



REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Debates of the House of Representatives

1st Session – 11th Parliament (Rep.) – Volume 2 – Number 13

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

THE HONOURABLE BRIDGID ANNISETTE-GEORGE
SPEAKER

THE HONOURABLE ESMOND FORDE
DEPUTY SPEAKER

Friday 27th November, 2015

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(TYPESET BY THE HANSARD STAFF, PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY THE GOVERNMENT PRINTER, CARONI,
REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO— 2021)

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, November 27, 2015*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, Mr. Ganga Singh, MP, Member for Chaguanas West; Mr. Fazal Karim, MP, Member for Chaguanas East and the Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy, MP, Member for Tobago East, have asked to be excused from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEES
(APPOINTMENT OF)**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received correspondence from the President of the Senate dated November 18, 2015 on the appointment of Members to Joint Select Committees as follows.

“Dear Honourable Speaker,

Appointment of Members to Joint Select Committees.

Your letter dated November 16, 2015 on the subject at caption refers. Please be informed that at a sitting held on Tuesday, November 17, 2015, the Senate appointed the following Members to serve with an equal number from the House of Representatives on the Joint Select Committees specified below:

The Public Accounts Committee

Dr. Lester Henry;

Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon;

Mr. Wade Mark;

Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir;

The Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee

Mrs. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus;

Mr. Foster Cummings;

Mr. Wade Mark;

Mr. David Small;

JSCs (Appointment of)

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The Public Administration and Appropriations Committee

Mr. Clarence Rambharat;

Ms. Allyson Baksh;

Mr. Daniel Dookie;

Mr. Rodger Samuel;

Ms. Melissa Ramkissoon.

Parliamentary Broadcasting Committee

Ms. Christine Kangaloo - Vice-Chairman;

Ms. Nadine Stewart;

Ms. Khadijah Ameen;

Mr. Paul Richards.

The Committee on Government Assurances

Ms. Christine Kangaloo – Chairman;

Mr. Foster Cummings;

Ms. Khadijah Ameen;

Mr. H. R. Ian Roach.

The Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs

Mr. W. Michael Coppin;

Mr. Clarence Rambharat;

Mr. Wayne Sturge;

Ms. Sophia Chote, SC.

The Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure

Mr. Franklin Khan;

Mr. Hafeez Ali;

Mr. Daniel Solomon;

Mr. Stephen Creese.

The Committee on Social Services and Public Administration

Ms. Nadine Stewart;

Mr. Hafeez Ali;

Ms. Khadijah Ameen;

Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir.

The Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities

Mrs. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus;

Mr. Nigel De Freitas;

Mr. Daniel Solomon;

Mr. H. R. Ian Roach.

The Committee on State Enterprises

Dr. Lester Henry;

Ms. Allyson Baksh;

Mr. Wade Mark;

Mr. David Small.

The Committee on National Security

Mr. W. Michael Coppin;

Mr. Nigel De Freitas;

Mr. Wayne Sturge;

Mr. Taurel Shrikissoon.

The Committee on Energy Affairs

Mr. Franklin Khan;

Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon;

Mr. Daniel Solomon;

Mr. David Small.

The Committee on Foreign Affairs

Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon;

Mr. Avinash Singh;

Mr. Rodger Samuel;

Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir.

The Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity

Mr. Dennis Moses;

Ms. Sarah Budhu;

Mr. Rodger Samuel;

Ms. Jennifer Raffoul.

JSCs (Appointment of)

Friday, November 27, 2015

Establishment of two (2) Joint Select Committees (each to consider and report on a specific Bill)

Also the Senate concurred with the establishment of a Joint Select Committee on the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property (Amdt.) Bill, 2015 and a Joint Select Committee on The Whistleblower Protection Bill, 2015.

The following Members were appointed to serve:

Joint Select Committee on The Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property (Amdt.) Bill 2015:

Mr. Franklin Khan;
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon;
Mr. Wayne Sturge;
Mr. David Small.

Joint Select Committee on The Whistleblower Protection Bill, 2015

Mr. W. Michael Coppin;
Mr. Foster Cummings;
Mr. Wade Mark;
Ms. Sophia Chote SC.

Accordingly, I respectfully request that you cause these matters to be brought to the attention of the House of Representatives at the earliest convenience.

Yours respectfully,

Senator the Hon. Christine Kangaloo

President of the Senate”

**SESSIONAL SELECT COMMITTEES
(APPOINTMENT OF)**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, pursuant to Standing Order 89(2), I have appointed the following Members to serve on the Sessional Select Committees of the House of Representatives for the First Session, 2015/2016, of the Eleventh Parliament:

House Committee

Mr. Ganga Singh, in lieu of Dr. Lakhram Bodoë.

SSCs (Appointment of)

Friday, November 27, 2015

Committee of Privileges

Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan, in lieu of Dr. Roodal Moonilal.

Statutory Instruments Committee

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, in lieu of Dr. Fuad Khan.

Business Committee

Mr. Ganga Singh, in lieu of Dr. Roodal Moonilal.

PAPERS LAID

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Statement of Recovery of Expenses of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Affairs for the year ended December 31, 2014. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.
2. Annual Administrative Report of the Betting Levy Board for the year July 01, 2012 to June 30, 2013. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. Final Report on the Ninth Actuarial Review of the National Insurance System as at June 30, 2013. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training for the period October 2013 to September 2014. [*The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia)*]
5. Annual Report of the Registration Recognition and Certification Board for the year 2011. [*The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
6. Annual Report of the Registration Recognition and Certification Board for the year 2012. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
7. Special Report No. 1 of 2015 of the Ombudsman of Trinidad and Tobago submitted under Section 94(4) of the Constitution. [*The Deputy Speaker (Mr. Esmond Forde)*]

PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

**Students on Scholarship
(Tuition Disbursements)**

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (*Siparia*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. A question to the hon. Acting Prime Minister, and may I take the opportunity to congratulate him on his appointment as Acting Prime Minister. [*Desk thumping*] He seems very happy.

Dr. Gopeesingh: He is smiling.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Can the Acting Prime Minister state whether all Trinidad and Tobago students attending university on scholarship have received their tuition disbursements?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Due to the short notice of this question which is usual for Prime Minister's questions, I am not in a position to state definitively whether all Trinidad and Tobago students have received their tuition disbursements. What I can say, however, is that the Ministry of Education is making every effort to ensure that all tuition disbursements are paid on time.

**Net Foreign Reserves
(Increase or Decrease)**

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (Caroni East): Could the Acting Prime Minister state whether the national foreign reserve has increased or decreased between September 08, 2015 and November 26, 2015, the date I had filed the question?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The foreign reserves are calculated on a weekly basis and therefore it is not possible to give precise figures within the short space of time afforded to me to answer this question. However, what I can say is that on September 11, the net foreign reserves stood at US \$10.3 billion, equivalent to 11.7 months of import cover. And on November 20, the foreign reserves stood at \$9.6 billion, equivalent to 11 months of import cover.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Would the hon. Acting Prime Minister indicate whether that decrease to \$9.6 billion included the \$500 million that the Central Bank, in conjunction with your discussion with them—would that have been included in your figure finally which you stated?

1.45 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, I would not want to talk out of turn. The \$500 million was injected in November. But since these figures are at November 20, I would not want to say definitively whether that is so or not. I believe so, but I do not wish to make a categorical statement that the \$9.6 billion was after the injection of \$500 million, but I am reasonably confident that it was.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Could the hon. Acting Prime Minister indicate if he is aware, if you have any knowledge, as to when you came into Government what was the foreign reserve since you were Minister of Finance?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: He said \$10.3 billion.

Hon. C. Imbert: I answered that. On September 11th, which is when all Ministers were sworn in, it was \$10.3 billion.

**Budgetary Measures in relation to VAT Collection
(Details of)**

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Could the Acting Prime Minister state whether the budgetary measures in relation to VAT collection so far are producing the anticipated results?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, I found this to be a very curious question and one gets the impression that the hon. Member was not paying attention during the presentation of the National Budget, because it was clearly stated, during the presentation and during the detailed examination of the estimates and on a number of occasions afterwards and in the other place last week, in answer to a matter on the adjournment, that the adjustments to the VAT regime are scheduled to take effect on January 01, 2016, which has not yet arrived so it is not possible to answer this question, because the VAT changes have not yet taken effect.

**URP Workers
(Details of)**

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Is the Acting Prime Minister aware that many URP workers have been dismissed since the new administration took office?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): I am not so aware.

Dr. Gopeesingh: I wish to bring it to his attention. Would it be possible—
[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Can we bring it to your attention?

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East, that is not a question.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Yes.

Madam Speaker: So I would not permit that. So when I called Member for Caroni East, it was with respect to the other question that you have.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Well, can I just ask a supplementary on the last, if you would kindly permit?

Madam Speaker: You are entitled to four supplementary, once they arise out of the question or the response.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Would you be kind enough to make enquiries as to the question, and report?

Hon. C. Imbert: I am assuming that the hon. Member is associating that question with the original question.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Yes.

Hon. C. Imbert: And the answer is, certainly.

Contract Employees (Details of)

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): Is the Acting Prime Minister aware that many contract employees in state enterprises have been dismissed since the new administration took office?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, we are aware that there were a number of short-term contracts scheduled to terminate on 30th September. With respect to that question, I am not aware, but I would say that, in my capacity as Minister of Finance, my other capacity, I received a report that there are over 7,000 contract employees within the public service and the Government has recently appointed a committee to review contract employment. But with respect to the specific question, I am not aware how many or if any contract employees have been dismissed since this administration took office.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Would you consider it kindly to enquire into whether there have been employees in state enterprises who have lost their jobs?

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, I am not aware and I do not think I have the capability to answer a new question in five seconds, but I would most certainly determine if that is so.

Foreign Exchange Shortages (Government's Action)

Dr. Fuad Khan (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. May I start by congratulating the Member for Diego Martin North/East on his ascension

to the Acting Prime Minister after almost “20-something” years. Congratulations. I decided to give you a very simple question that belongs to your Ministry.

Can the Acting Prime Minister explain how the Government intends to address the foreign exchange shortages facing businesses?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank Madam Speaker. I would like to thank the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan and also the Leader of the Opposition for their very kind sentiments.

With respect to this particular question, the Government is keeping the foreign exchange availability situation under review on a regular basis. In fact, we are monitoring this on a weekly basis. What I can say at the outset is that when one examines the conversions of foreign exchange in the commercial banking sector, you would see, and this is something I reported yesterday at the post-Cabinet Press Conference, that in 2013, the conversion of foreign exchange in the commercial banking sector was of the order of US \$5.8 billion and the quantum of foreign exchange injected into the system by the Central Bank was of the order of \$1.3 billion, which gives you a demand for foreign exchange annually, in aggregate of just over US \$7 billion.

Based on the preliminary analysis that has been done since the new Government came in, the foreign exchange demand has continued at a level of approximately US \$7 billion in 2014 and also in 2015, so far.

In 2014, the conversions in the commercial banking sector, this is by manufacturers and other earners of foreign exchange, was reduced from \$5.8 billion in 2013, down to about \$5.5 billion in 2014. As a consequence, the injection by the Central Bank increased from \$1.3 billion up to about \$1.6 billion, to maintain the same availability of foreign exchange in aggregate.

In 2015, so far, the Central Bank has injected just over \$2.6 billion as the conversions have fallen to below \$5 billion, and this is a direct result of the decrease in commodity prices. But the availability is more or less the same in 2013, 2014 and 2015.

So we are monitoring the situation and we are taking appropriate action to ensure that there is a supply. I could also say that the recent injection of \$500 million was to clear a backlog of foreign exchange demand in the system. It has now rebooted and reset the system.

Dr. Khan: Just a supplemental question. I just want to ask the hon. Acting Prime Minister if he is aware that the pharmaceutical companies have been

indicating that they are not getting the foreign exchange for vital drugs. If you are not aware, could you just look into that aspect for me please?

Hon. C. Imbert: I am not aware but I would most certainly look into the matter and take appropriate action.

Dr. Rambachan: Acting Prime Minister, can you say whether—in fact, with respect to the question in addressing how the Government intends to address the foreign exchange shortage, whether any analysis is being done to see whether the foreign exchange being released is really reaching the legitimate traders, or whether financial institutions have been using the money for their own use, in terms of payments and so on? Because one bank, you recall, did stop selling foreign exchange in August of this year.

Hon. C. Imbert: Based on the information so far, the injection of \$500 million, which was a measure taken to ease the shortage of foreign exchange, has been used for trade-related purposes—but we have been—primarily. But we are going to drill deeper into this matter and do some more in-depth analysis to ensure that the system of distribution is practical and in the best interest of all concerned. We are keeping this under constant review.

Dr. Rambachan: Is the Acting Prime Minister aware that people who need foreign exchange are being called to say how much you want by certain banks and based upon their ability to find the TT equivalent to pay that, they are paying higher rates?

Madam Speaker: I am not sure that that is a supplemental question. Okay? So I would not allow the question.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Could the hon. Acting Prime Minister indicate whether they have done the research or the enquiry into the payment of the \$500 million released by the Central Bank, as you had indicated from what I read in the press?

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, I thought I just said that? But for the benefit of the Member, who does not seem to be paying attention, I said that we examined the distribution of the \$500 million and it was primarily used for trade-related purposes. I did say that two seconds ago.

What I would also say is that I want to repeat that the Central Bank has already put US \$2.6 billion into the system and the recent injection of \$500 million was designed to clear the backlog. So there has been very active participation by the Central Bank in 2015, to deal with the demands for foreign exchange and we are keeping it under constant review.

**Foreign Exchange Shortage
(Government's Solution)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I join with my colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East for his accession to the position of Prime Minister. I would like to ask the following question:

Is the Acting Prime Minister aware that many contracted officials employed in Embassies and High Commissions abroad have been dismissed since this new administration took office?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): I am not so aware but what I am aware of is that many of the persons who were engaged at these missions were political appointees and it is quite normal, on a change of administration, to have changes in political appointees.

Mr. Charles: Is the Minister comfortable with his statement regarding these dismissals and are they consistent with a statement made by the Prime Minister that no citizen need to be fearful of victimization?

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, I am not going to allow that as a supplemental question. It does not follow from the answer which said, if I remembered well, your question was framed with respect to dismissals. I believe the Member also said that these contracts came to an end.

Mr. Charles: No, he did not say that.

Madam Speaker: But in any event, I am not allowing that as a supplemental.

Mr. Charles: May I ask another supplemental question?

Madam Speaker: Once it is within the rules.

Mr. Charles: Is the Minister prepared to indicate when terminal and other benefits would be paid to these dismissed officers, consistent with their contracts?

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, I answered the first part by saying I was not aware that contracted officials had been dismissed and since I am not aware that contracted officials have been dismissed, I am in no position to indicate whether terminal benefits would be paid, because I am not aware that contracted officials have been dismissed.

**National Gas Company
(Wage Freeze)**

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I too want to join in congratulating the Member for Diego Martin North/East in ascending to the Office of Acting Prime Minister and I take the opportunity to ask the Acting Prime Minister:

Is the decision of the Board of the National Gas Company to introduce a wage freeze one that your Government supports?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, it is necessary to put this issue into some perspective. In 2012, the profits of the NGC group totalled \$9.6 billion. In 2013, the profits fell to \$6.6 billion. In 2014, the profits fell to \$4.4 billion, and in 2015, the profits are forecasted to fall below \$3 billion.

In addition, Madam Speaker, the prices and the margin in the sector are projected to be lower than usual for a considerable period of time. This will impact upon the profitability of the National Gas Company.

As a consequence, the National Gas Company issued a memorandum on November 16, 2015, and in this memorandum they indicated that there would be no market adjustment in salaries for 2015 and 2016, there would be no merit increases in salaries for 2016 and there would be a ceiling on gain/share payments at six weeks basic salary for both 2015 and 2016. The National Gas Company took this action in the context of the declining profitability of the company.

2.00 p.m.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Hon. Minister, was that decision taken by the board? Is that decision supported by your Government?

Madam Speaker: Is that two questions or one question? I am not certain.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Hon. Speaker, it is the identical question on the paper that was not answered. So I am asking it again.

Madam Speaker: The identical question on the paper that is being asked?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: It is one question.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, the decision was taken by the Board, and as the substantive Prime Minister has indicated at another time, in another place, and which I also endorse, in the face of declining profitability it was a sensible move on the part of the company.

Dr. Tewarie: May I ask a supplemental, hon. Speaker?

Madam Speaker: You may, Member.

Dr. Tewarie: Does this represent—does the wage freeze represent a national policy by the Government for the state sector?

Madam Speaker: That is a much wider question than the original question asked. I do not think it is a supplemental question. I think it is a new question. I would not allow it.

**Prime Minister's Official Travel
(Attendance at Political Fund Raising Events)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (Naparima): Could the Acting Prime Minister state whether the Prime Minister will be attending any private, political fund raising events while on his current official visit?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): The substantive Prime Minister, the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, has already indicated at another time, in another place, that in his private time on one of the evenings that he will be the United Kingdom, that he will be attending a private event.

Mr. Charles: Is the Prime Minister following proper protocol, while on official business abroad, he is supposed to attend public partisan events?

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, I do not think that that is supplemental. I think that is a fresh question. I do not think that is supplemental to the answer given.

Mr. Charles: I have a copy—[*Interruption*]

**San Fernando to Point Fortin Highway
(Completion of)**

Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan (Tabaquite): Could the Acting Prime Minister inform this House when will the San Fernando to Point Fortin Highway be completed?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is difficult at this point in time to give a precise answer to that question, because of the manner in which the project was mismanaged by the previous administration. [*Laughter*] I participated, in my other capacity, on a site visit with the hon. Minister of Works and Transport and the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to the highway construction; approximately one month ago I believe?

Mr. Hinds: Yes.

Hon. C. Imbert: We observed that on the face of it, the physical works are barely 50 per cent complete. Whereas the contractor has been paid almost 70 per cent of the cost of the project. [*Interruption*] In addition, it appears that the former administration made some design changes which have reduced the scope of the project, and have downgraded the effectiveness of the project.

As a consequence of all of these events, the mismanagement of the project by the former administration; the possible overpayment to the contractor and the reduction in the design scope of the project, the Government is currently conducting a comprehensive review, and will take appropriate action in due course. [*Desk thumping*] It is therefore not possible to state, at this time, precisely when the project will be completed.

Mr. Hinds: “Well putted, Prime Minister. Well putted.” [*Laughter*]

Dr. Rambachan: Acting Prime Minister, through the Speaker, are you aware that at November 24, yesterday, that the OAS had the right to terminate the contract? And did they issue—did they use that right?

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, the former administration made no financial arrangements for the funding of the Point Fortin Highway beyond October of 2015. The new Government is now faced with the problem of raising the necessary finance to complete the project. The matter of which the hon. Member speaks is a direct result of the gross incompetence of the last administration, [*Desk thumping*] in not arranging proper long-term financing for this project.

I wish to state, however, we have this matter under constant review. We have hired experts and we will take appropriate action to safeguard the national interest. [*Desk thumping*]

CDAP Drugs (Shortage of)

Dr. Lackram Bodoie (*Fyzabad*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. May I also take this opportunity to congratulate the Member for his ascension to the Acting Prime Minister, and to ask: is the hon. Acting Prime Minister aware that there is reportedly a shortage of CDAP drugs in the country?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Again, Madam Speaker, the issues currently being faced by the Ministry of Health with respect to CDAP drugs are a direct result of the failure of the former administration to finalize long-term arrangements with the supplier for the supply of drugs.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health was faced with a month to month contract arrangement, unresolved negotiations, and a missing long-term contract for provision of drugs. Despite that, the Minister of Health has managed to manage the situation admirably [*Desk thumping*] to make sure there is a proper supply of drugs in the pharmacies. [*Laughter and interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Please settle down. Members! Please settle down.

Public Sector Wages (Freezing of)

Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*): Thank you. Would the Acting Prime Minister inform this House whether a decision has been taken by Cabinet to freeze wages in the public sector?

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (**Hon. Colm Imbert**): The answer is no.

Mr. Paray: Is Cabinet—thank you, Madam Speaker. Is Cabinet giving consideration to such a policy and what approach and measures are being perused to achieve this objective?

Hon. C. Imbert: The answer to this supplemental question is also no, and therefore, the other part of that question does not apply.

Outstanding Wage Negotiations (Settlement of)

Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Would the Acting Prime Minister inform this House whether his Government intends to settle outstanding wage negotiations in a number of state enterprises including T&TEC, NP, PETROTRIN, UTT, PowerGen, among others? Thank you.

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (**Hon. Colm Imbert**): The answer is yes. [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

URGENT QUESTIONS Closure of Schools

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (*Caroni East*): To the Minister of Education, Madam Speaker: is the Minister aware that a number of schools are currently closed in Trinidad, and what is the Minister doing to address this present issue?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Anthony Garcia): Madam Speaker, the simple answer to this question is yes, I am aware that there are a number of schools that are closed at this present time. In fact, I can point out to you some of the schools that are closed:

- South Oropouche RC Primary - safety issues
- Palo Seco Government Primary - sewer problems
- Vistabella Presbyterian Primary - electrical problems
- Brothers Presbyterian Primary - health and safety issues
- Moruga RC Primary - building demolished
- Arouca Government Primary - electrical
- Lower Government Primary - non-functioning air condition
- Piccadilly Government Primary - building declared unsafe
- Raghunanan Road Government Primary - clogged sewer drains
- Chaguanas Government Primary - sewer problems
- Monroe Road Hindu - awaiting approvals

Madam Speaker, the Education Facilities Company Limited, as we are well aware, was given its papers on November 09. Since then as Minister, I met with them on two occasions. The first was on November 16 and second occasion was on November 24. At our meeting on November 24, I mandated the EFCL to do everything that was possible to ensure that those schools that are closed, are opened in the shortest possible time. On that occasion I was informed that everything was being done so that at least nine of those schools would be ready for occupation on Monday, November 30.

Madam Speaker, I wish to state that our Government is committed to providing quality education to the nation's children, and we are to ensure that the conditions under which our children and our teachers work and study are safe, healthy and fit for teaching and learning.

I would like to point out, Madam Speaker, that—*[Interruption]*

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your time has expired.

Hon. A. Garcia: Thank you.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Could the hon. Minister of Education indicate whether he thinks that this is—to remedy these situations is taking an extraordinarily long period of time, when particular areas like sewer could be done in two or three days, and these are taking three to four weeks? *[Interruption]* We used to do it in three days; “three days we repair them”.

Hon. A. Garcia: Madam Speaker, I would like to inform the Member for Caroni East that all these problems are problems that we met and are problems that were caused by the former administration.

Mr. Hinds: You left a royal mess.

Hon. A. Garcia: We are working assiduously *[Desk thumping]* to ensure that these problems are rectified in the shortest possible time. *[Crosstalk]*

Dr. Gopeesingh: In the hon. Minister’s answer, if he met it, it means then that you—do you believe then that you have taken more than two months to deal with this problem, and if you said you met it? So it means that it is more than two months you are taking to deal with the problem.

Hon. A. Garcia: Madam Speaker, these problems go way back before September 07. The EFCL at that time, their concentration was on building new schools and neglecting repairs and maintenance of our schools, *[Desk thumping]* and that is the core of the problem. Also associated with that was the high level of corruption and mismanagement. *[Desk thumping]* Therefore, Madam Speaker, this Government, this Minister, or the Ministry of Education cannot be blamed for the misdeeds of the former Government. Thank you. *[Desk thumping]*

Dr. Gopeesingh: Is the Minister aware that under the last administration, more than 5,000 repair and maintenance projects had been undertaken by EFCL *[Desk thumping]* in a five-year period, with more than 1,000 contractors doing these in a short period of time at minimal cost. *[Crosstalk]*

Madam Speaker: Members, may we have some order please?

Hon. A. Garcia: Madam Speaker, I am sure that the Member for Caroni East and the former Minister of Education is well aware of the sloppy work that was done by the EFCL, *[Desk thumping]* and all of us in this country are aware that many of the repair works that were done, were done not to the standards that one would have expected of a company. And as a result, our students are suffering today because of the poor work that was done previously. Thank you. *[Desk thumping]*

2.15 p.m.

**Maternal Deaths at Mount Hope
(Investigation Into)**

Dr. Lackram Bodoë (Fyzabad): To the Minister of Health, given the recent reported deaths of yet another mother and infant at the Mount Hope Maternity Hospital, could the Minister state whether an independent enquiry will be established to investigate and analyse maternal deaths in Trinidad and Tobago with a view to decreasing maternal mortality?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in response to the question, we are taking swift action to address the issue of maternal deaths, not for any particular case but from 1990 to 2013 we have had no significant impact. To that end, this administration, and this Minister of Health, has engaged the services of the Pan American Health Organization, commonly called PAHO, who will be here in January of 2016 to complete a comprehensive audit of all our maternity services, with special emphasis on the Mount Hope facility.

**Housing Development Corporation Applicants
(Government's New Policy)**

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (Caroni East): To the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, could the Minister indicate how many current Housing Development Corporation applicants will be affected by the Government's new policy with regard to the qualifying income level?

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Marlene McDonald): Thank you, Madam Speaker. The home application fulfilment system database has a total of 168,065 applicants. Of the 168,065 applicants 1,186 are listed as earning over \$25,000 monthly, however, 15,000 persons did not indicate their income level. This 1,186 of the database represents .07 per cent of the total database which will be affected by our new qualifying income level policy.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Supplemental.

Madam Deputy Speaker: These are under Urgent Questions and the Standing Orders only allow supplemental questions by the person who has asked.

Dr. Gopeesingh: I asked.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Okay, so that you can proceed.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Could the hon. Minister indicate—the figure you gave of 1,186-plus, whatever, is that the figure for combined household or just one applicant on it?—the \$25,000. Is it for the combined figure?

Hon. M. Mc Donald: Certainly, it is combined. Thank you.

**Carnage on Nation's Roads
(Measures to be Implemented)**

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of Works and Transport, due to the recent incidents of carnage on our nation's roadways, could the Minister indicate when will speed guns, speed cameras and the points system in relation to driver's licences be implemented as legal measures?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Madam Speaker, carnage is horrific, my condolences to those who were affected by those horrible road deaths over the last few weeks, and for all time, as a matter of fact. Madam Speaker, in respect of cameras, the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Bill, 2014, which was debated in both Houses of Parliament in the last session, and which was allowed to lapse on June 17, 2015, as the Parliament was dissolved, made provisions for both the speed cameras and, of course, the points system to penalize drivers who were repeat offenders of our road traffic laws. Madam Speaker, we propose to bring this Bill back in quick and short order, and to send it, if our friends on the other side consider it necessary, to a Joint Select Committee for further review.

As it relates to speed guns, the very Bill made provision for speed detection devices to be used, or speed guns. Cabinet, by Minute No. 3186 of November 2013, agreed at a sum of some \$7.6 million for 400 speed guns. It turned out that because of their incompetence, this was grossly inadequate to acquire 400 guns. Cabinet, Minute 1578 of July 2015, agreed that the Government purchase guns to the sum of \$7.6 million; VMCOTT engaged in the process for procurement; a contractor has been identified; the award of the contract is expected very soon, and as soon as the new board—we are in a bit of transition—as soon as the new board, in a couple of days, goes in—[*Interruption*] Thank you very much.

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, supplemental.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, you may.

Mr. Indarsingh: Taking into consideration the issue of the roadworthiness of vehicles and checking on it, could the hon. Minister state when the Motor Vehicle Authority building at Frederick Settlement in Caroni, when it will be formally opened and operationalized to check the roadworthiness of vehicles, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, I would not permit that as a supplemental question.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Madam Speaker: Hon. Leader of Government Business.

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, we are able to answer all the questions on the Order Paper. With regard to Written Questions, Madam Speaker, we recognize that the Written Question qualifies for today's date and we will be ready at the next sitting to present the written answer for that question. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Therefore, the response is deferred under the Standing Order, 29(12).

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

National Health Facilities Services Company Limited (Details of Expenditure)

2. **Dr. Fuad Khan** (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Further to the contribution made on October 12, 2015 during the budget debate, could the Minister indicate:

- a) the quantum of money spent on the formation of the National Health Facilities Services Company Limited for 2013—2015; and
- b) the total expenditure spent by the National Health Facilities Services Company Limited for 2013—2015?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you. In response to Question No. 2, the quantum of money spent to date on the formation of the National Health Facilities Services Company Limited for the period 2013 to 2015 is \$460. The details are as follows: registration of company, \$120; change of directors, \$40; the company's logo, \$300.

- (b) During the period 2013 to 2015, no expenditure was incurred by the National Health Facilities Services Company Limited.

Dr. Khan: Supplemental, could you once again say the total quantum? Is it \$460 total?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes.

Dr. Khan: All right. Are you aware that in the budget contribution you made an indication that \$8 million was spent on that?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes.

Dr. Khan: Would you like to retract that statement?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: No. In the budget contribution I said there was a Cabinet Note dated July 08, 2015, where the Cabinet was granting approval for the sum of \$8 million. And the breakdown then, if we did not come into office, you would have spent \$1 million on personnel expenditure, which includes salary to a CEO, \$5 million on goods and services, and \$2 million on minor equipment purchases. If we did not have an election we would have spent that, and that is what I alluded to in my budget contribution. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Khan: Could I just ask the hon. Minister if the Note that he is referring to is a confirmed Cabinet Note?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: It is a Note for Cabinet which you were going to take, and if we did not have an election this is what you would have taken to Cabinet in which you would have spent. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Khan: Madam Speaker, I just would like to ask, was it a confirmed Cabinet Note?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: I answered you already.

Madam Speaker: Member, I believe the answer was given.

Dr. Khan: No, I was asking was it a yes or no answer of a confirmed Cabinet Note. Could the Minister answer it, please?

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, I believe the Minister answered, you cannot tell him how to answer the question. Hon. Member, I believe the Minister answered your question, and I have determined that. [*Interruption*] This is a further question?

Dr. Khan: Just one supplemental.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Dr. Khan: Then, Minister, am I to assume then it was not a confirmed Cabinet Note?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Asked and answered.

Madam Speaker: Can we then move on, please? May I call, again, Member for Barataria/San Juan.

National Health Card Programme (Details of)

3. Dr. Fuad Khan (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

With respect to the National Health Card Programme, could the Minister indicate:

- a) the current status;
- b) the number of persons registered; and
- c) the fiscal 2016 projection for the registration of new persons?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you. Answer to part (a), the National Health Card Programme is operational and is currently deployed across 271 CDAP pharmacies. Answer to part (b), to date, the number of persons registered is 14,526. Answer to part (c), the projection for the registration of new persons during the fiscal year 2016 is estimated at 30,000 persons.

Couva Children and Adult Hospital (Details of)

4. Dr. Fuad Khan (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Could the Minister indicate whether the Couva Children and Adult Hospital would be fully commissioned?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you. Answer for Question No. 4, the Couva Children and Adult Hospital—and I congratulate me for referring it to its correct name, Children and Adult Hospital [*Desk thumping*—will be fully commissioned after design and/or construction defects that are likely to affect the proper functioning of the hospital have been remedied, and all the issues relating to staffing, equipping, outfitting, and operation of the facility have been addressed.

Dr. Khan: Will that be done on a confirmed Cabinet Note?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: It will be done following proper process, which is something you are not familiar with.

**DEFINITE URGENT MATTERS
(LEAVE)**

**Closure of 16 Schools
(Details of)**

Miss Ramona Ramdial (*Couva North*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 17 of the House of Representatives, I hereby seek your leave to move the adjournment of the House at today's sitting for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely, the failure of this Government to adequately address the very serious effects of the closure of 16 schools on thousands of children, parents, teachers and staff in Trinidad and Tobago.

The matter is definite insofar as these 16 schools have not opened since the reopening of the school term on September 08, 2015, and, as a consequence, having a serious impact on the education of thousands of school children, including those students preparing for the SEA examinations.

The matter is urgent because of the immediate and severe impact on the education of thousands of school children, their parents, teachers and staff.

Additionally, parents and the business community are affected as parents are being forced to take emergency leave or use sick leave to stay home to supervise their children, or pay for alternative arrangements. This is also affecting the productivity levels of the business sector and the public sector. The matter is also of public importance given the cause of the closure of 16 schools has yet to be ascertained, and citizens have not been properly informed as to the reasons behind closures. Further, it raises serious concerns on the preparedness of SEA students sitting the SEA examinations. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I am not satisfied that this matter qualifies under Standing Order 17(3), and I advise the Member to pursue this matter under Standing Order 16. The Leader of the Opposition.

**Economic Policy
(Failure of Government)**

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (*Siparia*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 17 of the House of Representatives, I hereby seek your leave to move the adjournment of the House at today's sitting that is Friday, November 27, 2015, for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely, the failure of Government to enunciate a clear and cogent economic policy to guide Trinidad and Tobago through the challenges.

Definite Urgent Matters
[MRS. PERSAD-BISSESSAR SC]

Friday November 27, 2015

The matter is definite because the slowdown in the performance of the economy has the potential of generating massive job losses and unemployment, which has been manifested and continues to manifest itself in the state sector.

The matter is urgent because of the chronic slowdown in the performance of the economy, generated in the main by external influences and internal political managerial incompetence.

The matter is of public importance since it poses a clear and present danger to personnel and public security challenges which may arise in Trinidad and Tobago from the disruption of social peace through protests and, possibly, social unrests and instability. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I am not satisfied that this matter qualifies under Standing Order 17(3). I advise that the Member pursue this matter under Standing Order 16.

2.30 p.m.

STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS

National Insurance Board (Ninth Actuarial Review)

The Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):
Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I am authorized by the Cabinet to make the following ministerial statement: the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago has been in operation since 1972 and is a major institution in the landscape of Trinidad and Tobago.

The National Insurance Board has paid in excess of \$30 billion in benefits since its inception, and currently manages a fund of approximately \$26 billion. The NIB provides comprehensive long-term, short-term and employment injury benefits to approximately 517,000 workers, with over \$4 billion currently paid to beneficiaries on an annual basis.

With an established administrative expense limit of 7.5 per cent of contribution income, the NIB has been able to operate with an average administrative expense ratio of 5.4 per cent. In fact, according to the findings of the ninth actuarial review, Trinidad and Tobago stands in the group with the lowest administrative expense ratios among Caribbean countries.

According to section 70 of the National Insurance Act:

“...an actuarial review of the system of national insurance shall be undertaken within three years of the date on which the first contributions under this Act are payable and thereafter at five-yearly or shorter intervals as the Board may determine...”

Madam Speaker, since inception, the National Insurance Board has complied with this obligation and, to date, nine reviews have been conducted. Previously, actuarial reviews were conducted at five-yearly intervals; however, in recognition of the rapid changes affecting social security systems worldwide, including the national insurance system in Trinidad and Tobago, the NIB adopted a prudent approach to conduct actuarial reviews at shorter intervals. Beginning with the ninth actuarial review, these reviews are now being conducted at three-year intervals.

I have had the privilege of laying the recently concluded ninth actuarial review of the national insurance system earlier today, as of June 30, 2013 in this House. This review was conducted by the École Nationale D’administration Publique, ENAP, an organization based in Quebec, Canada. The ENAP actuaries are qualified and experienced in international social insurance valuations, and prepared the review in accordance with the standards of the International Actuarial Association.

The key objectives of this review are to evaluate the current condition of the national insurance system, assess the long-term financial sustainability of the NIS, analyze the financial impact and modifications to current NIS provisions, and provide recommendations for the continued sustainability of the NIS. The ninth actuarial review therefore gives a comprehensive analysis and sound recommendations for ensuring that the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago continue to benefit for years to come from the national insurance system.

Current and long-term condition of the NIS: At present, the contribution rate is 12 per cent; the maximum insurable earnings \$12,000 per month. There are also 23 benefits which include the provision of a minimum monthly pension of \$3,000.

The last review, that is the eighth actuarial review, projected that the expenditure incurred to pay national insurance benefits would exceed contribution income for the first time in the financial year 2013/2014. This did, in fact, come to pass and has repeated itself in the financial year 2014/2015. The ninth actuarial review tells us that the situation has not changed. What this means is that under the present conditions and parameters of the system, the contribution income that is being collected is insufficient to meet all benefit obligations. As a result, the NIB has had to utilize investment income to support the expenditure of the system.

Notwithstanding this, total assets of the NIS are projected to increase until 2018/2019. From 2019 onwards, if no reform measures are implemented, as recommended by the actuaries, assets will have to be liquidated to meet expenditure, and the NIS funds will be completely depleted in the financial year 2029/2030. I wish to make it clear that that will only happen if no reform measures are implemented. This will not be allowed to happen under this current Government. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker, fund depletion is a reality faced by many social security systems around the world. One of the main causes of this is the aging population syndrome. Those who pay national insurance contributions, our working population, are in fact the financiers of the NIS. As the ratio between workers and beneficiaries narrows over time, more and more pressure is placed on the system. According to the ninth review, on average 3.7 working persons now support the payment of one person in retirement. This is projected to decline to 1.1 persons supporting one retiree over the next 50 years.

Trinidad and Tobago is currently the second oldest population in the Caribbean behind Barbados who has already taken measures to modify its system in order to improve the sustainability of their national insurance fund. In spite of the challenges faced by the NIS, I wish to remind this House that we have increased the cap on the income received by retirees, in respect of national insurance and old age pensions, to \$5,000 a month. A person in receipt of the \$3,000 pension from the National Insurance Board can, therefore, qualify for up to \$2,000 from the Ministry of Social Development. This illustrates the commitment of this Government to treating with the elderly and the vulnerable in our society.

I come now to the recommendations. Madam Speaker, the actuaries have made a number of recommendations. The short-term recommendations are: one, that there be an increase in the maximum insurable earnings from \$12,000 to \$13,600. This increase is in the order of 13.3 per cent and is intended to cover an additional \$1,600 of insured income which is in line with the increase in the national wage over the three-year period of this review. Madam Speaker, despite the pressures being placed on the fund, one of the principle benefits of social security is to maintain the relevance of benefits to customers over time. We are committed to this.

Two, maintaining the minimum monthly retirement pension at its present level of \$3,000, at least until the beginning of 2017.

Three, the actuaries found that a social security minimum pension should be between 40 and 80 per cent of the minimum wage. However, the NIS pension of \$3,000 represents 115 per cent of the minimum wage. In light of this, future changes to the minimum pension must be guided by subsequent actuarial reviews. They have also recommended that the contribution rate be increased to 13.2 per cent.

Madam Speaker, the implementation of these measures, the increase in the maximum earnings and the increase in the contribution rates were announced in the national budget and will take effect from July 04, 2016. This should delay fund depletion by at least six years.

In terms of long-term recommendations, the actuaries have recommended an increase in the retirement age, a change in the earnings class system to a percentage of earnings system and that all parameters should be subject to an automatic annual adjustment based on inflation. All these measures will require dialogue at the national level. These are merely recommendations at this point in time. The actuarial also recommended extending coverage to self-employed persons, details of which are given in the report laid in this House.

The ninth review has shown that the financial condition of the NIS has deteriorated over the three-year period from July 2010 to June 2013. The review also projects that this trend is likely to continue, unless major reforms are taken. This is not unique to Trinidad and Tobago, and it is now necessary to engage all stakeholders in a national dialogue on the findings and recommendations of this ninth actuarial review. This dialogue, this feedback, this consultation will inform us on the mix of reform measures as we go forward. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

**Beetham Waste Water Project
(Cessation of Contract for)**

The Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have been authorized by the Cabinet to make the following statement. As a citizen of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Minister of Government, I rise here today, charged with the responsibility and task of informing my fellow citizens of this beloved twin-island State of a very serious matter that is affecting us.

The population was made aware sometime early last year of the award of a contract by the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago, NGC, to Super Industrial Services Limited, SIS, for the design and build of the Beetham water recycling plant, together with the associated pipelines and water storage facilities. This project is commonly known as the Beetham Waste Water Project.

We were told that the purpose of this project was to recycle output water from WASA's existing waste water treatment plant to industrial water quality standard, and to take the pipe-treated water from Beetham to the Point Lisas Industrial Estate, using newly built pipeline infrastructure.

The RFP for this project was issued on December 10, 2013, and the last administration awarded this design/build project to SIS via a contract dated March 10, 2014, in the sum of approximately TT \$1,037,154,560 just over \$1 billion. It is noteworthy that SIS was not the lowest bidder on this project. In fact, SIS's bid was \$464,196,390 more than the other bidder. The contract awarded is a FIDIC plant and design/build for electrical and mechanical plant and engineering works, designed by the contractor-type contract. The responsibility and onus for design and building the water recycling plant, together with the associated pipelines and water storage facilities, was that of SIS.

The completion date for the design and build out of the waste water plant, associated pipelines and storage facilities was October 21, 2015. It is noteworthy that the last administration paid a 20 per cent mobilization fee to SIS. It is not usual to have as high as a 20 per cent mobilization fee. In this case, NGC made an advanced payment to SIS which was \$207,430,810.

Madam Speaker, a mobilization fee is usually worked back through the life of a contract with appropriate credit or repayment being given. To date, none of this mobilization or advanced payment of some \$207 million has been repaid or credited to NGC by SIS. Furthermore, to date, NGC has paid SIS the sum of approximately \$780 million, with the last payment certificate, certified by NGC for work being done in May 2015.

Madam Speaker, on October 8, 2014, SIS was awarded a further contract by NGC for the operation and management of the Beetham water recycling plant for a five-year period with a value of approximately \$56.4 million.

The question is: Why was NGC utilized as the entity to contract SIS for the design/build of this water provision facility, as opposed to WASA? WASA is the statutory body charged with the responsibility for water supply in Trinidad and Tobago. The question asked is: Why did the former administration undertake this billion-dollar project under the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago, as opposed to WASA?

It has also been discovered that to date there is no off-take contract entered into for the final water product from this project; therefore NGC, whose mandate was not and is not the provision of water, entered into this contract for over \$1

billion, paying out over \$780 million to SIS to date, and only approximately 40 to 45 per cent of the project work is completed, when over 75 per cent of the full cost of the project has already been expended from the cash coffers of NGC.

2.45 p.m.

Madam Speaker, the newly appointed board of NGC is having an independent assessment done of the works performed to, inter alia, ascertain the quantum and percentage of work actually performed. This is an essential and prudent step to take in the circumstances that I shall now outline.

Today, the situation is this. There is a billion-dollar project entered into with no contract for the end product, \$780 million paid out from NGC's cash flow and reserves. That sum paid out is approximately 75 per cent of the total cost of the project and the project is only 40 to 45 per cent complete. With that contractual and factual background as the setting, I crave your indulgence to state the most recent facts. SIS began slowing down works prior to the general election. This slowdown of work became even more apparent after September 07.

Madam Speaker, after the election, NGC received several reports from the subcontractors of SIS as to the non-payment of moneys due to them by SIS. On September 14, exactly one week after the general election, SIS wrote to NGC in an attempt to extricate itself from its contractual obligations, after already having been paid \$780 million and only completing 40 to 45 per cent of the works, by saying—quote that:

People now holding high office in the Government Trinidad and Tobago have made serious allegations about the project that the conduct of officials of NGC and SIS and as a result SIS is reasonably certain that steps would now be taken by the State to stop or frustrate SIS in the successful execution of this project.

There was no evidence to support this position that the new Government would have stopped or frustrated SIS from completing the project. Madam Speaker, NGC responded to this denying any allegations of State interference and stating that NGC was committed to enforcement of the contract and that it expected SIS to continue to deliver all contractual obligations in a responsible and timely manner.

There then ensued an exchange of correspondence and communications between SIS and NGC where SIS claimed that it had underbid on the project at the tender stage and was unable to continue the works, this even though SIS's price for the project was \$464 million more than the next bidder. SIS also suddenly

claimed that it had safety and security threats and it used this as its excuse to begin the withdrawal from the construction resources and manpower and equipment from the sites on October 08.

By letter dated October 15, SIS wrote to NGC stating inter alia:

We regret to advise we are unable to continue the works under the current circumstances and current conditions of contract.

By this time SIS had stopped the vast majority of the work being done and it had begun vacating sites. NGC responded by letter stating:

NGC is alarmed and deeply disturbed that SIS which is contractually obligated to complete the works can simply write a letter advising NGC of its inability to complete two weeks before the completion day. We regard this as a fundamental breach of contract. Please be assured that NGC is committed to completing this project, having paid SIS US \$121.8 million to date, the bulk of the contract price.

At a subsequent meeting between the parties NGC listed—SIS indicated that there were three problematic areas—engineering design challenges, financial challenges, safety and security challenges, the absence of frontend engineering design, resulting in a significant underestimation of the project parameters. SIS erred in providing adequate contingencies in its bid. There were major cost overruns in the areas of engineering pipeline. SIS could only proceed with the works after an in-depth review and revision with NGC of the contract price, programme of works, payment schedule in the resolution of ongoing safety and security threats.

Madam Speaker, in response, these matters raised by SIS—in response to these matters raised by SIS, NGC stated:

We would continue to pursue the successful completion of the project.

Subsequently, SIS stated that it had underbid on the project at the tender stage and that it was unable to continue the works. These matters being raised by SIS, after it had been paid \$780 million, some 75 per cent of the total cost of the project with only 40 to 45 per cent of the works being completed, not forgetting, Madam Speaker, that SIS's bid was \$464 million more than the next tenderer.

Madam Speaker, on Friday, November 20, 2015 after due and proper consideration of the facts, failed attempts to discuss the way forward and the advice obtained, NGC gave SIS written notice of its intention to terminate the

design/build contract. NGC recapped SIS's position. It was unable to continue the works under the current circumstances. It had underbid on the project at the tender stage and that it had also failed to renew insurance and an advanced payment bond.

In other words, Madam Speaker, in the clearest possible terms, SIS had demonstrated that it had abandoned the works alternatively, did not intend to continue performance of obligations under the contract.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your time has expired. The text of your statement shall be circulated to Members. [*Desk thumping*]

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE
(APPOINTMENT TO)**

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. I beg to move that Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie be appointed to serve on the Joint Select Committee to consider and report on a Bill entitled the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property (Amdt.) Bill, 2015.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly Madam Speaker. I beg to move that Mr. Prakash Ramadhar be appointed to serve on the Joint Select Committee to consider and report on a Bill entitled the Whistleblower Protection Bill, 2015.

Question put and agreed to.

**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
(PROVISION OF TEXTBOOKS)**

Dr. Tim Gopeesingh (Caroni East): Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas from 2010 to 2015, the People's Partnership Government (the former government) provided core textbooks and workbooks to all students in early childhood centres, primary schools and secondary schools and learning material to special needs students, at no cost to parents;

And whereas a commitment was made by the former government to continue this arrangement for the academic year 2015 to 2016;

And whereas there was a further commitment made by the former government that for the academic year 2015 to 2016 E-books would be introduced on a phased basis in Forms 1 and 2 in selected subject areas;

And whereas the Ministry of Education has not provided new textbooks, workbooks, learning material or replacements for the academic year 2015 to 2016 which has resulted in financial hardship for families and loss of educational material for both students and teachers;

Be it resolved that this Government take urgent steps to ensure that all students are provided with textbooks, workbooks and/or other learning material in fulfilment of commitments given for the academic year 2015 to 2016.

Madam Speaker, education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights. It promotes individual freedom and empowerment and yields important development benefits. There are legal obligations to the rights of education: the rights of every individual to enjoy access to education, particularly our students; to good quality without discrimination or exclusion is an imperative, and education remains the cornerstone and fundamental pillar of any civilized society.

The People's Partnership Government firmly supported a strong commitment to education, and under the leadership of Kamla Persad-Bissessar we had ensured major transformative changes, a silent revolution, a reengineering and a retooling of our education system with equity, accessibility and quality.

Madam Speaker, before I deal with the first aspect of the Motion, I think it important for us to understand where we are and in relation to where we are in education and how the deprivation of textbooks for certain students could lend to us not moving with the momentum that we started even since Dr. Eric Williams' days, and which continued through the years by subsequent administrations and subsequent Ministers.

Trinidad and Tobago is now being globally recognized as one of the leaders in education not only in the Caribbean and Latin America, but globally. This country can rightfully claim to be one of the few that has fully implemented Article 26 of the human rights chart which establishes that "Everyone has the right to..."—free— "...education". Everyone has a right to a free education and there should be no deprivation. And even though schooling has been mandatory in Trinidad and Tobago since the 1970s, no previous government has ever placed so much emphasis on this subject, if I may say, as the People's Partnership Government.

The only way for a country like ours to move forward and move forward with its human capital towards sustainable development, is by placing a strong emphasis on education. And we look forward to this present Government continuing the strong work that we did over the last five years and keeping the momentum going for our students.

Since the People's Partnership Government took power in 2010, the largest chunk of the national budget for all the years has been on education, and in 2014/2015 the education Ministry received the largest part of the annual expenditure taking \$9.3 billion shared by Minister Karim's Ministry, Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training. And in 2014/2015—that was out of \$55 billion. And in 2014/2015, \$10.6 billion was allocated. That is close to 6 per cent of the GDP, Madam Speaker, and which is higher than many developed countries which gives close to about 4.5 per cent of their GDP, and is close to 16 to 18 per cent of the annual expenditure from our annual budget.

When you look at the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, developed countries, they come close to 12 to 14 per cent of the annual expenditure and we are 14 to 16 per cent. That is in the context of the financial requirements that we need to provide the basic essential tools for our students and that is the textbooks and the working materials, and this is why this Motion was brought forward because we have questions and uncertainties as to where the students are at the moment, conscious that the main economic assets of the most advanced nations and knowledge and information and in their own citizens, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar had always stressed. At that time the Prime Minister had always placed the strongest emphasis on education.

3.00 p.m.

In the manifesto of 2010 she stated, and I quote:

“The oil and gas boom of the...last decade has fizzled out and the...hard work of building a sustainable...economy stands before us.”

For this reason the Government needs:

“...to ensure that our oil and gas wealth is truly used for the development of our nation and our people.”

Therefore, the Ministry of Education's objective is:

“...Building the Foundation for an Intelligent...Nation and a Creative Economy”—from—“EARLYCHILDHOOD”—through—“PRIMARY and ... SECONDARY EDUCATION...”

Prime Minister, Bissessar, kept her promise and delivered to the nation unparalleled and unprecedented performance in government in areas of education, health, infrastructure, housing, water, public utilities and others. The ultimate objective was the massive investment from early childhood all the way up to the undergraduate level. For the postgraduate level the State pays up to 50 per cent of all expenses.

So, when I speak now about the requirements for education, of universality, accessibility, equity and quality, these are watchwords and should be always our policies on education. No child must be left behind, and ours is an inclusive model. So, no child of any underprivileged socioeconomic group or position should be deprived from education whatsoever. And this is where we are finding some difficulty in understanding or ascertaining whether textbooks are being provided to the students, which are required, for particularly the underprivileged ones who do not have the availability of finance to buy their books for themselves.

And, let us look at a little background into this. So, the Textbook Evaluation Committee was set up and approved by Cabinet Minute 926 of September 2002. That is the Textbook Evaluation Committee. Before that, I remember the administration of Basdeo Panday had difficulties in terms of looking at these students taking a number of books to schools on their shoulders and on their backs, and he made a determined effort to try to reduce the amount of textbooks that students were taking to school for a particular subject, and he formed a Textbook Evaluation Committee—I was a member of that Textbook Evaluation Committee in 1997 where Ken Ramchand was the chairman of that—and at the end of that the decision was made to allow principals to choose one book which the Textbook Evaluation Committee had registered, and then there was a little uproar and his administration then allowed to choose one out of two books per subject, so that the students would not have to take three and four books in a particular subject to school, which sometimes the teachers were asking for information from different books.

So, that was sorted out, and this committee in 2002 was later—well, nothing happened for two years and the Textbook Evaluation Committee did not start working until 2004. And then that committee was later reconstituted to a Learning Materials Evaluation Committee by Cabinet Minute 1710 dated July 20, 2006. So, that is two years later. The Textbook Evaluation Committee was changed to a Learning Materials Evaluation Committee otherwise known as LMEC. In recognition of the fact, the committee's remit went outside of the scope of the

books, including other materials, they began to bring in other materials, particularly for the special needs students and the early childhood education students. But, that committee came to an end in 2009.

Madam Speaker, the unit that was set up was asked on the remit to recommend textbooks and a wide range of special learning and teaching resources such as study guides, past papers, syllabi, cassettes of audio visual material and multimedia items, such as DVDs, CDs and video cassettes, as well as teachers' handbooks and other tools. Also, accessories and manipulative to early childhood care and education centres, primary, secondary and special schools at the level of the government, denominational and private schools. And that was across Trinidad and Tobago, and which was undertaken in accordance with the requirements of the curriculum—so, the books in accordance with the requirements of the curriculum.

Subsequent to that, there were several Cabinet agreements in the ensuing years that impacted on the programme. In 2005, under the previous PNM administration the programme was expanded to schoolbooks, Government supply, to include Form 4 students. It was agreed that the full-scale rental programme would be implemented in 2006/2007, with students paying \$20 per textbook. And that was apparently rescinded in 2006 because there was some uproar. In December 2007/2008, Cabinet agreed that existing books should be retained as long as they are in good condition and in alignment with the curriculum, and that programme would consist of top-up of all textbooks in the system.

So, the PNM administration started a system of having the books circulated amongst the students from one year to the incoming year, once the book was readable and not tarnished, not defaced, and then they would have a top-up from year to year. So, the Textbook Evaluation Committee began to determine which books were suitable for use by students at the primary and secondary levels for the education system. And I remember now deceased Richard Kokaram, a principal of Hillview, Winford James, Clyde Permell, Neville Baird, Richard Penco and Father Ronald Mendes were all members of that committee that started then. And they had recommended one textbook in four subject areas per student in Forms 1 and 2, then to eight subject areas, a dictionary and an Atlas, and also that included CSEC and CAPE past papers.

Also, they recommended for primary schools one textbook in five subject areas—primary schools, they had about five major subject areas—and they recommended one textbook under the Textbook Rental/Loan Programme. And in 2006 the LMEC, as I mentioned earlier, started with a retired Permanent Secretary, Winston Connell, starting the work. Now, the preliminary report of that committee of LMEC on

textbook for the education system for the academic year 2007/2008 was not found favourable having regard to the list of textbooks found unsuitable, far outweighing those found suitable. So, in the evaluation of the textbooks they found more were unsuitable for use by the student than they found suitable. And, that therefore, caused an imperative and an urgency of engaging the fraternity of authors and publishers in detailed stakeholder consultations. And that committee agreed that submission for review of textbooks for the period 2007 to 2010 be deferred to the period 2008 to 2011, and when they demitted office our administration had to deal with the issue.

And so the textbook committee, they conducted stakeholder meetings with authors and all the publishers in the industry, and we had many consultations with the publishers. And during the time that the PNM administration was in Government, generally about 12 publishers were used, who provided textbooks to the school population. But, then the publishers and authors began to raise their voices more and more, and there was a proliferation of more and more authors, and therefore more and more publishers. So, as the new incoming Government in 2010, and which deals with the first part of the Motion:

“Whereas from 2010 to 2015, the People’s Partnership Government...provided core textbooks and workbooks to all students in early childhood centres, primary...and secondary schools and learning material to special needs students, at no cost to parents;”

Let me provide to the national population, through this honourable House, what our administration did when we came into office in 2010, and subsequently. The Textbook Rental/Loan Programme of the Ministry of Education, we continued to provide students at primary, secondary and special education schools with quality textbooks and learning materials. During 2010 to 2013, the Ministry of Education purchased 2,259,250 textbooks—2,259,250 textbooks were provided during 2010 to 2013 for the students, and that included special education manipulative and learning material, and that total cost was \$208,422,422. So, 2.2 million textbooks at a cost of approximately \$208 million. Textbooks and learning materials, that is between 2010 to 2015, and I have the figures here that in 2010 to 2011 we provided 354,000 textbooks at approximately \$17.4 million; and 2011/2012, 342,000 textbooks, at approximately \$35 million, because there were more secondary school textbooks which are a little more expensive; and 2012/2013, 1.198 million textbooks at an approximate cost of \$84 million, that was more secondary school textbooks again; and in 2013 to 2014, 363,000 textbooks at a cost of approximately \$70 million. So, during 2010 to 2011, 2011 to 2012, 2012 to 2013 and 2013 to 2014 we had provided close to \$181,825,759, and in 2014 to 2015, the approximate cost for that year was \$25 million for the top-up textbooks.

And, Madam Speaker, that is in the context of how much money the Ministry of Education had available for expenditure. Out of the \$4.3 billion that we have for recurrent expenditure, that does not include the Public Sector Investment Programme, IDF and Capital Development Fund; \$2.4 billion approximately went for salaries and personnel emoluments out of the \$4.3 billion. Close to about 55 per cent. And about \$230 million goes to the School Feeding Programme—now, at that time there were 155,000 meals per day, about 100,000 lunches and 55,000 breakfast for 200 days, so we provided about 3.1 million meals per year. We spent about \$150 million for security services, which generally is MTS, which is a state sector company; about \$150 million for janitorial services, which is about \$100 million to MTS; \$50 million for school transportation; \$50 million for examination fees and, of course, the textbooks, approximately, if for five years we spent \$208 million, it is approximately \$40 million per year. And that is how the expenditure goes.

3.15 p.m.

So, the Ministry of Education's main strategy to transform the education sector through the infusion of information communication technology was undertaken. And in this regard the Ministry had been investigating the feasibility of incorporating electronic textbooks since the students have the laptops in the schools, putting that into the Textbook Rental/Loan Programme. And the findings of that exercise indicated that of the 426 titles purchased at the primary level—so in the primary school level, books were purchased, about 426 titles. I will come to that in a while, why that happened. And only 63 of these 426 were found to be compatible with an electronic form at that time and available in that e-format.

At the secondary level, of the 467 titles purchased, only 95 were available in an electronic form at that time. And this highlighted that incorporating e-books into the Textbook Rental/Loan Programme was not feasible at that time within the procurement cycle due to limited availability of textbooks in the e-format. The Ministry continued to hold consultations with publishers, now about close to 30 publishers moved up from about 12 to 30 publishers, and a lot of international publishers as well, focusing on exploring the incorporation of electronic textbooks into the programme and their rising challenges. The sessions highlighted concerns of copyright issues, different payment structures and possible distribution methods for the electronic textbooks. And all of those issues required further research and discussion requiring all stakeholders to do more work.

The Ministry recognized the benefits e-books will bring to the Textbook Rental/Loan Programme, namely, reduction in logistical and replacement cost, and as such, the Ministry continued to partner with textbook publishers to address

concerns in an effort to incorporate e-books in the Textbook Rental/Loan Programme, and we also brought the publishers association into the stakeholders' consultations.

In 2014/2015, the Ministry provided 256,000 textbooks approximately, at the primary level. This was comprised of a top-up of replenishment of books in mathematics, language arts, reading, science and social studies, from Standard 1 to Standard 5 based on data collected from schools. Now, when we realized in 2012 that the textbooks the Ministry of Education were purchasing from the publishers, which started in the PNM administration time, the principals and the teachers were not using some of these books. They felt they needed to get the books that they thought that they wanted to use, and this is why they began to ask parents to purchase other books, other than the ones that the Ministry of Education was providing. And at one time there were stacks and stacks of textbooks in rooms in the schools, with cellophane wraps and they were never used. So the Ministry was purchasing books, even before our time, to be used in the schools and they were not used by the principals and the teachers.

So we made the decision to ask the principals and the teachers to supply the requirements, what they require and what they feel that they will use in the schools. And what we obtained after a number of times seeking information from the principals through the supervisors and with the teachers, we eventually had a list of what they required from all the schools, primary and secondary, and of course, the Early Childhood Care and Education centres throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

So from 2012, it was the first time that we bought books for all the students in primary, secondary and Early Childhood Care and Education centres rather than just the topping up. So we bought an annual full replacement of workbooks in reading, language arts and science at Infant Levels 1 and 2, and additionally, in alignment with the Ministry's priority of improving numeracy and literacy, the Ministry also had 100 per cent replacement of mathematics textbooks as well as accommodation of textbooks in language arts at the Infant Levels 1 and 2. The age of the students, and interactive nature of these textbooks required students to write in the books. So we provided 100% replacement for these books.

At the secondary level in 2014/2015, the Ministry of Education procured 41,000 textbooks per secondary school and this comprised a top-up. At the special education level we provided special textbooks, manipulatives and other learning materials to the students who have special needs challenges, and these materials were provided to Government and private registered special education schools, namely about 26, based on their request. And so the cost of that programme in 2014/2015 was about \$25 million.

This expenditure on textbooks came from Subhead: Current Transfers and Subsidies, Subhead 006, Educational Institutions: Sub Item 26, Special Education Resource Programme, and then we have two Subheads: Textbook Rental Loan Programme for primary schools and Textbook Rental Loan Programme for secondary schools.

I am making these statements because two months now into this academic year it is our understanding that textbooks have not been provided to the students in the secondary schools, in the primary schools, in the ECCE centres and the special education centres for the students. And we are wondering why? Why is it, that at an approximate value—this cycle in 2015/2016 was going to be the cycle for the purchase of all fresh textbooks and the topping up will continue in 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. As such, we had some difficulties on the way because authors and publishers began to feel that they needed to be a part of the system of provision for textbooks for our students and we allowed the freedom of choice which empowered principals and teachers to choose their required titles based on the individual student learning ability and school needs.

And this shift in policy created a fair open market, where schools could have selected any textbook but were limited to one core book per subject area. And this increased the number of suppliers from 17 publishers to 43 and additionally, the number of titles increased to 426 in primary at which 313 were new titles, therefore new authors of textbooks, and at the secondary level 467 titles were purchased, of which 397 were new titles. But the shift ensured that the textbook being provided were sufficiently utilized, however that impacted on the cost of the programmes, because if you buy in bulk you get it cheaper and if you have about over 400 authors and titles you have to pay a little higher for each one. So the bulk discounts enjoyed by the Ministry were no longer applicable as the scope of requested titles increased but the requested quantities dramatically declined.

Madam Speaker, the issue of more publishers in the system, more authors, giving the principals and the school teachers the ability to choose their books, we went ahead, and for the first time in 2012 we had a situation where the publishers were now printing their textbooks in Trinidad, giving employment to all the printing organizations. There were four major printing companies in Trinidad now printing the books locally, whereas previously most of the printing were done internationally and a lot were done in China. So when we gave this ability in 2012 to have more publishers they chose to go locally and have the local printers do most of the work.

And in 2015/2016 we made a decision in Cabinet and Cabinet Note 1963, August 3, 2015, to provide these textbooks as I indicated here in the Motion:

“And whereas the Ministry of Education has not provided new text books, workbooks, learning material or replacements for the academic year 2015 to 2016 which has resulted in financial hardship for families and loss of educational material for both students and teachers;”

At the beginning of August the Cabinet had taken the decision to provide these textbooks as a new start, the new cycle at a cost of \$136 million which included the top-ups for 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. There was money available from the previous budget and what was needed was \$111 million, approximately.

So we are asking now, the Minister of Education, to tell us why after two months, the students—the parents having to go everywhere, particularly poor students who cannot afford to purchase these books that are used in the schools and are begging for help, when two months have gone by and the Ministry of Education, as far as I am aware, have not been able to provide these textbooks for the students. So we are asking, why have these books not been provided? The Cabinet Note was there for everyone to see at the Ministry of Education. It was just a matter of follow-up to go into the details of it, complete it, make the order and more than 90 per cent of the textbooks used in the schools are done, you can get it locally. It is only about 5 per cent to 10 per cent of the books come from foreign publishers. And even that, with the foreign publishers you just have to pay a minimal amount more to have these books air shipped into Trinidad and Tobago.

So, what has prevented this Government from providing the students with the textbooks that they need? Now the textbooks is one aspect of the education of the children, but why are we having 15 schools closed? Why we have no moderators and facilitators in the primary schools to do the Continuous Assessment Component? Why is the Continuous Assessment Component being looked at, of being abolished? Why have the 400 plus homework centres stopped? That is a minimal cost of about \$10 to \$12 million per year? Why has the construction of schools stopped? Why is the Minister speaking about schools being closed because of sewage problems and electrical problems? We used to have five schools per day breaking down, but within three days’ time we will have the schools up and running because we were able to get the sewage systems going and we were able to get the electrical systems going.

3.30 p.m.

So in five years we did 5,000 repair and maintenance projects in over 800 schools in Trinidad and Tobago because it is about five per day breaking down, and we had to do it quickly, and at no time during any academic year we had 15 schools closed.

You know, textbooks become an important part of the education of the children. So here they are being deprived from the textbooks; they are being deprived from the schools, not being able to go to the schools because the schools are closed. You do not have moderators and facilitators in the system. The schools are not being repaired and all these statements about EFCL and so on—you are the Minister. You are responsible for EFCL. Get EFCL to do the work. I had to get them to do the work. You have to direct them—

Hon. Member: Yes. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: You had to direct them and make sure that they do the work. You are in charge. You are only finding fault and you are finding and escorting people out of the building. For what?

Hon. Member: “Yuh red and yuh ready.”

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: What are you escorting people out of the building—
[*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: Incompetent contractors.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Madam Speaker, they speak about contractors—the Member is speaking about contractors. Out of the 106 early childhood education centres we constructed in Trinidad and are under construction now, 58 contractors are the ones who had done them—58 for 106. And 53 of these were done by the IADB—under IADB scrutiny. [*Desk thumping*] And these range from between \$5 million to about \$8 million, VAT inclusive. And out of the 46 primary schools constructed, 28 different contractors constructed these 46 primary schools.

And you know what, Madam Speaker? That administration, in 2009, awarded contracts worth \$1.5 billion for the construction of secondary schools which we had to deal with because of the silly HVAC system that they tried to put in, and then \$60 million went with the Haji Construction with the South Korean company outside of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

And here they are talking about mismanagement, corruption and nepotism and so on. Out of 46 primary schools, 28 contractors; 102 ECCE centres, 56 or 58 contractors. And today we are saddled—you are saddled now. I was saddled with over \$195 million legal questions—legal cases coming before the Ministry of Education by design consultants which designed schools in 2004 which were never started—\$195 million in legal fees by design consultants to the Ministry of Education. They have to explain that. And one supervising consultant—one design consultant—got 10 secondary schools.

Hon. Member: That is true.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: One person. I would not call the name today.

Hon. Member: Call names.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: I would not call the name. They know who it is; one of their friends.

Hon. Member: Call the name. Call the name.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: You know, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Member: Call the name.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh:—it is sad to see our students suffering for lack of textbooks in the schools. And the Minister knows, 15 schools are still closed. Here it is. So why? Sewer problems shut down another school. Sewer systems are supposed to take two to three days to clear up, and the Minister—I do not know what he is doing but I do not want to make any negative comment, but he has to take responsibility for it.

And you know, one of the Members said, the last time when we had “Finance” that EFCL was owing \$600-and-something million to contractors. You know how much—when we came into office in 2010, how much we were found owing? \$722 million was being owed by EFCL when we came into office—[*Crosstalk*]*—and I have the breakdown.*

So all your forensic audit and all of that that you want to do to try to incarcerate people and take them out with police and so on—[*Crosstalk*]*—all of them—[Crosstalk]* That is what they want to do, blame others; \$722 million, this people’s administration government was being owed. We were owing for work that they said they started. One of their friends got three secondary schools, valued \$500 million.

Hon. Member: What?

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: One of the members of their team, yeah. One of the senior members of the PNM team got three secondary schools valued over \$500 million. So 10 secondary schools they were supposed to start in 2004, they did not start it until 2009. We ended up with an HVAC system—[*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, settle down, please.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: Madam Speaker, how much time do I have again?

Madam Speaker: About a minute and a half.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: All right.

Hon. Member: Make it work.

Dr. T. Gopeesingh: So, Madam Speaker, I ask the Minister of Education why he has not been able to provide the textbooks for the children, making the poor people have to go and try and beg and borrow and get money for the education of their children, because the children are their primary concern. So thousands of families across the country are being affected. If they had saved some of the money that they misspent, with Haji and all of that \$1.5 billion that they gave out in contracts, they would have had money now to be able to help the poor students of Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

I beg to move, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Ramadhar: Madam Speaker, I second the Motion and reserve the right to speak.

Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Deal with it. Deal with it.

The Minister of State in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Dr. Lovell Francis): Madam Speaker, good afternoon. Good afternoon to the Members on both sides of the House.

Mr. Indarsingh: You put the vice-captain to bat.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: I am extremely pleased, vice-captain or otherwise, to be allowed to respond to this Motion—extremely pleased. In fact, I am tremendously grateful to the Member for Caroni East because if I had one disappointment after my first discourse in this House during the budget debate, was that I was only allowed to finish half of what I intended to discuss. So he has unwittingly allowed me, via this Motion, to speak to the other half of the matters I intended to discuss. [*Desk thumping*] So, Sir, to you, I am very grateful.

Dr. Gopeesingh: Speak on the Motion—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: I intend to. When I read this Motion, I was at first confused as to what I was reading. I was not sure if all this “Whereas, Whereas, Whereas”, whether it was a pantomime or a conceit in the literary sense, or whether I was seeing something real. Because if I were to give a frank response to

this Motion, I would probably want to channel my inner Member for Diego Martin, hon. Acting Prime Minister—Diego Martin North/East—who, in his response to the interesting question by the hon. Member for Tabagite about his sign, responded that “you should ask yourself”. That constitutes a legitimate answer to this.

More than anything, the author of this Motion, if he wishes to get a really fundamental answer, there is a mirror in many rooms in this Parliament. He needs look no further.

Hon. Member: Ay-ah-yai! [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: But I have been forewarned by the Leader of Government Business that regardless of my personal views of the Motion, that the citizens of this nation require a more considered answer to this Motion. So I will attempt to do so and I will do so in a way that will put it in a proper context, and given the fact that all of us know the recent history of this nation, nothing here should be lost in translation.

All of us are aware in this nation that elections were constitutionally due on the 24th of May, and I would suggest that a wise, or a responsible government, would have ensured that they were called on that date. In fact, I might propose that a wiser political leader on the other side, for example, Mr. Basdeo Pandey, might have chosen to call the election on the date, for a number of reasons. One of them being that we have two military men in the House and their ranks far exceed our very talkative captain, and they could, for example, say that—military strategy—it is best to catch your opponent underprepared or unprepared.

Of course, that was not the option taken. But I would say more definitively, no—I will say it slowly. No responsible government, given the nature of the economic year in this nation, would have opted to have an election in September. No responsible Prime Minister, no responsible Parliament, no responsible political party, given that the financial year ends in September, would have opted to have the general election in September. [*Desk thumping*] That that choice was made stands at its own condemnation. Why is that? Because we end up having an election on September 07, one day before the school term begins—

Hon. Member: That is right. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. L. Francis:—one day before the school term begins. Add to that, we have a budget that is read on October 5th after the end of the financial year. But the Member is asking in very sanctimonious terms: “why have the books not

been provided?” Because after the budget is read we have to go through the proper procedure: Standing Finance Committee, which takes a week or two. After that, finances have to be disbursed. And yet we ask: why the books were not provided.

I could suggest there is a mirror in the bathroom, he can go look at himself. Why is that? Because any responsible Minister of Government, any responsible Minister of Education, especially one who was convinced that he would retain the post, could have taken a number of measures to ensure that this textbook situation did not happen. He has just talked in very clear tones about all the things that his government did during their time; all the things he putatively did. The one thing he did not do was to make provisions for textbooks to be provided.

So had he been Minister—God forbid—he would have found himself in a far worse situation. Good Sir—

Dr. Gopeesingh: Will you give way?

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: I shall not give way. Good Sir, the error lies with you. I am also quite pleased that the Member extended beyond his initially narrow parameters to discuss many of the other situations facing education in this nation. I am quite pleased by that because I intended to do the same, so he has allowed me to meander a bit beyond the narrow confines of his discourse. Because I want to make the point that the textbook situation in this nation, as it stands, is part of a larger paradigm which has to do with the manner in which the former Minister of Education, the hon. Member for Caroni East, chose to manage the Ministry of Education.

In this nation we often confuse symptom and cause, so we end up talking about the wrong thing. So his whole discourse is really based on a minor chord on a major theme. The larger theme has to do with the management of education. The textbook situation is just a subset of that situation. And I want to say this definitively. For someone who has just stood and spoken—I would love to say, eloquently, but it would not be true—about the nature of education in this nation during the last five years, I want to say definitively, as I said during the budgetary debate, Madam Speaker, that the education Ministry inherited, primarily by Minister Garcia, and also by myself, is the quintessential example of organized chaos. [*Desk thumping*] And I want to say definitively that the author of that chaos is the honoured mover of this Motion. [*Desk thumping*] And I make no bones about it.

3.45 p.m.

The situation vis-à-vis the textbooks is really one subset of a larger problem and to explain that, I really want to go back into explaining some of the situations that we are facing or have faced in the Ministry for the last two weeks. The hon. Member spoke about the fact that there are a number of schools that are closed. I want to add some depth to that discussion because the situation is actually direr than that. We have three categories of problematic schools. There are schools that are closed; there are those that are unopened, and there are those that are operational in very dangerous circumstances, and I can provide living examples of each.

Schools that are closed. There is one school that, through the intervention of Minister Garcia opting to ensure that another arm of the State, in this case, WASA, intervened to solve a sewer problem, had been having tremendous problems since earlier in this year, from March. The Minister alluded to 5,000 repair jobs being done. I am asking a logical question: why so many? If one does a job properly, you do not have to do it repeatedly. The fact that five schools were, in his own words, breaking down every single day points to the fact that the jobs were not being done adequately. [*Desk thumping*] By his very own words, his argument is condemned.

We had a number of schools in which shoddy contractual work was done and it became a recurring decimal. And oftentimes, the same contractors that did the mediocre work would be contracted to do them all over again. There is a very good example of such a school in my constituency, Elswick Presbyterian, which, for months this year, was facing a recurring sewer problem since March. Between March and November, constant closure, loss of teaching hours, frustration on the part of the principal. This only ended because the Minister intervened and he asked WASA to make an intervention and they solved the problem, and for the last month, this school has been operational without a problem. [*Desk thumping*] But that is one example.

Now, I am not sure if the number is 15; the last number I had was that there are 13 schools that are not opened. And this is not a situation that anyone should be proud of, but it is one we need to understand. If we do not understand it, it will not be solved in any kind of definitive manner. But aside from that, there are a number of schools that remain unopened and by this, I mean, new schools that were constructed, that were hastily opened in the midst of the election fever and have never been occupied. There is a good example of that in my constituency, the New Grant Government School.

Now, a few weeks ago, Madam Speaker—on a Thursday is my constituency day where we meet our constituents and we listen to their concerns and we try to make interventions. Because I do not have Cabinet duties, I have decided to organize myself so that I visit schools in the morning in the constituency, and in the afternoon I meet my constituents. So three weeks ago, I decided to visit the New Grant Government School. They have this very beautiful, massive structure on New Grant Junction which has not been occupied even though it was “opened”. I visited the school and I spoke with the acting principal, because the principal was not present, informing me that, as far as she was aware, this brand new school, which has never been occupied, is facing an electrical and a sewage problem. Boggling my mind: how does a school which has never housed students have a sewage problem?

I did what I always do in that situation. I called the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry, I called the DPS who deals with infrastructure, and because I am a bit familiar as an MP, I called T&TEC to see if they would deal with that extant electrical problem. I created a bit of chaos calling here, there, all morning. Eventually, the Ministry called EFCL; EFCL called T&TEC; T&TEC mobilized. They went and they actually took care of the electrical problem. So, in my mind, I had solved a major issue and within a day or two, school would have started.

That enthusiasm, that bubble, was burst very quickly, because in the same afternoon, in the midst of my euphoria, I received a call from the same DPS at the Ministry who deals with these issues, informing me that that school, that newly constructed school at New Grant Junction, which I have been informed cost something like \$25 million, could not be occupied because the Ministry of Works and Transport had flagged it with severe structural flaws—completely shattering my bubble.

In fact, I was informed that the structural flaws were so severe that it might cost an exorbitant sum to fix them or the next consideration will be that we demolish the school and we start all over. Need I mention that the constructor of that school is a company with a three-letter acronym that is so notorious in this nation now? I need not call the letters but they just recently lost a contract for a waste water plant. Madam Speaker, I am sure you understand to which company I am referring. Subsequent to that, I have been informed that the situation is slightly better, that some corrective work was done over time, and that the school might be useable but we are still awaiting a certificate of readiness from the Ministry of Works and Transport, also one from the regional corporation.

I want to state definitively here, it must be very frustrating for the people of New Grant, a rural community with which I am very familiar, to be waiting and looking at this lovely building and facing very cramped conditions where they are housed right now in the Hindustan Community Centre. I am sure that they are frustrated; I am sure they love what they see of that school, and I am sure that they want to occupy their school. But I am also sure that it would be an act tantamount to be criminal if any Minister of Education, in this nation, allows students to be housed in a school that has not been declared structurally safe. I am certain that neither Minister in the Ministry of Education is going to sanction a move as foolish as that.

So, Madam Speaker, not only do we have a number of schools that are closed, we have a number of schools that were hastily opened that are not operational for a number of reasons. Might I add as well—*[Interruption]*

Dr. Gopeesingh: Madam Speaker, could I have a point of order, please? Standing Order 48(1), relevance.

Madam Speaker: Member. Hon. Member for Moruga/Tableland, I would allow you to continue.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Thank you. *[Desk thumping]* Madam Speaker, might I reiterate that the hon. Member for Caroni East discussed, not only one problem vis-à-vis the schoolbooks, but a number of problems plaguing the education system, *[Desk thumping]* and I am attempting, in the most clear manner, to deal with the issues that he has raised.

I should add, Madam Speaker, to that New Grant story, not only was that school opened even though it had been flagged with serious structural issues, like a number of new schools constructed hastily in the run-up to the elections or “completed” hastily in the run-up to the elections, that school was opened in the absence of any furniture. So I am not sure if the UNC policy on education was that our students and teachers now sit on the floor. That school has yet to be provided with the commensurate furniture. So before it is opened, the Ministry will have to ensure that the furniture is placed so that the students, when they eventually occupy it, which we really hope will be in January, we will have the furniture that is needed to ensure that they can learn properly.

Madam Speaker, there is a third category of problematic schools that is directly aligned to the nature of management that was perpetrated by the hon. Member of Caroni East as Minister of Education. Last week Thursday, I made an impromptu visit to another school, which is not in my constituency, it is actually

in the constituency of Princes Town. But because many of the students who attend that school are the children of my constituents, I thought it correct that I should visit. Added to that, there were numerous reports in the media of difficulties in the school, in terms of student behaviour, in terms of teacher/student relationships. I thought it right that I should visit the school. This is the Princes Town East Secondary School.

I had the distinct pleasure of entering a school where I was not recognized. In fact, I walked in and they were basically: who are you? I had to say, “I am the Minister”, and then I was taken to the principal. When you arrive in an ad hoc, impromptu manner and a principal is extremely happy to see you, that, for me, is a source of concern. The principal there was very gracious, a Mr. Ali. He brought me to his office and then a litany of woes was read out to me.

The Princes Town East Secondary School was completed and handed over to the Ministry of Education in 2012. And the principal of that school took me on a tour of the compound and I was so moved by what I saw, I turned into “ah paparazzi”. I took a number of pictures and I really, really wish that the Parliament had the purview for what the Americans, in their system, call show and tell, because I would like to show the august Members here some of what I saw while I walked around that school. A school that I would still term new—handed over just two and a half years ago—is in such a state that I was surprised.

What did I see while I walked through this school? Walls with electrical wires exposed; electrical wires in PVC pipes coming out of the floor, so that students, if by mistake they stumble and fall, they could impale themselves on these pipes; doors that are completely leaving the walls. I am not talking here about examples of vandalism, which there are in the school, I am talking about examples of incomplete work that was passed. I am talking about a VAPA building that has never been commissioned and allowed for use by the school. I am talking about a multipurpose hall that is still not in use and has not been handed over to the school. I am talking about a field that is not fit for cows to graze, much less for students to play. [*Desk thumping*] I am talking about courts that are bolted and are not for the use of the children, and then you wonder why the students are acting up, and it was handed over to the Ministry and accepted as complete under the tenure of the former Minister.

So, Madam Speaker, while I accept the mover of the Motion’s notion that there are schools that are facing problems, the depth of the problems and the source of the problems, he did not vet in the most honest manner, but the

problems extend beyond that. The problems extend beyond schoolbooks, they extend beyond infrastructure. There are other cultural issues that arose out of the tenure of the former Minister.

One of the things that we faced when we got into the Ministry was the understanding that all of the relationships upon which the normal function of the Ministry operated were broken. And a good example of that is the relationship between the Ministry and the major stakeholders in education and by this, I refer to, for example, the National Parent Teacher Association; I refer to TTUTA; I refer to the denominational boards. One of the things that the current Minister has done—*[Interruption]*

Dr. Gopeesingh: Standing Order 48(1), again, please. Not relevant to the Motion. I did not mention anything about TTUTA.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, in the actual Motion, you went outside and have opened up everything about education. Could you continue, please, hon. Member for Moruga/Tableland?

4.00 p.m.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I was saying, thank you very much. One of the situations that was made very clear to us from the onset was that the relationship between the Ministry and its major stakeholders was broken. In fact, we were informed by a number of them that meetings with them and the Minister would be ignored, meeting times would be broken. In fact, it went so far that a number of them informed us that they were basically *persona non grata* at the Ministry.

One of the things that has been very useful in the opening period of our tenure as Ministers is that Minister Garcia, in particular, was adamant that one of the first things we should do was to meet with all of the major stakeholders in education in this nation and to begin mending fences, and we have done that. We have not met every single stakeholder as of yet but we have met a number of them, including the National Parent-Teacher Association, TTUTA, all of the board members, and we have set about the process of trying to mend these relationships. Without them, Madam Speaker, education in Trinidad and Tobago does not function properly and the tenure of the former Minister imperilled all of those relationships. This is going to be a process that will take time but I am assuring this House, as well as the nation, we are going to mend those fences and get the education system back on board. *[Desk thumping]*

There are a number of other issues. We have issues with staffing. We have issues with contracts. Madam Speaker, I was bemused, not amused, bemused, to learn a few weeks ago, when I was overseas on State duty, that there were nurses protesting outside the Ministry. Why? Because the short-term contracts that were awarded to their lecturers were coming to an end and they were panicked about the fact that they would have no one to teach them so they took to the streets and we have similar situations in a number of sectors. Internally in the Ministry also, because of the nature of the contract relationship perpetrated under the former regime, a number of staffing issues was created. It was fortunate that by the time I had returned, Minister Garcia had already, Madam Speaker, got a grasp of the situation and brought an end to what might have been a difficult situation for our nursing students.

Additionally, other problems existed. We faced the situation where—and this was particularly galling to me as a professional historian—there were moves to remove the teaching of History from schools or to minimize the teaching of History at the secondary level, so much so that our political leader was prompted, during the election campaign, to state categorically that when the PNM won the next election none of the things that we would do was to ensure, one, that History would no longer be disenfranchised at the secondary level but also that we would focus specifically on the teaching of History.

Mr. Deyalsingh: And you would need textbooks for that.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Exactly. In addition to that, Madam Speaker, we face a number of other situations. The hon. Member has made mention of the debt that the Ministry faces, vis-à-vis those contractors that have not been paid by the Education Facilities Limited. I have heard and seen sundry numbers. I have seen in the media a number as high as \$640 million. The figure provided to us in the Ministry was some \$572 million. This remains a problem. It does not, however, give an accurate picture or a total picture of the economic situation facing the Ministry.

Our Ministry at present, Madam Speaker, owes some US \$2 million to Digicel for a project that we have great difficulty in quantifying or qualifying. That is so problematic, that during our last meeting with the board of EFCL we could not receive a legitimate answer as to whether there was ever a contract signed for the services provided by this country and the exact nature of those services to be provided. Added to that, my good friend, Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara constantly reminds me that our education Ministry owes MTS some \$73 million. And this is not the sum total of all of the moneys owed. These are just the most obvious balances. These situations are not emblematic of the competent management of a Ministry.

Madam Speaker, I could go on and on, in terms of the negative situations that we face in the Ministry. But at the end of the day—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Gopeesingh: “When you supplying the books?”

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: I can answer that directly. The hon. Member would be pleased to note or pleased to understand that a Note was taken to Cabinet last week, dealing with the procurement of books and this matter is already being handled. [*Desk thumping*]

But I would make the point again, Madam Speaker. The issues concerning the textbooks are really a minor chord on a major theme. There are larger concerns that are plaguing the Ministry. The last five years, given the nature of the management of the Minister, have been disastrous for the Ministry of Education. What Minister Garcia has inherited is literally the calm after the hurricane has passed. And our task is to put this together. But I wish to state definitively to this House and to the nation on one hand that this PNM Government, like every single PNM Government before this one, remains committed to the education of our young people; that this PNM Government intends—[*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your speaking time has expired. You are entitled to avail yourself of a further 15 minutes.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: Thank you, Madam Speaker, though I doubt I will need all of them.

Madam Speaker, I wish to make the point again. This PNM Government intends, as every previous incarnation of our Governments have, to deal seriously with the education of our young people. The PNM has always stood for development via education. That scenario has not changed. To this end, Minister Garcia and myself, we have identified, along with our team, a number of ways forward. It is not my intention here today, Madam Speaker, to somehow castigate or throw under the bus the Ministry of Education. This organization today is still full of very competent, very well educated, very professional public officers—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Patriotic.

Hon. Dr. L. Francis:—very patriotic, thank you, public officers. And they have given us the kind of support that is needed to turn a negative situation into a positive one. A new board for the Education Facilities Company Limited has already been constituted. They have received their instruments and they are operational. [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Could we have a little order, please?

Hon. Dr. L. Francis: This board has already undertaken the gargantuan task of reviewing the procedures and processes of this Special Purpose Company and even though the Ministry and this board understand that the way forward is not going to be as straightforward as we would like it, they have already begun the process of righting all that was wrong with that company.

Added to that, the Ministry of Education intends to have a major consultation, nationally, on education next year, where stakeholders large and small would be invited to lend their two cents or many cents to the path forward for education in this nation.

In addition to all of that, Minister Garcia and myself, along with the technocrats in the Ministry have already begun the process of reviewing the procedures and processes under which the Ministry works and we are moving towards ensuring that we implement best practice in the way that the Ministry functions to take us into the future.

Madam Speaker, the situation at the Ministry of Education is not ideal. Neither the Minister nor I am pleased with the situation in which it exists at this moment. To say that we were not the creators of this is redundant. At the end of the day, the one thing that the hon. Member for Caroni East has said that I agree with is that we are now charged with the responsibility of fixing all that is wrong and charting a prudent way forward for the Ministry. This is not going to be an easy task but the mantle is ours. We are responsible to this House, to the nation, to the parents and the children and this is not something that either Minister Garcia or I intend to shirk. Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, may I suggest at this time we take the tea break. May I call on the Leader of the House?

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Yes Madam, red and ready. Madam Speaker, under normal circumstances, as the Standing Orders indicate, we would have to finish by 6.00 p.m. However, the Opposition has indicated that they want to adjourn at this time. This is their day, Private Members' Day. So Madam Speaker, I would like to indicate that I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to next Friday at 1.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, we were dealing with the Motion to increase the borrowing limits under the Development Loans Act, Chap. 71:04, the Guarantee of Loans (Companies) Act, Chap. 71:82, and the External Loans Act, Chap. 71:05. Madam Speaker, may I also indicate that notice of this Motion will be sent by email to all Members of the House. Thank you very kindly, Madam. Sorry, may I indicate that next Friday is December 04 and that is the date that we are adjourning to. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 4.13 p.m.