities due to their location, financial situation or other factors. Significant investments have been made to enhance teacher preparation, incorporate digital learning and upgrade school infrastructure through the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Speaker, 279 schools had their structural flaws that had been left to languish for the past nine and a half years, fixed by the Vacation Repair Programme. In Cumuto, Biche and Manzanilla where a number of schools have experienced problems with leaking roofs, inadequate ventilation and other infrastructural issues, this has already begun to directly benefit our students thanks to the political will of this Government to get the job done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Education is the equalization of opportunity. It should not only be available to those in urban areas. This budget treats it as such coupling fiscal responsibility with an unwavering belief in human potential, because when UNC wins, our children win.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: You have remaining 20 seconds unless you wish your 10 minutes.

Ms. S. Sam: I would like to take it, yes, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Thank you.

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, to update the country's transport system and improve accessibility, particularly for rural populations, this Government will invest in the electric bus pilot project, a major project under this budget which aims to launch 30 new electric buses by the middle of 2026.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, this project which is run by the Public Transport

Service Corporation through a public-private partnership is a component of a larger strategy to lower emissions, boost productivity and extend routes into underserved areas like Cumuto/Manzanilla.

For commuters, many of whom rely on PTSC services to access work and education, the new intelligent public transport system which includes electronic ticketing and real-time tracking is anticipated to increase dependability. The ongoing investments in public transport reform and road safety support larger initiatives to update the nation's infrastructure. This strategy gives hope and relief to the people in the east which were forgotten under the previous administration where connectivity has all too frequently been associated with suffering. Mr. Speaker, promise made, promise kept.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, as a woman making my first contribution in this House, I am deeply conscious—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*] You are doing well.

Ms. S. Sam:—I am deeply conscious of the responsibility that accompanies my voice. Among those who have broken down barriers before me is the hon. Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC whose legacy I stand upon. Her leadership characterized by intelligence, compassion and determination has changed the expectations for women in government. These same values are reflected in this budget which acknowledges that women's empowerment is essential to growth rather than only a byproduct. More than just a policy, the growth of youth programmes, housing grants and social support programmes is a declaration that advancement must reach all households, especially those led by women.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to highlight an issue that touches upon both dignity and equality, that of period poverty. Across Trinidad and Tobago and particularly

within rural communities like Cumuto/Manzanilla, there are young women and girls who miss school or work because they cannot consistently afford sanitary products. We can no longer ignore this fact and this budget makes provisions for this social issue. Because, Mr. Speaker, when UNC wins, women win.

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

Ms. S. Sam: Mr. Speaker, this budget provides recognition which has long been denied to the constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla. It acknowledges that rural Trinidad must be viewed as essential to the narrative of renewal rather than as an afterthought to the country's progress as was the case under the last Government. The actions outlined in this budget which range from agricultural subsidies to coastline conservation and road reconstruction, represent the start of that regeneration.

This budget, Mr. Speaker, is a pledge to equity, revitalization and inclusivity. It charts a realistic path to success while acknowledging the hardships of our people. It provides the much-needed relief, genuine opportunity and the comfort that their voices have finally been heard. This budget clearly puts T&T first by building—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam:—and guaranteeing economic fairness through accountable fiscal policies.

Mr. Speaker, I want to close by once again reiterating this Government's commitment to a better Trinidad and Tobago one step at a time. I am confident that under this administration and under the astute leadership of our Prime Minister, our country will continue to expand in terms of justice, compassion and unity. Because, Mr. Speaker, when UNC wins, public utilities win.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: When UNC wins, the environment wins; when UNC wins, women win; when UNC wins, rural communities win; and when UNC wins, Trinidad and Tobago wins.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Ms. S. Sam: I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Before I call on the Member for Laventille West, can I, Member, offer my deep and sincere congratulations to you—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker:—for what can only be described as an outstanding maiden speech.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for Laventille West.

Mr. Kareem Marcelle (*Laventille West*): Thank you very kindly, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, it is both my privilege and my solemn responsibility to rise in this honourable House on behalf of the resilient, proud and unshakable people of Laventille West.

Mr. des Vignes: Yes, Sir.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: I thank you very kindly for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Allow me to congratulate the Member for Princes Town on this historic position today in which she was the first woman in hijab to take the seat of the Speaker of the House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: I want to congratulate her not only as a woman in a hijab, but as one of the youngest Members of this House and when young people are given

opportunities, I am always in support of it and I salute it.

Mr. des Vignes: Yes, Sir.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, as a new Member of Parliament, I had the opportunity to peruse and examine a hefty bundle of documents prepared by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and, of course, printed by the Government Printery. In this regard, I want to extend my sincerest thanks and appreciation to the hard-working public servants of the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and the Government Printery for their hard work during this very—and every accounts department in every state agency that would have sought to close the fiscal year and of course, put their plans in motion. I want to salute and thank our public servants.

Mr. Speaker, I must admit that as a newly elected Member of Parliament, I did not expect my first budget contribution to be on this side of the House. I expected, Mr. Speaker—

Hon. Member:—to be outside?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: I expected, Mr. Speaker, to, of course, have my first term in Government where of course I would be able not only to advocate but with the support of the Government, to action many of the plans and policies of the People's National Movement in Laventille West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: But, Mr. Speaker, soon come.

Mr. Speaker, I entered politics with, and I will forever maintain and remain, with a pure heart, with a pure spirit of hope, love, resilience and dedication to my

constituency and this nation by extension. Despite entering this honourable House for the first time in Opposition, I stay steadfast to standing for my constituency fearlessly and standing in their defence. Tonight, I rise not merely to critique figures in a document but to speak the lived realities of my constituents and by extension, the nation of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, sometimes these realities of fellow citizens are often lost in the hundreds of pages in budget documents. But, Mr. Speaker, if this budget is the first true test of the UNC's performance as a government, then they have already failed miserably.

Mr. Des Vignes: "Ah, boy."

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, after almost six months in office, the people of Trinidad and Tobago have waited to see if the UNC's promises of fairness and compassion would be matched by delivery. Yet, in every community, certainly in Laventille West, the promises have not reached our people. Instead of fairness and compassion that they promised this country, the lived reality is pure hate and "ackin" normal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Instead of keeping their promises to create 50,000 new jobs, this evil administration has taken revenge and vengeance to another level. They have done the opposite. They have fired almost 50,000 workers in less than five months. These were real workers, real citizens, real mothers, real fathers with real families to take care of. The UNC pretended to be humanitarians in the last general election campaign. They pretended to love every creed and race prior to the election. They played on the psyche of a despondent people and before the ink could have dried on this country's citizens' fingertips, they waged war on some of

the most vulnerable citizens who fell for their act and empty promises.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, this administration's fiscal and policy decisions in the last five months-plus, have created a humanitarian, social and economic crisis in our country. From CEPEP to URP, to reforestation, to the North West Regional Health Authority, to the North Central Regional Health Authority, the Eastern Regional Health Authority, the South-West Regional Health Authority, WASA, HDC, CCC, HYPE, MiLAT, MYPART, YAHP, every single continuous short-term employee in every Ministry, in every state agency, were all collateral damage, according to the Member for La Brea.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

12.05 a.m.

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, this budget, entitled: T&T First: Building Economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies, claims to chart a new course, but it is simply a continuation of their last five months in government. Mr. Speaker, it is one thing to print words of fairness and another to practise it, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, as the last few days have passed and the dust has settled on the Minister of Finance's slogan-filled budget presentation, one truth became increasingly clear: That the numbers on the pages simply do not match the reality on the ground. Our nation's finances tell a story of missed opportunities, missed priorities, of strained public services, and a widening gap between those who make decisions and those who live with the consequences of them, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, while the Government speaks of progress, the people speak of pressure. It is for this reason, Mr. Speaker, that I stand to give voice to the real issues, particularly those affecting Laventille West, and by extension, communities

across East Port of Spain. Mr. Speaker, the Government continues to blame the previous administration for everything under the sun, yet, after five months plus in office, they cannot produce any single positive, tangible result. Mr. Speaker, the nation deserves solutions, not scapegoats.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, according to Simon Sinek:

“Leadership is not about being in charge.”

It—“...is about taking care of those in our charge.”

And on that account, Mr. Speaker, this administration has failed miserably to take care of those that they are in charge of.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, I move to justice and governance. Justice must never be reduced, Mr. Speaker, to headlines or statistics. Justice is about people, about fairness, access and dignity. This administration has divided the national security into three Ministries: Justice, Defence, and Homeland Security. Mr. Speaker, three new titles but not one new sustainable solution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: The last administration, Mr. Speaker, ensured that proper legislation, systems and resources were put in place to facilitate virtual court hearings. Immediately, saved taxpayers' moneys, the court's time, the defendant's time, the prosecution's time, the defence counsel's time and limited serious security threats, and placed an ease on the resources of all parties involved, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the Law Association supports virtual hearings. The Judiciary supports virtual hearings, and I am certain that all taxpayers support virtual hearings. Mr. Speaker, I have noted public statements by the Member for

Aranguéz/St. Joseph in the public domain, relative to considerations around removing and/or limiting virtual appearance options from some police stations and otherwise.

Mr. Speaker, to reverse that progress now without adequate justification, it places immense strain on an already fragile system. The cost of transporting prisoners across the country is not inexpensive, Mr. Speaker. Each journey requires fuel, manpower and high security, all at taxpayers' expense. What sense does it make, Mr. Speaker, to spend millions to move prisoners and/or detain persons back and forth, when technology can achieve the same result with greater efficiency and safety?

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, reverting wholly to physical courts, exposes officers, inmates and the public to unnecessary risk. We cannot claim to be modernizing justice, while dismantling the very tools that made it accessible. Mr. Speaker, I have no reason to doubt that the hon. Minister and Member for Arranguéz/St. Joseph would approach this exercise with giving careful thought to all stakeholders, the fiscal implications, as well as what is in the best interest of the administration of justice. I know that my friend from Arranguéz/St. Joseph—and I hope that he will certainly do so, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, a justice system must serve both retribution and rehabilitation. But further to that, Mr. Speaker, any government that is serious about justice must acknowledge the preventive measures to crime in the most effective way to ensure a safer and productive society, where our justice system would not be overburden.

Mr. Speaker, when we see the cancellation and in some instances, decreases in allocations in key youth and social programmes across the board, it tells a troubling story. When we see the cancellation or no allocation whatsoever for youth agricultural apprenticeship programmes in this fiscal year, that is things to

watch, Mr. Speaker. When we see the Civilian Conservation “Co-ops” cut—

Hon. Members: Corps

Mr. K. Marcelle:—Corps; when we see the implementation of national youth policy cut; the youths social programmes cut; the youth development formulation project cut; the youth entrepreneurship hubs allocation cut; the youth business incubator programme cut; the programmes for young offenders cut; MiLAT cut, a whole list of initiatives and programmes that continues, Mr. Speaker, to serve as a preventative tool for our at-risk youth, we are seeing now, these things are being cut.

Mr. Speaker, this budget has not placed any real emphasis on the conditions and programmes at the YTC. Mr. Speaker, these young men are not lost causes. They are young citizens in need of direction, opportunity and the kind of structure that builds men of purpose, rather than punishment.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, if we are serious about national safety, we must start by rehabilitating, rather than warehousing our young offenders.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: We must invest more in literacy, in digital skills, in mentorship, and in giving these young people a chance to re-enter society as strong and productive citizens of this country, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, there is no increase whatsoever in the allocation for rehabilitation, vocational programmes or psychological services. In fact, Mr. Speaker, there is a significant decrease. A nation cannot claim, Mr. Speaker, to fix crime if it refuses to fund prevention and correction.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Justice cannot continue to operate

on its own. They must work hand in hand with the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training; the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs; and the Ministry of People, Social Development and Family Services. Mr. Speaker, when we work hand in hand with all the different stakeholders, then that is how you achieve true justice in this country. We need all hands on deck.

Mr. Speaker, you see, the true cost of neglect becomes routine. It becomes routine, Mr. Speaker, when we have the fall of these significant programmes, which seek to protect and prevent our young people who are not in education, not in skills training, not employed, to stay on the right track, or to get on the right track.

Mr. Speaker, so when you cut all these programmes and then you speak of reform, I want to ask: Reform for whom? Reform has to be for our most vulnerable citizens. You look at the very relevant Selwyn Ryan report, Mr. Speaker, on point as it relates to our at-risk youth and the need to develop programmes, and put things in place to prevent that cycle.

I call on this administration, Mr. Speaker, to put focus on our young people and to bring back some of these very essential programmes that have continued to save and reform so many of our young people lives—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle:—especially in communities like Laventille, like Beetham, like St. Barbs, like Morvant, like Nelson Street, Duncan Street, St. Paul Street, Sea Lots.

I move now to local government. Mr. Speaker, when we speak of justice, we must also speak of fairness in governance. The same inefficiencies that plague our national security system have found their way, Mr. Speaker, into local

government institutions. Mr. Speaker, local government is the closest form of governance to the people. It is one of the areas where you just do not play politics, Mr. Speaker.

I had the absolute displeasure of reviewing the budgetary allocations to all municipal corporations in this country, Mr. Speaker, in this fiscal year, especially as it relates to its *Development Programme*. Mr. Speaker, for the benefit of those listening and the viewing public allow me to explain what does the *Development Programme* in local government mainly consists of.

Mr. Speaker, it is where small drains are built; where the streets in our communities are paved; where play parks are built and refurbished; where handrails are installed; where traffic mirrors are installed by blind corners; where the retaining walls in our communities are fixed; where supplies, like mattresses, hampers, cleaning supplies, tarpaulins are purchased for persons in natural disasters. These are the little but impactful initiatives, Mr. Speaker, that matter most to our constituents.

Mr. Speaker, but to borrow from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* commandments, "Some people are more equal than others." And we see this, Mr. Speaker. Because when it comes to the UNC, based on the budgetary allocations in local government to the municipal corporations, it is proof that in the UNC's eyes, Mr. Speaker, the people of Princes Town are more equal than the people of Port of Spain. It seems, Mr. Speaker, that people of Couva are more equal to the people of Diego Martin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: It is clear, Mr. Speaker, that the people of Chaguanas are more equal than the people of San Juan/Laventille.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: It is clear, Mr. Speaker, that the people of Siparia are more equal than the people of Point Fortin. Mr. Speaker, this Government did not even bother to hide their hate and vitriol toward the PNM-led corporations and people who they perceive to be PNM. With evilness and venom in their hearts, they slashed the budgetary allocation, Mr. Speaker, of every single one of the seven PNM corporations by the millions.

Mr. Speaker, if the approach was to cut spending across the board, then we could understand that the Government is trying to reduce its expenditure and trying to reduce costs, in terms of all corporations across the board. But it is vividly clear, Mr. Speaker, it is pellucidly clear that it was a targeted attack on PNM-led corporations and anybody who seemed to look like a PNM.

12.20 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, on the other hand, the Minister of Finance has increased the budgetary allocation of every single UNC-controlled corporation to the tune of millions, Mr. Speaker. I want to just take you through very quickly, Mr. Speaker, the budgetary allocations that the then PNM administration would have given in 2025 to all municipal corporations. Mr. Speaker, the PNM gave the Port of Spain City Corporation \$19,750,000 in 2025 for the development programme; Arima Borough Corporation, \$18,250,000; San Fernando City Corporation, \$20,050,000; Point Fortin Corporation, \$17,650,000; Chaguanas Borough Corporation, \$17,250,000; Diego Martin, \$17,450,000; San Juan/Laventille, \$17,150,000; Tunapuna, \$18,150,000; Sangre Grande, \$17,750,000; Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, \$17,150,000; Siparia, \$17,350,000; Penal/Debe, \$17,150,000; Princes Town, \$17,350,000, Mr. Speaker. All within the range of 17 to 18 million dollars for each corporation.

When we talk about fairness in governance, Mr. Speaker, we can look at the

PNM for an example. We can look at that allocation and say that that is a fair amount to allocate to all of the corporations for their development programme. But instead, Mr. Speaker, what did we see in this budget? What did we see when it comes to the allocations to municipal corporations, Mr. Speaker? In the Port of Spain Corporation, there was a significant decrease. We are talking about—and I am going to go through the list quickly. There was a decrease in the Arima corporation first, Mr. Speaker, a decrease of \$12,650,000; in Diego Martin corporation, a decrease of \$6,350,000; in Port of Spain City Corporation, \$15,650,000 cut.

Mr. Des Vignes: Fifteen?

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, 15 million. In Point Fortin, \$12,100,000 cut.

Hon. Members: Wow.

Mr. K. Marcelle: In San Fernando, \$1.5 million cut, Mr. Speaker. In Tunapuna/Piarco, \$880,000 cut. But let us look, Mr. Speaker, at what happened in the UNC corporations, the UNC-controlled corporations.

Mr. Speaker, they saw an increase by more than \$20,710,000. In Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, an increase of \$1.8 million; in Mayaro/Rio Claro, an increase of \$1.6 million; in Penal/Debe an increase of \$21 million; in Princes Town an increase of \$20 million; in Sangre Grande an increase of \$250,000; and in the Siparia Borough Corporation an increase of \$3,700,000. Mr. Speaker, how could that be fairness? How could that be right? After every single line, the Minister comes to tell you that local government wins, that this one wins, that that one wins, Mr. Speaker, all PNM corporations have lost in this fiscal year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: This is political wickedness to another level, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: So, Mr. Speaker, local government is the heartbeat of service delivery. It is where promises of the national budget actually meet the real needs of the little people in the constituencies. Yet today, that system is failing because of the inequity that we are seeing with this administration, Mr. Speaker.

As we turn to the state of local governance and the realities faced in Laventille West, we must acknowledge one undeniable fact, that when local government fails, the people feel it first. Mr. Speaker, local government was created to bring efficiency and equity to all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, it is meant to be the engine of daily life, ensuring that roads are repaired, grass is cut, drains are cleared, and citizens feel seen by their representatives. Yet across the country, Mr. Speaker, and particularly in Laventille West, that engine is spluttering. The termination of CEPEP contractors and workers, reforestation workers, and URP workers earlier this year has left entire communities overgrown and unsafe. Grass and bush have swallowed drains and road verges. The absence of regular maintenance has created the perfect condition for flooding and mosquito breeding. Mr. Speaker, it is not just an eyesore; it is a public health hazard. Everywhere you go, every community that you turn and look, you are seeing the state of our country. The environment and the state of our community clearly have lost under this administration. No wins there.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Residents are living beside neglected waterways, Mr. Speaker, broken culverts. Without CEPEP, reforestation, and URP teams, garbage is piling up. Children must walk to school on the sidewalks, Mr. Speaker, hidden by overgrown bush. Elderly citizens are fearful to venture outside. The tracks in

different communities in Laventille, Mr. Speaker, are overgrown. In fact, there was a recent landslide in Laventille West in Point Pleasant Park and Block 22. Whilst I was there assisting the residents in need, I realized that there was a particular track, Mr. Speaker, that used to be continuously used by residents to access their homes and instead they had to come up with an alternative route. The bush is so overgrown. That cannot be the type of governance that this country deserves, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, local government workers are willing to serve. They are willing to fill the gap, but they cannot operate without the resources or authorization and releases from the Government. Each of the PNM-led corporations, the Chairmen, the different Mayors, have come out publicly and said that they have just not been getting releases since this administration came into power. No releases for goods and services. They cannot even procure the simple and basic needs, Mr. Speaker. Recently—Mr. Speaker, I told you about the landslide in Laventille West. After that, I visited the Disaster Management Unit of the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation. Usually, there are certain supplies that they will give out in these times of need. You will be surprised, Mr. Speaker, that they said they did not have the basic things they usually give out, either vouchers, cleaning supplies or different things when you are in need. But, Mr. Speaker, they say that they simply cannot afford it. They have none because there have been no releases. Local government is not to play politics with. It is the lives and livelihoods of some of the most vulnerable people when they are in need, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, I am duty-bound to advocate for and on behalf of

my constituents. Mr. Speaker, I take this opportunity to highlight to the hon. Minister of Works and Infrastructure, the Member for Couva South, whom I have a great amount of respect for as a very hard worker. I want to advocate on behalf of my constituents of Laventille West. When I came in, I would have thoroughly looked at some of the projects that would have been on the pipeline, in terms of what we would have advocated for, Mr. Speaker. I want to take the opportunity to plead and advocate on behalf of Laventille West for some projects as it relates to road works and drainage, specifically at the upper Pashley Street area, where there has been decay in terms of the road, there is shifting soil, persons' homes are being damaged and so on. I want to advocate for the hon. Minister to look into that.

I understand there has been some feasibility study somewhere along the line to see how we can look into that. I am hoping that the hon. Minister can put some of these projects on her priority list this fiscal, please. Upper Thomasine Street, Mr. Speaker, has a serious road issue where the road, of course, is sort of separated. There is a landslide, and it is impassable. And I know, Mr. Speaker, what will come, you know. They will say, "Well, it had a PNM MP there before". Mr. Speaker, my job started on April 28th, and I will advocate and work very hard for my constituents.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Mr. Speaker, I start off in Opposition—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle:—but I am certain I will not end in Opposition, Mr. Speaker. I am certain that after, of course, the advocacy—and I know that the Minister will help, Mr. Speaker. But after that when with Member for Arima takes her rightful place as the next Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle:—that we will get to act on all of these plans and policies that we definitely can. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Speaker, I want to draw that hon. Minister's attention as well to Prizgar Lands. There was a recent—could be thereabout May, where two homes would have been severely affected in terms of the collapse. I would like to bring that to the attention of the hon. Minister as well, to see how best we can look for the solution towards it because more homes continue to be at risk in that area. And, I want to commend the Member for Chaguanas East, Mr. Speaker, because when that emergency did happen, I did reach out to the hon. Minister of the People, Social Development, and Family Services, and assistance was given to my constituents, and I want to commend her, even in her absence, for her responsiveness, please.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: So, Mr. Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: —I was making my plea.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: I was making my plea to the Member for Couva North on behalf of the people of Laventille West, and I will continue to do so. Mr. Speaker, there are some road upgrades that are needed in San Francois Valley Road, Upper Laventille, St. Barbs, Beetham Gardens, please, Mr. Speaker. In addition to which, our major drains in terms of in and around Eastern Main Road, and Beetham Gardens, the one running parallel to the Beetham Highway, to the Priority Bus Route, as well as to the Eastern Main Road and the major culverts that take it south, Mr. Speaker, that are in fact in need of cleaning and maintaining, please. I would like the hon. Minister to perhaps take a look at that and see how best we can

achieve that.

Mr. Speaker, as it relates to WASA I want to say that there are some significant sewer issues that have been plaguing the community of Beetham Gardens, and I want to bring it to the attention of the hon. Member for Couva South to ask for his intervention. I must admit that the WASA executive team did visit Beetham Gardens with me, and we looked firsthand at some of the issues, and I hope that in this fiscal year that the hon. Member for Couva South, in collaboration with WASA, can seriously look at this very serious issue that has been plaguing the community of Beetham Gardens. Mr. Speaker, I am saying it from upfront, I know that the response to it will be, “Well, they had a PNM MP before, and PNM Government was there before”. I understand that, Mr. Speaker, but I take my responsibilities seriously. As of April 28th, the people of Laventille West gave me their stamp of approval and faith in me. I must advocate.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: I must advocate, Mr. Speaker, from that day forth. So, I ask this. I ask as well the hon. Minister of Sport to look into the especially—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Ms. Ameen: “How much thing you want?”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Des Vignes: “He fighting for he constituents, wham to you?”

Ms. Ameen: You want everything.

Mr. K. Marcelle: Of course, I want betterment for my constituency—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle:—Member for St. Augustine.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Marcelle: Of course, I want some upliftment. [*Laughter*]

Of course I want some upliftment. Of course I want some upliftment. Right? So, I am simply, Mr. Speaker, advocating for, you know, some of the very serious concerns, Mr. Speaker.

12.35 a.m.

But I want to make a very important point. The East Port of Spain Development Company is a company that is very close to the hearts and the lives of the people of, not just Laventille West, but east Port of Spain on a whole, please, Mr. Speaker. It is a state enterprise that was developed in mind with the unique areas of concern and the at-risk youth and communities that form part of east Port of Spain. And it is a state agency that has truly done their very best to try to uplift and develop east Port of Spain. Another PNM project piloted by the then Minister of Local Government, Minister Hazel Manning.

Mr. Manning: Mom.

Mr. K. Marcelle: “Look you calling a different name.”

Mr. Manning: Yes, sorry.

Mr. K. Marcelle: Yes, Mr. Speaker. And what I want to pay close attention to, is that since April 28th, this East Port of Spain Development Company has, one, been without a board of directors. I am calling on the hon. Prime Minister to please look into and to have a board in place so that different policies and different approvals can be met so that the delivery to the people of east Port of Spain can continue, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, but what was concerning to me when I look at the Development Programme, the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*, I looked at the allocation for social and economic programme for east Port of Spain. Mr. Speaker, in 2024, on that line Item, east Port of Spain was given \$10 million. In 2025, under the PNM, it was given \$4 million, but expected in the mid-term to

increase, Mr. Speaker, and it was done the same way in 2024. But we have seen a 100 per cent decrease this fiscal year by only allocating \$2 million to east Port of Spain for its social and economic programmes. Mr. Speaker, that is concerning, and I hope that in the mid-year review, the hon. Minister of Finance and the hon. Minister of Housing can look at that allocation, revise it, and give the people of east Port of Spain the much-needed tools to continue to develop, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the second line Item, which is the regeneration of communities, that line, line 004. In 2024, we see \$5 million; 2025, \$4 million, Mr. Speaker. These funds were allocated to do very small projects within east Port of Spain: build stairs, small drainage, whatever the case may be, upgrade play parks, those kind of things. But, Mr. Speaker, for the first time in the history of east Port of Spain, the Government has allocated zero dollars and zero cents to this line Item.

Mr. Speaker, what sort of political victimization is this, when the very company designed to develop as its core mandate these very simple and small projects, Mr. Speaker, in these communities, to receive not one cent towards this, Mr. Speaker? Is that an indication that the people of east Port of Spain are not important to the UNC? Is it that they may have only been important before election, Mr. Speaker? Mr. Speaker, I call on the Government to correct this, whether it is in the mid-year or otherwise, and to allow the East Port of Spain Development Company to deliver on its mandate to the people of east Port of Spain, and in particular, the constituents of Laventille West.

Mr. Speaker, I see that the hon. Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs is back, and I want to just bring to his attention, I saw there is an allocation for the refurbishment and upgrades of the community swimming pools, and I know that the Laventille swimming pool has been down for repairs. It is my information that

it is less than \$100,000 to have the parts repaired, and I am asking, in collaboration with the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs, as well as the hon. Member for Couva North, who has the responsibility for UDeCOTT, for a combined effort to ensure that this particular pool is up and running for the benefit of the people of Laventille West.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity again, and I want to just end with a message to the people of Laventille West. I want to thank them firstly, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to represent them in this House, and the opportunity to serve them with integrity, with decency, with hard work, and with dedication.

Mr. Speaker, within the last five months-plus, as the Member of Parliament for Laventille West, I have rolled out some significant initiatives, have distributed over 500 back-to-school supply packages and vouchers. I have created a network where every month we give out food support to members in need. And, of course, Mr. Speaker, I am grateful as well—I know that the Member for Chaguanas East was not here when I gave the commendation, but I commend as well and gladly accept the 60 food cards for the people of Laventille West, for Divali, of course, and we hope that we continue to partner in the best interest of the people of Laventille West. I ask the people of Laventille West to be patient, because whilst we may be in opposition for this term, I am certain that it is only for one term. I ask them to have faith that joy cometh in the morning. Mr. Speaker, with those few words, I thank you very kindly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Members, before I ask the next speaker to speak, I propose to take a short break now. It is 12.42, I propose to return at quarter-past one, if that is agreeable. So, the sitting is now suspended until 1.15 a.m. Thank you very much.

12.42 a.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

1.15 a.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. Speaker: Member for Claxton Bay.

The Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training (Mr. Hansen Narinesingh): Mr. Speaker, I begin by extending my deepest gratitude to the people of the proud and resilient constituency of Claxton Bay, who, on the 28th April, 2025, entrusted me to be their Member of Parliament. Mr. Speaker, this is a responsibility I carry with humility, pride and unwavering commitment.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to take the opportunity to extend my appreciation to the constituents and citizens who attended the pre-budget consultations, both in Claxton Bay and across Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Their questions, ideas and suggestions were not only heard, they were valued and considered.

I must extend sincere thanks to the Member for Fyzabad, the hon. Minister of Finance, as well as the Minister of Planning and Economic Development and their respective teams. Their dedication, diligence and commitment to fiscal responsibility have ensured that the people's priorities form the foundation of this year's budget.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to also thank the mother of this nation, the hon. Prime Minister—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh:—whose steady leadership and guiding vision of putting Trinidad and Tobago first, served as a compass for this process. Her careful and critical examination of the policies and allocations, her insistence on fairness,

prudence and her razor-sharp focus on national development has shaped a budget that is not only fair, Mr. Speaker, but one that is truly for the people.

Mr. Speaker, I stand here today not only as the Member of Parliament for Claxton Bay, but also in my portfolio as the Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training. Upon assuming office, we were confronted with nothing but chaos, 10 years of neglect, incompetence, mismanagement, corruption and maladministration within the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training. We inherited a system that was broken, underfunded and directionless. The former Ministry of Education was bloated in scope and hollow in direction, that paid little attention to technical/vocational education.

Mr. Speaker, what can be described as the most egregious act of national sabotage is the systematic neglect and deterioration of tertiary education and the skills training sector. Let me be clear, technical/vocational skills training is not a peripheral concern. It is a cornerstone of national development. It equips citizens with the academic, technical and vocational skills they need to enter the workforce, to contribute meaningfully to the economy and participate fully in the progress of our nation. Neglecting this sector for a decade undermined the very foundations of a prosperous Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, during the period 2010 to 2015, the foundation of a knowledge-based economy was laid. Our tertiary institutions were vibrant, they were prospering, with a total enrollment of over 47,000 students, a reported 60 per cent uptake in tertiary level education. But, Mr. Speaker, what was left in 2015 was systematically eroded by 2024.

1.20 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, over the past nine years, there was a total collapse and

UNREVISED

deliberate hollowing out of these institutions. By 2024, the total enrolment across six major tertiary institutions dropped to just 27,000 students. Mr. Speaker, what truly highlights the past administration's mismanagement and lack of foresight lies in technical and vocational skills training.

Again, during the period 2010—2015, the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme, which we know as YTEPP, was the flagship provider of community-based skills training. YTEPP delivered courses in full-time centres and part-time centres within communities and community centres across the country. Most of these part-time centres were located in secondary schools, using the plant and equipment in secondary schools. This, Mr. Speaker, has stopped. The last Government forced YTEPP out of the secondary school system by asking YTEPP to pay to use these schools, even though they received funding from the central government. YTEPP, therefore, had to reduce the delivery of their programmes to thousands and thousands of young people, and only concentrate on six full-time sectors. Mr. Speaker, this is not just poor planning, it is reckless squandering of public funds.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: At COSTAATT, in 2015, Mr. Speaker, we left six fully functioning campuses: One in San Fernando, Chaguanas, Port of Spain, El Dorado, Sangre Grande and Tobago. You can fact-check that if you want, Mr. Speaker. There was six fully functioning campuses. El Dorado, in particular, was known as the Academy of Nursing and Allied Health. It was opened and commissioned in September of 2013. It was constructed to adjust the nation's and the region's need for health care professionals. Mr. Speaker, this all-important centre is now closed and repurposed for other needs. Out of the six COSTAATT campuses, only three in Trinidad remained open; one in San Fernando that is being

rented, one in Chaguanas that we constructed and one in Port of Spain, with just a single office in Tobago. That is what was left for the people of Tobago, just an office. These institutions, Mr. Speaker, are now just a shadow of what they once were.

Additional to this, while enrolment was dropping, we were also met with constant overlaps in programmes, duplication of skills training programmes, wasting valuable resources. The National Training Agency, which is the central authority for planning, coordinating and administering the national TVET system, was diminished due to a lack of ministerial oversight. This led to a fragmented training environment, with multiple agencies and Ministries operating in silos.

Mr. Speaker, we were also met with additional issues. Training institutions were issuing non-accredited, unrecognized certifications. Certificates were given without benchmarks, the National Qualification Framework or the Caribbean Vocational Qualification, known as the CVQ. This meant—and this is instructive, Mr. Speaker. This meant that hard-working citizens, after completing courses and earning certificates, would go to employers only to find that qualifications are undermined, not recognized and their skills disregarded. Mr. Speaker, this not only has an impact for us nationally but also, globally. By giving out certifications that are not recognized, this severely undermines the credibility of Trinidad and Tobago's workforce abroad.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: The blame for this, Mr. Speaker, falls squarely on the past administration for their lack of oversight, their neglect, poor planning and mismanagement. Mr. Speaker, this is a sad state of affairs. By destroying technical-vocational education, they signalled to the world that Trinidad and Tobago's workforce was becoming less skilled, less productive and less

competitive. But fear not, Mr. Speaker, we will fix it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister of Finance, my good friend, who I have known numerous years since secondary school, who I would now like to call the “Finance Tsar” of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh:—has already highlighted that he would open the Debe campus, which will be fully operational offering courses in law, forensics, IT and artificial intelligence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Mr. Speaker, the Debe campus signals a revival of Trinidad and Tobago’s academic potential. Citizens no longer have to travel the East-West Corridor to access the University of the West Indies. Whether you are living in the north, whether you are living in the south, whether you are living in the east or the west, you will have access to education.

Further to this, Mr. Speaker, a new construction sector skills programme is being launched with a goal of certifying 250 young people, equipping them with the CERT skills to contribute meaningfully to our nation’s development.

Mr. Speaker, we also plan to strengthen the accreditation system to safeguard the system against institutional drift and fragmentation. Mr. Speaker, we will even go further. We will create pathways for secondary school students who wish to pursue technical-vocational courses at the highest level by establishing the first technical-vocational university in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Fear not, Mr. Speaker, we will fix it. Not only will we provide greater access for education immobility, but we will also ensure

excellence. We will expand the vocational curricula, train more instructors and produce more graduates who are ready to meet the demands of a modern workforce.

Mr. Speaker, our Government is in a mode of resuscitation. We are resuscitating the drilling school under the NESC, which was launched under the last UNC-led administration, to supply talent for the energy industry and even those of our neighbours in Guyana. In fact, Mr. Speaker, we have plans even to support talent as far as West Africa. We are reviving the Aviation Campus under the UTT, commissioned in 2015 to position Trinidad and Tobago as the regional aviation hub. Mr. Speaker, where they dismantled, we will rebuild.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Where they rejected, we will nurture. We will fix it, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: I now turn to my own constituency. Mr. Speaker, this was a decade of neglect, disregard and outright failure. My constituents of Claxton Bay, previously known as Pointe-a-Pierre, feel a sense of abandonment and hopelessness. Mr. Speaker, in terms of the institutional structures, it is heartbreaking to know that some of our secondary schools in this constituency are in a state of total disrepair. The Claxton Bay Junior Anglican School has been closed since 2019, citing health and safety concerns. Mr. Speaker, but hear this, the children were relocated to the police municipal building in Marabella and were forced to be shuttled to school by PTSC buses. Mr. Speaker, instead of fixing the health and safety issues reported from the schools, you know what the last administration did? They stopped the buses from picking up the children. The school is still in a state of disrepair. Mr. Speaker, the Harmony Hall Presbyterian

School, I visited that school twice, it is in a state of the disrepair. It is a disgrace to have children attend an institution of learning in such a squalid condition.

Mr. Speaker, I now move to early childhood care and education centres. In my constituency of Claxton Bay/Pointe-a-Pierre—and I say Pointe-a-Pierre because that is the name I have learnt since I have been growing up there—there are two early childhood care and education centers that were built during the period 2010—2015, one in Spring Vale and one in Gopaul Lands. Mr. Speaker, these childhood centers were never opened. The state of these centres is utterly shocking. Mr. Speaker, this is not just neglect, this is unconscionable. Mr. Speaker, it is beyond—it is mind-blowing to note that the children of this nation cannot go to their early childhood centres. Mr. Speaker, it is heartbreaking. It is totally shameless. But, Mr. Speaker, I am confident that my honourable colleague, the Member for San Fernando West, the Minister of Education, will address these school repairs, and he has already indicated to me that we will fix it and we will get this thing done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Mr. Speaker, outside of the education system, I must turn my attention to infrastructure in my constituency. For far too long, the people from Claxton Bay have been repeatedly crying out for help; for 10 years, Mr. Speaker, for 10 years calling out for help. Their pleas have fallen on deaf ears. And I need to call out the communities, because if they are up and they are watching now, they will want to know that there communities have been called out because they have been in a state of disrepair and neglect, Mr. Speaker: Sum Sum Hill; Diamond Village; Belle Vue Village; Windsor Park; Cedar Hill; Claxton Bay; Spring Vale; Macaulay—hon. David Lee, tell me when I am going wrong—Sookoo Trace; Macaulay; Lalloo Trace; Badoo Trace; Maingot Ville; Pranz

Gardens; Union School Road, Marabella; and Gopaul Lands. Mr. Speaker, these areas have severe flooding issues, deteriorating roads, collapsing pavements, landslips and fallen bridges. This is the reality of my constituents' lives every single day.

Mr. Speaker, but there is one item in particular that you have to hear about. Mr. Speaker, there is a primary school by the name of Union Presbyterian Primary School, and about 100 feet from that school, there is a bridge. Mr. Speaker, the bridge is in a state of disrepair. I am sorry to use that word over and over again, but I have to use it. Mr. Speaker, the pavement and the sidewalk have fallen into the river. For the past—it has fallen into the river. The sidewalk—the fish in the river is probably using the sidewalk. This is where the children have to walk, Mr. Speaker, to go to school. But, Mr. Speaker, we will fix it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: I have already spoken to the Minister of Works and Infrastructure, the hon. Jearlean John, who immediately sent down her team, and her team came and did site visits, and project plans have been drawn up, and for fiscal 2026, I am assured that this bridge will be repaired.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: But, Mr. Speaker, it will be remiss of me if I did not, as the Member of Parliament for Claxton Bay, address one of the most deceitful and destructive decisions ever to have been taken by the previous administration.

1. 35 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, they thought they would make us forget, you know. They thought they would make us forget. You know how? They thought by changing the name of the constituency from Pointe-a-Pierre to Claxton Bay, that that would change the whole concept and the way people think in Claxton Bay. Somehow

they thought that we would forget 2018, Mr. Speaker, but we did not forget.

Mr. Speaker, paramount or perhaps what can be described as the compendium of injustices brought upon the people of Trinidad and Tobago by the former government, Mr. Speaker, the single perhaps biggest injustice was the closure of the Pointe-a- Pierre Refinery in 2018.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, I feel strongly about this. This singular decision—I feel strongly about this, Mr. Speaker, having grown up in the constituency, having grown up around men and women who have worked from Texaco, Trintoc, to Petrotrin, in different incarnations of that refinery, right, who have laboured in that refinery. Mr. Speaker, that singular decision crippled the communities of Gasparillo, Claxton Bay, and San Fernando. The refinery was the heartbeat of Pointe-a-Pierre and by extension the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. It sent thousands of highly skilled workers, technicians, engineers, and operators on the breadline, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: It not only destroyed the economy and the society, it also destroyed the psyche of the people of Pointe-a-Pierre.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: I do not know if they understand what they have done, Mr. Speaker. But I have full faith in my colleagues. I have full faith in my colleagues from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, my friend and one of our labour tsars, the Member for Point Fortin, and also the indomitable lion, the Member for Oropouche East. I know that they will fix this, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: That refinery will be back up. Mr. Speaker, the people of

Trinidad and Tobago and the people of Claxton Bay have waited too long and suffered enough under the previous regime. We did not come to this House to defend failure or preserve comfort. We came to this House to lead, to serve, and to deliver for the people. This budget, as presented by the hon. Minister of Finance, marks the first decisive step on the road to national recovery.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: This budget is about hope. It is about fairness, about healing. Mr. Speaker, this budget is about fixing it. We met this country in a state of disrepair, but today we are rebuilding it brick by brick, road by road—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh:—drain by drain, school by school, and community by community. We will fix it. And, if there is one thing, Mr. Speaker, if there is one thing you know, we in the UNC have proven time and time again that we are a government of performance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: We are a government of competence, and when the UNC wins, everybody wins.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Thank you, *gracias* and *Shubh Diwali*, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: I just want to congratulate the Member for Claxton Bay on his maiden contribution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

[*Pause*]

Mr. Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Nobody stood up.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

The Minister of Finance and Minister in the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development (Hon. Davendranath Tancoo): Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, one more time, the Members of the PNM in Opposition have abdicated their responsibility.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. D. Tancoo: Their sworn oath in this Chamber.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. D. Tancoo: You see, while many of them spoke, Mr. Speaker, and spoke, while many of them spoke and discussed all the important things, the Leader of the PNM indicated that she had the authority, she had the authority to speak. And, the Leader herself has abdicated the—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. D. Tancoo: Mr. Speaker, the PNM has fallen.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk and desk thumping*]

Hon. D. Tancoo: The PNM has fallen.

Mr. Speaker: Okay, we have gone very well.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Okay, we have gone very well through the 14 hours or 16 hours or however long hours we have been sitting. Okay, let us not engage at two o'clock in the morning into needless, useless, unhelpful, unproductive heckling. Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. D. Tancoo: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, they all had the opportunity to talk. They all had the opportunity to talk and several of them chose not to. The Leader

of the Opposition, she vacated the Chamber, she has gone, she has abdicated her responsibility again, Mr. Speaker.

[Opposition Members exit the Chamber]

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Hon. D. Tancoo: Mr. Speaker, and they run. And they run. The most important decision—

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Hon. D. Tancoo: You see, Mr. Speaker, they have nothing to say because they have no choice but to acknowledge that this is an excellent budget.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. D. Tancoo: The Opposition spoke for many hours, Mr. Speaker, and they ran out of things to say. They repeated, repeated, repeated, repeated, tedious repetition and still had no point to make. Mr. Speaker, this will be the shortest wind-up ever of a national budget because there is nothing to respond to there. So, Mr. Speaker, on the basis of all of that, I want to thank my colleagues on this side—

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. D. Tancoo:—who stood up and represented the citizens of this country, while Members of the PNM ducked and ran, and shirked their responsibility. Mr. Speaker, it is my honour and privilege to commend this budget to the House. Mr. Speaker, I beg to move.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Hon. D. Tancoo: Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 81(8), I beg to move:

That the Appropriation (Financial Year 2026) Bill, 2025, be referred to the Standing Finance Committee for the consideration of the Bill together with the Estimates.

Mr. Speaker: The House shall now go into Standing Finance Committee to consider the Bill and the Estimates.

House resolved itself into Standing Finance Committee.

Mr. Chairman: Members, can I crave everyone's indulgence? Apparently, well, for obvious reasons, I do not think anyone thought we would have been at this stage at this time in the proceedings. So the procedural brief that usually accompanies this is not yet ready. Mr. Lucio has kindly offered to volunteer to print it and to bring it for us. So I am going to suspend for 10 minutes, and we will return in 10 minutes.

Unless the Members would want to convene the Committee and then— [*Chairman confers with Clerk*] I am advised by the Clerk to my left who knows this procedure far better than I ever would, and I suspect most of us in here ever would, that we should suspend for 10 minutes, so that we get the procedure correct. So it is now 1.49. We return promptly at 2.00. Thank you very much.

1.49 a.m.: *Standing Finance Committee suspended.*

2.00 a.m.: *Standing Finance Committee resumed.*

Mr. Chairman: Members, my apologies, but there seems to be some sort of delay in the printing of the procedural brief. Now, it appears to me that the House, having moved into the Committee, I think it is accepted that we are not going to do it now. We are going to adjourn to Tuesday to do it. I think the bugbear is that the staff feels that we should explain the process going forward now.

Mr. Imbert: It is normal.

Mr. Chairman: It is normal, but I suppose as a House, we can defer it, and we can defer that process until Tuesday.

[Mr. Speaker confers with Clerk]

Mr. Chairman: I am told it is here. Alright, so shall we go ahead for the economy of time? Hon. Members, in accordance with Standing Orders 81(2) and (8), the Estimates containing the details of the financial requirements, along with the Appropriation Bill, have been referred to this Committee for consideration. The documents before the Committee, therefore, include the *Draft Estimates Details of Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure for the Financial Year 2026*, which identifies:

1. The Heads of Expenditure;
2. The chart of accounts for expenditure;
3. The classification of expenditure Sub-Items under the Personnel Expenditure, Goods and Services and Minor Equipment Purchases Sub-Heads;
4. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure;
5. The Sub-Item details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The *Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly for the Financial Year 2026*, which identifies:

1. The statutory board or body for each Head of Expenditure;
2. The abstract of estimated revenue and expenditure for the year ending 30th September, 2026;
3. The abstract showing the Government's subvention for 2024 Actual Expenditure, 2025 Estimates, 2025 Revised Estimates, 2026 Estimates

and the increase or decrease of the 2026 Estimates over or under the 2025 Revised Estimates;

4. The chart of accounts for income and expenditure;
5. The classification of expenditure Sub-Items under the Personnel Expenditure, Goods and Services and Minor Equipment Purchases Sub-Heads;
6. The Sub-Item details relevant to each statutory board or body for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The *Draft Estimates of Development Programme for the Financial Year 2026*, which includes:

1. The summary of estimates for the Development Programme for the financial year 2026 for Part A, the Consolidated Fund;
2. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure for Sub-Head 09: Development Programme Consolidated Fund;
3. The Item, Sub-Item, Project Group and Project Description details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding;
4. The summary of estimates of Part B of the Infrastructure Development Fund for the financial year 2026;
5. The summary of the total allocation to each Head of Expenditure for Head 701: Infrastructure Development Fund.
6. The Item, Sub-Item, Project Group and Project Description details relevant to each Head of Expenditure for the current fiscal year and the two fiscal years immediately preceding.

The Appropriation (Financial Year 2026) Bill, 2025: The Bill provides for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending 30th September,

2026. The Bill seeks to authorize a sum of \$50,405,695,293 from the Consolidated Fund. The Schedule details the sum to be approved for each Head of Expenditure.

In accordance with Standing Order 85(1), the consideration of the clauses of the Bill will be postponed until after the consideration of the Schedule, which lists the Heads of Expenditure to be approved. The Heads will be considered in the order submitted by the Leader of the Opposition.

The proposed work schedule is as follows: Hon. Members, there are 44 Heads of Expenditure to be considered over a maximum five-day period. Therefore, I propose that the Committee meet each day from 10.00 a.m. to 8.00 p.m., or for so long thereafter, to consider a minimum—and I stress—minimum of nine Heads of Expenditure per day.

In consideration of the Tobago House of Assembly, hon. Members, I crave your indulgence to have the Committee agree on the time for the examination of the Tobago House of Assembly and the Central Administrative Services, Tobago, on day five, Saturday, October 25, 2025, I am advised, in order to allow these representatives to make arrangements to travel to Trinidad and Tobago. May I suggest that given the order submitted by the Leader of the Opposition, the Tobago House of Assembly and the Central Administrative Services, Tobago, be examined on a date to be agreed on Tuesday morning, so that sufficient notification can be given to Tobago?

Speaking time: Hon. Members, in accordance with Standing Order 45(1), the speaking time in the Standing Finance Committee shall not exceed five minutes on each intervention. Each Minister will be invited to make a brief five-minute opening statement on the Ministry or department's priority areas for the upcoming year. The procedure for each Head should be as follows:

1. The Head and the amount to be appropriated will be announced by me as the Chairman;
2. The Minister will then be invited to make a brief opening statement;
3. The Chairman, I, will then propose the question that the sum proposed stands part of the Schedule;
4. For each Head of Expenditure, I will call the Sub-Head followed by the Item. I will not call the Sub-Items. Discussions can ensue on the Item called or the relevant Sub-Item, and clarifications sought. Once the Committee moves to another Sub-Head, questions from a previous Sub-Head will not be entertained.
5. I will repeat the procedure for the Development Programme.
6. Once this is concluded, I will then put the question that the sum stands as part of the Schedule.
7. This identical procedure will be repeated for each Head of Expenditure.

Can I enquire whether there are any other items of business to be discussed at this point? Hon. Members, the meeting of the Standing Finance Committee is now hereby suspended and will resume on Tuesday, October 21, 2025, at 10.00 a.m.

Standing Finance Committee suspended

House resumed

DIVALI GREETINGS

Mr. Speaker: Members, even though the Committee was suspended until Tuesday, as we are all aware, on Monday the nation celebrates Divali. I will now invite both sides to make short remarks on the occasion of Divali. If I could invite the Government side first—any nominee of the Government side. Leader of Government Business.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath): Thank you, hon. Speaker. At 2.09 a.m., I would like to greet Members of this House and the national community in the Hindu traditional way of Sitaram or Namaskar.

Mr. Speaker, as we celebrate Divali 2025, we are reminded that Hindus believe in *Matru Devo Bhava*, which means “mother is our first God”. And therefore, it is around Divali time, in particular, that the Hindu deity, the Goddess Lakshmi, is worshipped and revered.

We are also reminded that while there are grand celebrations in mandirs, Divali celebrations and the holiest of places, Hindus believe in *Matru Devo Bhava*, meaning “mother is your first God”, because the Goddess Lakshmi herself resides in our mothers, our grandmothers, our daughters, our sisters, our wives, and also, our political leader and the Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Padarath: Mr. Speaker, Bhagavan Krishna says in *Bhagavad Gita*:

*“Yada yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati bharata
Abhythanamadharma-sya tadatmanam srijamyaham
Paritranaya sadhunang vinashay cha dushkritam
Dharmasangsthapanarthay sambhabami yuge yuge”.*

Lord Krishna says, when righteousness is on the decline, the world is in turmoil. I will come from time to time to relieve you from your problems.

Mr. Speaker, on April 28th, Bhagavan Krishna did not come himself. He did not send a man. He sent a woman, the embodiment of Mahalakshmi herself that we celebrate during Divali time, to return goodness, prosperity, happiness, the light, the divinity to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Divali Greetings
Mr. Des Vignes (cont'd)

2025.10.17

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Padarath: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Government Members, we want to say that we recognize that anywhere in which a society respects women, that society will uphold. Anywhere society disrespects women—where we have seen glaring examples of that, even in this own Chamber—that society will crumble.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, as we celebrate Divali 2025, it gives us the opportunity of introspection. It gives us the opportunity to place respect on women in particular, as the Goddess Lakshmi herself represents everything that is good, and therefore, once we see everything that is good, through the Goddess Lakshmi, we also see everything that is good in all of our nation's women and throughout the world.

Therefore, this early morning, on behalf of the Members of the Government, we offer our respect to the feet of the light and the divinity, the embodiment of Mahalakshmi, through our hon. Prime Minister, who has restored good governance to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to say Shubh Divali on behalf of the hon. Prime Minister, Members of the Government Bench, and may the light continue to pervade all of Trinidad and Tobago, and continue to remove the darkness that we endured over the last 10 years. May Bhagavan Krishna and Mahalakshmi continue to bless all of Trinidad and Tobago during this time of Divali. Shubh Divali to Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for Diego Martin West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hans Des Vignes: Mr. Speaker, we are in a holy and sacred period for the Hindu community, indeed, one of the most auspicious in the Hindu calendar. The

Divali Greetings
Mr. Speaker

2025.10.17

holy period is characterized by deep introspection, fasting and preparation. As the world over celebrates this festival of Divali, we in the Opposition extend warm greetings to the Hindu community and to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. We are truly fortunate to live harmoniously in a multicultural society; a privilege many around the world do not get the pleasure of experiencing.

Divali reminds us that no matter our situation, our circumstance, good always triumphs over evil, knowledge over ignorance, and righteousness over treachery. As diyas are lit across homes and communities, we are reminded of the enduring power of unity, compassion and spiritual enlightenment. It is a time when families come together, communities are strengthened and the bonds of our shared humanity shine most brightly. This year, as we face many social and economic challenges, the lessons of Divali remind us that even in the darkest of times, light will prevail. Let us draw inspiration from this sacred festival to reaffirm our commitment to justice, equality and the dignity of all.

On behalf of the Opposition, I extend warm greetings and heartfelt wishes to the Hindu community and to all citizens of our beloved nation as we celebrate the joyous festival of Divali; Divali, the festival of lights, a time of reflection, renewal and hope, rooted in the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance.

Divali offers a powerful message: Peace, love, honesty, respect, one that all in this Chamber, all in the Government, would do well to respect and abide by. May this Divali bring peace, prosperity and a renewed purpose to every home. Let us not politicize but continue to celebrate and protect the rich cultural heritage that defines us as a nation. Shubh Divali to all.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

UNREVISED

2.15 a.m.

Mr. Speaker: Members, I too should like to give some short greetings. It is a profound honour to extend my greetings on this sacred and radiant occasion of Divali, a festival that does not merely illuminate lamps but one which illuminates the human conscience.

We often describe Divali as the triumph of darkness, of good over evil and of knowledge over ignorance. Yet, in truth, this festival invites us to look inward, to confront the shadows that dwell within ourselves and within our society. It reminds us that the real struggle between light and darkness is not fought in distant heavenly realms, but in the quiet decisions we make each day between compassion and indifference, truth and convenience, justice and silence.

At the heart of Divali lies the timeless Katha or story of Lord Rama, the noble and beloved prince of Ayodhya, whose journey remains one of humanity's greatest moral and spiritual lessons. Exiled from his kingdom for 14 years, deprived of his birthright, deprived of his comfort and separated from all that he held dear in life and his loved ones, Lord Rama did not yield to despair, instead he embraced hardship with faith, humility and an unwavering commitment to dharma, righteousness. His trials reveal that the true leadership is not conferred by birth but forged in character, perseverance, resilience and conviction.

When Lord Rama triumphantly returned to Ayodhya, the people illuminated the city with thousands of deyas to welcome him home, that light symbolized far more than joy. It proclaimed the victory of virtue, the restoration of justice and the renewal of hope.

Each year, when we light our own deyas, we rekindle that eternal flame of faith and righteousness, reminding ourselves that even in our darkest hour light

endures. The flame of Divali is also reminiscent of the duality of life. Just as the flame illuminates, the flame can incinerate. It is the use you make of the flame. And so, as we celebrate this Divali, let us not only recall Rama's homecoming but ask ourselves: What Ayodhya are we building today? A nation guided by decency over noise, respect over ridicule and purpose over popularity?

Divali calls upon each of us, not merely to celebrate light but to become it, especially where light seems most fragile. May this Divali not only decorate our homes but illuminate our intentions, not only mark a victory of the past but inspire renewal of conscience for the present and the future.

On behalf of the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, I extend warmest Divali greetings to the entire Hindu community, and indeed, to our entire nation. May the divine light of Divali dispel the darkness of our hearts, guide our actions with wisdom and compassion, and inspire us to live lives of integrity, service and faith. Shubh Divali to one and all.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

Mr. Speaker: Okay. Members, I am further advised, to maintain procedural propriety, that we should, once again, merely for the formality of reconvening the committee stage and then formally suspending once again, even though we have done it because we came back into the House for the Divali greetings, that perhaps we should just do that out of procedural propriety. Not a big fan of procedural justice but this is what I am advised. Thank you.

Standing Finance Committee resumed.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, I thank you for your kind indulgences and the committee is hereby, once again, reconvened, and I propose that the meeting of the

Standing Finance Committee is suspended and will resume on Tuesday, October 21, 2025, at 10.00 a.m. Thank you all very much.

2.21 a.m.: *Standing Finance Committee suspended.*