



REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Debates of the House of Representatives

3rd Session – 10th Parliament (Rep.) – Volume 16 – Number 18

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)**

THE HONOURABLE WADE MARK
SPEAKER

THE HONOURABLE NELA KHAN
DEPUTY SPEAKER

Monday 28th January, 2013

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*Leave of Absence**Monday, January 28, 2013***HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Monday, January 28, 2013*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the following members: the hon. Winston Dookeran, Member of Parliament for Tunapuna, is currently out of the country and has asked to be excused from sittings of the House during the period January 23 to January 29, 2013; the hon. Dr. Rupert Griffith, Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande, is also out of the country and has asked to be excused from sittings of the House during the period January 26 to January 29, 2013; the hon. Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, Member of Parliament for Caroni East, is also out of the country and has asked to be excused from sittings of the House during the period January 26 to January 31, 2013; the hon. Surujrattan Rambachan, Member of Parliament for Tabaquite and the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, Member of Parliament for Diego Martin West, have asked to be excused from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

**Housing Development Corporation
(Purchase of Land)**

- 26. Miss Marlene Mc Donald** (*Port of Spain South*) on behalf of Dr. Keith Rowley (*Diego Martin West*) asked the hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Resources:
- A. With respect to the purchase of private lands at Calcutta Road, Couva by the Housing Development Corporation, could the Minister state:
 - i. Whether any payment was made by the Housing Development Corporation, how much has been paid and to whom?
 - B. If no payment was made as at November 22, 2012, could the hon. Minister state:
 - i. Why the payments have not been made to date?

- ii. When will the transaction be effected as outlined by the Minister in the Parliament budget debate on October 5, 2012?
- C. Could the hon. Minister further state whether he is aware that this said parcel of land which the Government (Housing Development Corporation) is willing to purchase for \$175 million was previously sold in 2010 for \$5 million?

The Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs (Hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just by clarification, there are other questions on the Order Paper for the Minister of Food Production.

Mr. Speaker: Yes.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: We are prepared to answer those questions as well, but I can proceed with question No. 26.

Mr. Speaker, the answer to question 26 A: yes, the Housing Development Corporation has issued payment to the sum of \$175 million. Payment made to Point Lisas Park Limited. B is not applicable given the answer to A; and C, it must be stated that the question is not well phrased in the sense that it is not a parcel of land that we are dealing with, but 275 well-serviced plots. These plots are well-serviced plots of land that include fully developed road networks, well developed drainage, waste water treatment plants, facilities for electricity, potable water and other laterals for a complete housing estate to include 275 housing units.

Mr. Speaker, that is in response to part C. The lands are located, for the record, at, well I must say, Calcutta Road in Couva.

Mr. Sharma: And only \$175 million.

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: At Calcutta—Mr. Speaker, we have this fascination with that place—Road, and there is no ship there. At Couva, those are the lands in question, 275 well-serviced plots.

Miss Mc Donald: Supplemental, Mr. Speaker, to the Member for Oropouche East. Is the Minister aware that after the closure of Caroni (1975) Limited, that the development plan for Caroni earmarked hundreds of acres of land in the Caroni area for housing? Are you aware of that, Sir?

Hon. Dr. R. Moonilal: Yes, Mr. Speaker, we are aware of that.

**Marine Fishing Stock
(Measures Taken)**

14. Mr. Fitzgerald Jeffrey (*La Brea*) asked the hon. Minister of Food Production:

What measures have been taken to secure adequate marine fishing stock for our nation?

The Minister of Food Production (Sen. The Hon. Devant Maharaj): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The question is what measures have been taken to secure adequate marine fishing stocks for our nation.

Mr. Speaker, this question cannot be adequately answered in the question time in the form of oral answer, but I would try my best. I have detailed notes, if you want to make yourself available to it.

Mr. Speaker: May I advise, if it is going to be too long, beyond five minutes, you will circulate the rest. Okay? But you can start.

Hon. D. Maharaj: I would start: Trinidad and Tobago has been engaged in a number of activities to ensure that the sustainable exploitation of the marine fisheries resources include several measures, which include the fisheries management policy for the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. This has been revised recently and is currently awaiting Cabinet approval. It was formulated with due consideration to the changing national, regional and international environment for fisheries management and conservation.

It considered the goal of sustainable management and growth of the sector with a diversified economy could be achieved by improving conservation outcomes, increasing industry self-reliance, creating systems that allow for efficient access to the allocation of resources, facilitating transparent decision-making and a shared stewardship and promoting aqua-culture as an alternative means of fish production.

Trinidad and Tobago has signed on to numerous international and regional conventions, and agreements that promote the sustainable use of fishery resources and thus confer obligations on this country to demonstrate its commitment to these fisheries management initiatives, through national legislation and other intervention. These conventions include: the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea; the Convention on International Trade and Endangered Species; the Convention on Biological Diversity; the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas; the Fish Stocks Agreement, to name a few.

The fisheries management in Trinidad and Tobago is currently governed by the Fisheries Act, 1916; amended in 1975; which empowers the Minister responsible for fisheries to make regulations to prescribe mesh size of net to restrict the size of fish, shrimp and crabs caught and prohibit their sale or prevent the catching of these species, either absolutely or by season or area. Fisheries Regulations and Fisheries (Amdt) Regulations, 2002, for example, specified the types and specifications of nets that can be used in the territorial waters of Trinidad and Tobago; the minimum size of fish that can be caught, and prohibited areas. The Fisheries (Control of Demersal Trawling) Regulations 2004 placed restrictions on demersal trawling for fish and shrimp in certain waters. The Fisheries (Conservation of Marine Turtles) Regulations mandate the use of turtle excluder or trawler efficiency devices in trawl nets of semi-industrial and industrial vessels, and the Protection of Turtles and Turtle Eggs Regulations, 2011 now prohibit catching, sale and possession of turtles and turtle eggs in order to protect these endangered species.

In seeking to update and modernize the regulatory framework, the Fisheries Management Bill 2007, which was drafted to repeal the outdated and inadequate Fisheries Act of 1916, was revised in 2011, and it is on the agenda before the Legislative Review Committee for this Wednesday. Some 26 meetings of a Cabinet-appointed committee were held to review and update the Bill, and eight consultations with industry stakeholders around Trinidad and Tobago were conducted in 2010 and 2011. The new legislation will provide for the preparation of fishery management plans and will in accordance with these plans control and limit access to fish resources through the establishment of a licensing system for both local and foreign fishing vessels. Thank you very much, I have more, but—

Hon. Member: You did well.

Caroni Swamp
(Details of)

15. Mr. Fitzgerald Jeffrey (*La Brea*) asked the hon. Minister of Food Production:

Could the Minister state:

- a) what tests are conducted in the Caroni Swamp to ensure that the toxicity level in our aquatic livestock does not compromise human health;
- b) how often are these tests done;

- c) what was the date when the last test was done and what were the results of the findings?

The Minister of Food Production (Sen. The Hon. Devant Maharaj): Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, this question poses—what tests are conducted in the Caroni Swamp to ensure that the toxicity level in our aquatic livestock does not compromise human health? How often these tests are done? And what was the date when the last tests were done and what were the results of the findings?

Mr. Speaker, testing of the Caroni Swamp to ensure that the toxicity level in our aquatic livestock does not compromise human health was under the purview of the Ministry of Housing and the Environment prior to the reconfiguration; it now falls under the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources. So the question is wrongly posed to the Minister of Food Production; however, I shall furnish you with the answer having solicited it from my colleagues.

The heavy metals and hydrocarbon testings are being conducted in the entire coastline. The wet seasoning sample of 2011 has been done, however the Caroni Swamp has not been included in this testing, but the programme needs to be expanded further. One test was conducted on the Caroni Swamp and this test was a bio data study with the Caroni Swamp being one of six test sites tested in 2002. The study was conducted for heavy metal, hydrocarbon as well as microbiological contamination. The Caroni area was identified as one of the hot spots because of the level of contamination. This study suggested there is more room for detailed studies. The Institute of Marine Affairs submitted a proposal to the wetland committee in 2010, early, for the monitoring of the Caroni Swamp; to date, the status of the proposal has not gone further.

Trinidad and Tobago Unregistered Farmers (Details of)

- 17. Mr. Fitzgerald Jeffrey (*La Brea*)** asked the hon. Minister of Food Production:

How many unregistered farmers are there in Trinidad and what is the acreage under cultivation by such farmers?

Mr. Speaker: The Minister of Food Production.

Mr. Sharma: “Best yuh take him by yuh.”

The Minister of Food Production (Sen. The Hon. Devant Maharaj): I feel we have to offer him a position in the Ministry of Food Production.

Could the Minister state how many unregistered farmers are there in Trinidad and what is the total acreage of state lands under cultivation by such farmers?

The Ministry of Food Production has a database of farmers who have registered at the various county extension offices throughout the country. Some farmers, although they may be serviced by the extension staff, are unable to be registered as they cultivate lands that are reserved for forest watershed management and other such areas. The regional administration offices of the Ministry, therefore, cannot provide accurate figures for unregistered farmers in the region. We have submitted figures, however, for the approximate number of persons illegally occupying reserves but involved in crop production.

The number of unregistered farmers in this context constitutes 5,259 persons. The approximate acreage under cultivation by these farmers is 4,317 hectares. Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

FINANCE BILL, 2013

Order for second reading read.

The Minister of Finance and the Economy (Sen. The Hon. Larry Howai): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move:

That a Bill to provide for the variation of certain duties and taxes and to introduce provisions of a fiscal nature and for related matters be now read a second time.

Mr. Speaker, we frame our debate on the Finance Bill today in the context of an improving macroeconomic environment. After registering declines of about 1 per cent per annum over the period 2008 — 2011, the economy turned the corner in 2012 with the CSO projecting growth using a revised number of just around 1 per cent.

1.45 p.m.

The turnaround has been mainly due to improved performance in the non-energy sector with growth being reflected in the services sector mainly in finance, insurance, real estate services, electricity and water as well as in personnel services. Manufacturing declined, however, mainly due to the slowdown in assembly-type operations as well as in textiles, garments and footwear. On the other hand, there was a moderate gain in food, beverages and tobacco and a relatively robust increase in wood and other related products.

The challenges facing the manufacturing sector have reflected the difficulties being faced by our compatriots in Caricom, who have seen declines in earnings, as a result of the fall-off in the tourism industry mainly as a result of the global financial crisis and of course the effects of the CL Financial meltdown which have continued to have ripple effects on their economies.

For Trinidad and Tobago, the preliminary data for 2012 suggests that the current account surplus has increased and that that trend continued towards the end of the year. As a consequence, the financial and economic buffers of the country continued to remain strong and resilient with foreign exchange earnings continuing to grow and with the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund closing the year at US \$ 4.7 billion.

The retail sector, although showing robust growth at the end of last year—mainly as a result of the Christmas sales—has to be wary of the impact of globalization as the effect of online purchases will begin to pose serious competition for this sector in years to come.

Unemployment remains reasonably controlled at just over 5 per cent—[*Desk thumping*] notwithstanding the increase in the labour force by 0.3 per cent and of course a marginal increase in the participation rate from 61.7 to 61.8 per cent.

The year-on-year growth in private sector credit remained good at 7.1 per cent using October 2011 numbers, and inflation has begun to show signs of moderating. At the end of the year, Standard and Poor's and Moody's reaffirmed their ratings for Trinidad and Tobago at A in the case of Standard and Poor's and BAA1 in the case of Moody's, both of them with a stable outlook.

The major areas of concern when we read the budget last year or in the current fiscal year were construction and energy. Over the long term, economic diversification remains an ongoing challenge. The budget, therefore, had a significant focus on incentives to generate activities in the construction and in the energy sectors, particularly in the case of energy in upstream investment.

In terms of economic diversification, all sectors are being addressed. A special focus has been placed on the creative industries and the financial services sector in the first quarter of this current fiscal year, and the PPP modality has been identified as a means by which the Government may be able to stimulate growth and show the increases in the various sectors that we wish to show without necessarily placing an undue burden on Government.

Mr. Speaker, permeating the entire budget speech was a belief that the private sector and labour have important roles to play if Trinidad and Tobago is going to

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develop, and we have extended invitations to them to partner with Government in this task. One of the areas that we started to work with the private sector on is the transitioning of labour from the CEPEP programme into the private sector.

An initial job fair was held towards the end of last year where an attempt was made to encourage employees of the programme to transition into mainly the retail sector. I must confess, however, that the turnout was not as large as we would have anticipated, but I am grateful to the private sector for their commitment to continue that process because this is going to be a process where there will have to be some changes in the modus operandi of the individuals themselves in terms of how they approach the work in the private sector.

Therefore, there is some need for us to institute programmes on the side of CEPEP itself to facilitate this transitioning process. The thing is that the private sector is committed to continuing the programme of job fairs with a view to ensuring that these individuals, when they leave the CEPEP programme after three years, will be able to transition into permanent employment.

The trade union movement has also demonstrated a willingness to dialogue with the Government, and a number of meetings are scheduled during the course of February and March with all the leaders of the various trade unions.

Mr. Speaker, the Finance Bill before this honourable House today contains legislative proposals intended to give effect to the changes which were in the 2012/2013 budget. Our goal is to create a diversified economy with solid platforms for good quality job creation while ensuring that the wealth so created is fairly and equitably distributed, but this is a long-term goal. The budget commenced a process of achieving this objective last year, and in my presentation today I shall only focus on some of the more important changes being made to the legislation.

The first item relates to the pensions or the retiring allowances for retired legislators. I propose to circulate to Members at the committee stage later this evening, a list of amendments proposing amendments to the Retiring Allowances Legislative Service Act in order to reflect the intention of Government as it relates to this matter.

I should state at the outset that what is stated at clause 2 of the Bill was already dealt with in the last Finance Act, 2012, when a minimum retiring allowance of \$3,000 was made effective. The true intent of the measure is to facilitate the payment of a retiring allowance to legislators who, although they

would have served for periods amounting in the aggregate to not less than five years, would have been denied the benefits simply because they ceased being a legislator prior to November 21, 1996.

Mr. Speaker, prior to November 21, 1996 the legislator would have had to serve for periods in the aggregate of not less than eight years in order to qualify for a retiring allowance. It is not altogether clear why there was a cut-off date of November 21, 1996, which marked the commencement of the Second Session of the Fifth Parliament, particularly since there are still a few legislators who had served this country quite faithfully and selflessly prior to that date. It is suggested that the commencement of the payment and not the qualification for the payment should be November 21, 1996. The inclusion of the amendment is intended to tidy up the language in the legislation as requested by the Attorney General's office to reflect properly the intention of the Executive.

Mr. Speaker, I also need to raise another issue which was overlooked by the earlier Cabinet decision on this matter, and this pertains to the retiring allowances to spouses. While this had been captured in a previous version of the Act, it was not in the last amendment. Unless section 9 of the Retiring Allowances Legislative Service Act is also amended, the spouses of qualifying legislators will be placed at a disadvantage, given the amendment to the Finance Act of 2007 which restricted the benefit, among other things, to legislators who satisfied the five-year service requirement as from November 21, 1996. So those who are still alive, who were there prior to 1996, will be suffering a bit of loss of not being included in this amendment.

So we are seeking simply to tidy this up and to correct it and to include the spouses as had been done previously. Actually, the word that had been used previously is "widows", but we thought that perhaps we may have "widows" somewhere along the line and we thought that we would change the wording to refer to spouses.

Secondly, this Bill seeks to make provision for the amendment to the Registration of Clubs Act by repealing and replacing the schedule to increase the taxes payable on gambling tables and other devices. We believe that the gaming industry has a legitimate role to play in the entertainment sector in Trinidad and Tobago; however, it is subject to abuse. It is the Government's intention to bring comprehensive legislation to create a gaming authority.

Now, this is something that has been on the card for a very long time, and I am not sure why it has not occurred to date, and perhaps as I go through the

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process of trying to make it happen I will find out what may have happened over the intervening years. But the intention is to ensure that this legislation is as comprehensive as possible to ensure that the industry is properly managed and regulated.

In most countries of the world, the gaming industry is a significant provider of revenue for the development of education, the arts, sports and culture. It is our belief that Government does not get its fair share of revenues from the sector, but we as Government have to bear the full cost of all the negative fallout from the industry because of the fact that it is not properly regulated and managed. This must stop.

However, I expect that the process for putting this regulatory regime properly in place will take perhaps about three years. I expect that the full, comprehensive legislation will be completed and passed within the next 18 months and the implementation of the institutional arrangements to give proper effect to the legislation will take probably as much as a year after that, a little more than a year after that, but in the meantime we have taken steps to increase the revenue that can be generated from the industry in the short term until a more comprehensive system can be put in place over the longer term.

Thirdly, we have the issue of litter. This is a major challenge for our country. Many times I myself personally feel that we lack perhaps a level of national pride in the way in which we, in a sense, have little regard for littering in public places. It is proposed to take immediate measures to improve this situation. Effective today, the Ministry of Local Government has employed 147 litter wardens and we expect that they would go into training with effect from tomorrow. This will have an immediate impact once these wardens are deployed in a couple of weeks' time. This measure is being put in place as part of a wider set of measures to deal with this problem.

Mr. Speaker, with this budget we seek to commence a gradual overhaul of our national insurance system. In our budget speech we had increases in the maximum insurable earnings over the period to 2020. This is a major adjustment to the system and results in increased benefits to income earners who made contributions after the changes have been effected. In conducting the eighth annual review of the NIS, which was laid in this honourable House towards the end of last year, the consultant firm was required to incorporate key social insurance principles as follows, and I quote from their terms of reference:

1. The NIS should maintain the principle of redistribution of income in favour of low income contributors.

2. Benefits must relate to earnings, thus reinforcing the concept of benefits as earned rights and recognizing that there is a relationship between one's standard of living while working and the benefits level needed to achieve income protection in the event of sickness, disability, old age and death.
3. The NIS through the provision of pensions, should provide a basic standard of living upon retirement for all persons who have contributed to the system and have satisfied eligibility requirements.
4. The NIS must ensure that the greatest good is provided to all stakeholders within the context of affordability, fiscal responsibility and administrative feasibility.

2.00 p.m.

So, Mr. Speaker, those were some of the policy positions that we outlined to the actuaries when we asked that they do the actuarial review.

They have completed the review and have provided their report, which was laid in the honourable House, as I said, and, of course, they have identified a number of challenges that we face. The first is that the fund is underfunded; the second is that the current low interest rate environment creates a challenge in terms of the build-up of reserves for the fund and thirdly, population demographics in Trinidad and Tobago have been changing and what it is pointing towards is that, more and more, a smaller and smaller working population will be providing for a larger and larger retired population. Therefore, inflows, potentially in years to come, will be less than outflows and, therefore, the problem of underfunding could be compounded. So we need to deal with these challenges.

With respect to the issue of underfunding, this is not an immediate issue, in the sense that most of these funds—national insurance funds—tend to be underfunded. In fact, I do not know of any particular fund—that is, a national fund—that carries a surplus. The reason why it is not an immediate issue is that liabilities crystallize over a long period of time and when compared to other funds globally, the deficit in our fund is quite manageable. So I do not think there is need to panic about the fund and where we are regarding the state of the overall level of funding because we can manage that particular situation. Nevertheless, it is one that has to be addressed.

So how are we addressing it? What we have done is, going forward, we are increasing the contribution rates. So, as you would see, Mr. Speaker, we are looking to increase from a contribution rate of 11.4 per cent to 11.7 per cent and

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we are looking to increase it further to 12 per cent in 2014. Now, what this does is that because you have a large number of people contributing—you have about 600,000 contributors to the fund—even though we give a small increase, by a large base, gives a fairly large contribution to the fund. On the other hand, the withdrawals from the fund do not increase commensurately as the increase in the revenue takes place. So with a small increase in the level of contributions, we can fund increased benefits and still contribute to the overall development of the fund.

So we have in place a programme which we will introduce over the next eight years which will ensure that contributions increase on a graduated basis; benefits increase, but the contributions, because you are multiplying them over a larger base, the increasing contributions will help to deal with the funding issue that the national insurance fund now faces. So we are able therefore to provide increased benefits, Mr. Speaker, on a sustainable basis.

I now turn to the specific changes and benefits being proposed in the Bill before this honourable House. First, changes are proposed in the classification of insured persons in section 2 of the National Insurance Act to allow the compulsory inclusion of self-employed persons in the national insurance system, allowing them to access retirement benefits as early as the age of 60 based on actuarial computations. The change in definition allows for the assignment of a contribution payment class for self-employed persons and will provide them with the necessary documentation within the national insurance system.

The provisions are expected to work to bring self-employed persons greater opportunities for social protection within the established national safety net by regularizing the transition between employment and self-employment in section 78, encouraging record keeping in section 79 and regularizing short and long term benefits due to the survivors of the self-employed person after his death in section 80.

Rules about contributions, benefits and compliance are all provided for in the proposed Part V of the Act. Changes to benefit payments in the National Insurance Act are also being proposed to fulfil the mandate of increased social protection. Maternity benefits, survivors' benefits, benefits for sickness, invalidity and employment injury are all being adjusted to ensure that an increased level of benefits are able to reach citizens. Maternity and special maternity grants, the minimum retirement grant and the funeral grant are subject to a one-time increase of 50 per cent this year. The minimum survivors' benefits with respect to spouses, children, dependent parents and orphaned children of a deceased contributor are subject to a one-time increase of 50 per cent this year as well.

Furthermore, calculated benefits in the cases of sickness, maternity allowance, invalidity, survivors' benefit, retirement benefit—except with the minimum pension—and employment injury benefits are to be increased by 25 per cent in 2013 and 20 per cent in 2014, a compounded value of 50 per cent.

We also intend, as I said, Mr. Speaker, to increase the contribution rate slightly from 11.4 per cent to 11.7 per cent in 2013 and to 12 per cent in 2014. In both instances, employers will bear more of the burden than employees. In addition, we propose an increase to the threshold for both maximum and minimum insurable earnings under the national insurance structure. The minimum threshold will move from \$120 weekly to \$150 weekly in 2013, to \$180 weekly in 2014; and the maximum threshold will move from \$8,300 monthly to \$10,000 monthly in 2013 and then further to \$12,000 monthly to 2014.

We also propose another addendum to the National Insurance Act at page 6 which would allow the NIB to create and offer investment vehicles to citizens of Trinidad and Tobago in order to supplement the retirement benefits of insured persons. One of the things with this particular change, Mr. Speaker, is that we can have some of the private managers of insurance funds and pension plans and so on, seeking to, or believing that the Government is seeking to get into their space. This is not so. In fact, I do not see any reason why any of the private insurers should feel that the National Insurance Board would be too much of a competition for them to handle. In fact, I think they should be glad for the increased competition which sharpens everyone and provides better benefits to the customer.

Part of our getting involved in this is basically to keep everybody on the straight and narrow. It certainly will allow us to benchmark our performance against the private sector and ensure that individual contributors get value for the money that they are putting into the fund. By this creative option offered to those insured, we simply wish to demonstrate that we are interested, not only in the static benefits that would accrue to those who encounter misfortune, but also in facilitating the dynamic process of increasing national savings.

Mr. Speaker, we have a very clear vision of where we want the national insurance system to go. We have a very clear perspective on how we want to see it develop. We have a good understanding of the risks, and our intention is to ensure that the burdens and benefits of the national insurance system are equitably shared. We are confident and comfortable that the national insurance fund will be able to meet all its obligation and that the formula that we have put in place, by

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way of the proposed increases in the contribution to the fund, will ensure that the fund can meet all of its obligations.

Mr. Speaker, I will deal now with the small amendment to the Public Assistance Act which is to be found in clause 7 of the Bill. The Government has identified the wellness of all its citizens as a primary objective and, in particular, the development of an environment where basic and special needs are adequately met. To this end, programmes and initiatives have been implemented with a view to supporting families and children at risk and reducing the need for foster care.

The Public Assistance Grant and the Disability Assistance Grant are administered under the Public Assistance Act. Mr. Speaker, with specific regard to the welfare of our children, it should be noted that Trinidad and Tobago is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and has also agreed to the UN Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children. In keeping with our international obligations, a national plan of action for children was completed and several pieces of legislation pertaining to the care and protection of our children were enacted, including the recently promulgated Children Act, 2012.

In addition, the Ministry of the People and Social Development administers several programmes aimed at providing financial support to children in need. Some of these initiatives include supporting children with special needs and disabilities and increasing family support programmes, special child grants, assistance for transport, clothing, medical and/or books. Families accessing these benefits also qualify for the food card.

In the case of the special child grant, a monthly sum of \$800 per child with a maximum of four children per family is currently paid to parents of children who have been certified as having a mental or physical disability and who are unable to meet the financial cost of caring for the special child. This grant is paid until the child's 18th birthday. However, a child on whose behalf public assistance is paid will not also be eligible for the special child grant.

Mr. Speaker, it should also be noted that special concessions are available under the Customs Act for the benefit of disabled persons. The following items imported for use by disabled persons are exempt from customs duties:

- (1) Goods catering to the needs of the mentally or physically handicapped as recommended by the Chief Medical Officer and admitted as such by the Comptroller of Customs and Excise; and

- (2) Tools of trade for the disabled as recommended by the Chief Medical Officer and admitted as such by the Comptroller.

After a child with a disability attains the age of 18 years, until 65, that person will be entitled to disability assistance of \$1,300 per month. The disability assistance was first introduced in 1996 in the Finance Act, 1996, with a monthly allowance of \$520 paid until the year 2002. Thereafter, the assistance was increased over the years. At present, it stands at \$1,300 per month. It is proposed to increase the monthly disability assistance by the sum of \$200, from \$1,300 to \$1,500, and to maintain the income ceiling for receipt of this grant at \$12,000 per year. The measure will benefit approximately 24,000 recipients. It is also proposed to increase the monthly special child grant which targets children with severe mental or physical disabilities, from \$800 to \$1,000 [*Desk thumping*] with effect from February 01, 2013. This latter measure will not require any legislative action to be taken.

Ease of doing business: Mr. Speaker, I come now to changes being implemented to improve the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago. As you know, Trinidad and Tobago ranked 69 out of 185 countries in the World Bank index for the ease of doing business.

Hon. Member: That is not a bad ranking.

Sen. The Hon. L. Howai: Notwithstanding that it is not a bad ranking, as the Minister is saying, the fact is that we want Trinidad and Tobago to rank in the top 10 per cent. [*Desk thumping*]

5. The actuaries were required to address an NIB policy objective which is to maintain the relevance of the level of coverage and the value of contributions and benefits to economic conditions.

2.15 p.m.

The goals this year—we are not saying we are going to get there this year, Member for Oropouche East—are to reduce the time taken to establish a new company from 43 days to three days and to reduce the time taken to clear an import shipment through customs from 19 days to three days. [*Desk thumping*] As a consequence, a number of measures have been incorporated into this Bill and I make reference to two of them.

The first is a requirement now being inserted into the Income Tax Act to require the Board of Inland Revenue to provide a person within one working day after the receipt of an application with a BIR file number.

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Secondly, the National Insurance Act is being amended to require the NIB to take specific measures to register a company and its employees up to a maximum of 20 employees, within one working day of receipt of the application. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, we understand that we cannot simply say that we want to reduce the number of days taken to do an activity and it will be done. We understand that processes will need to be re-engineered. We understand that jobs will need to be redefined. But, one must create a framework which generates a sense of urgency. We are committed to ensuring that this sense of urgency is created and to emphasize our commitment to achieving this goal and working proactively with the relevant agencies to ensure that this happens. This change to the legislation is intended to create a context that generates a degree of urgency and we know that we shall achieve these deadlines.

Mr. Speaker, a further measure which the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Investment had intended to introduce was to remove the requirement for light manufacturing companies to go through the process of having to attend the Ministry to have imports of equipment added to the list of duty-free items and obtain a Minister's licence. This has not been included in this Bill as this arrangement needs to be worked out further.

Mr. Speaker, I come to the matter of the Clico Investment Fund. The failure of Clico and the consequent collapse of the CL Financial Group has been a major blot on the economic landscape of this country. It also exposed the glaring inadequacies of our regulatory framework.

What has been equally painful was the manner in which the entire management of the takeover of the group was handled. Any banker will tell you that when you are lending money, you take security. This should have been done from the start and the priority of Government's claims, particularly over pre-existing inter-company liabilities, should have been established.

This has seriously compromised our ability to recover the \$19 billion put into this group to meet the obligations of depositors and other creditors and has complicated this process.

Mr. Speaker, the \$19 billion that has been put into this group could have done all of the following things put together: built the Point Fortin highway; built the Point Fortin and Arima highways; built the Couva children's hospital; built the five administrative complexes for the Judiciary; and built three administrative complexes for the regional corporations.

Hon. Member: Jesus!

Sen. The Hon. L. Howai: Instead, any Government wishing to do these things will have to borrow money to get them done.

Dr. Moonilal: That is why we are here.

Sen. The Hon. L. Howai: The failure to properly regulate this group has cost this country dearly and the attempts to manage this process when things went wrong have created the conditions which complicate the process for recovery of these funds.

Mr. Speaker, we shall never recover all the funds that have been put into this group, but our focus is to try to maximize what can be collected to reduce the borrowing that we need to do. We have negotiated an extension of time under the memorandum of understanding to allow us to do so. In the meantime, we have put the Clico Investment Fund in place as we promised to do.

We proposed that the Stamp Duty Act be amended by altering subsection (2) of section 68, in order to allow the President to waive the stamp duty fee for transferring shares in Republic Bank Limited owned by Clico to the Government. The waiver would also apply to the transfer of shares in Republic Bank Limited from the Government to the Clico Investment Fund and the transfer of units by the Government to persons who had received bonds due to be redeemed from the 11th to the 20th year.

The Clico Investment Fund serves as a vital part of the formula for restoring to citizens what is theirs and as a repository space to prevent undue systemic risks that can arise with financial market volatility. With this in mind, section 8(1) of the Income Tax Act is being amended to exempt the unitholders of the Clico Investment Fund from income tax and dividends earned, in keeping with arrangements for other similar funds. In addition, we are proposing that the income from the fund be free of tax.

Construction industry: Mr. Speaker, I turn now to the construction industry. The sector has had its challenges over the past few years, but so has this sector in many other parts of the world. To get the economy to turn around, this has been a major area of focus over the past six months. Although the challenges being faced by TCL have impacted the industry, the Government is confident that the sector will return to growth this year.

Our strategy is to focus on a combination of Government and private sector investment to stimulate activity in the sector. On the Government side, apart from

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the housing programme, a number of projects have been approved and are expected to commence this year. These include the Chaguanas, San Juan and Siparia markets; the construction of the Princes Town and Arima administrative complexes; phase II of the Landslip Restoration and Bridge Building Programme. In addition, the construction of the Couva children's hospital is expected to begin in the second quarter of this year, work on the national oncology centre is expected to commence by the third quarter of this year. In addition, the construction of the Early Childhood Care Centres, the police stations and the school building programmes continue.

To galvanize the private sector, we propose to exempt profits gained from the development and sale of land or housing sites from income tax, provided that development planning standards are complied with and that the projects commenced after October 1, 2012, with the sales of the units being completed by December 31, 2015. In addition, it is proposed to increase the limit for alterations, repairs and renovations made after February 10, 2013.

Mr. Speaker, I propose to move an amendment at the committee stage to increase the sum of \$950,000 referred to at clause 9(c) ii (B) to \$1.5 million as stated in the budget speech. This is in keeping with what we stated. [*Desk thumping*]

We also propose to exempt from income tax, until December 31, 2017, the premium and rents derived from the letting of newly constructed commercial building or multi-storey car park. In addition, the gains or profits from the initial sale of such a newly constructed commercial building or multi-storey car park will be exempt from taxes where such construction commenced after October 01, 2012.

However, Mr. Speaker, the challenge remains, how to get the approvals that are required to make the construction happen. It is one thing to say that we intend to galvanize the construction industry; it is one thing to provide tax benefits to the construction industry; it is one thing to provide low-cost funding for housing in the construction industry, but it is another thing to get the approvals so that you can get anything started.

What we have done is that we have established a committee to fast-track the approval process, and to do that we have called together representatives from the approving agencies at all levels within Government, under the chairmanship of the Ministry of Finance and the Economy to ensure that we can fast-track these approvals. This is a process that we are going to have to continue to work on to

continue to evolve, to continue to refine, to ensure that we can achieve the stated objective of getting the construction industry galvanized as quickly as possible.

Mr. Speaker, I turn now to the financial services sector. We have identified the financial services sector as an area of focus for the further diversification of the economy. The Government has signalled the relaunching of the International Financial Centre by the establishment of a financial institution support services or what we call “FINISS” industry.

The financial institution support services is a creation and formalization of a new sector within the financial services sector, under the facilitation of the Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre. The “FINISS” industry will support the outsourcing and consolidation of the middle and back office processing for regional and international financial institutions. In the circumstances, such enterprises will provide services to customers in Trinidad and Tobago, as well as in the wider region.

Some of the processes which would be included within this facilitation framework would be the processing of wire payments, loan adjudication and fulfilment, operational advice and counsel, database management, human resource management, credit card processing, collections from delinquent customers, reconciliations, provision of legal advice and so on.

So what we are seeking to do is to have as many of the financial institutions as possible which operate in the region and which have subsidiaries in the region to move all of their back office processing into Trinidad and Tobago and consolidate that back office processing here, with a view to deriving economies of scale, improving efficiency and effectiveness and increasing the level of customer service. We recognize, however, that to achieve this end, we have to ensure that we provide the appropriate level of fiscal incentives.

Accordingly, it is proposed that the Trinidad and Tobago Free Zones Act as well as the Income Tax Act and the Value Added Tax Act be amended to facilitate the legal framework in support of the “FINISS” industry. We look to this industry creating 3,000 jobs over the five years. To date, we have had one financial institution, well advanced in this area with offices established on London Street in Port of Spain and two additional financial institutions have signed memoranda of understanding with a view to commencing the operations of their facilities in Trinidad and Tobago consequent on the passage of this legislation during the course of this year. It is our intention to have at least nine institutions in total in this sector, registered and operating within the next three years.

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Mr. Speaker, the energy sector: The energy sector accounts for 40 per cent of gross domestic product and provides 80 per cent of our foreign exchange earnings. Over the medium term, it will remain the major sector in your economy. However, oil production has been declining and in 2012, averaged 82,000 barrels of oil per day as compared to a production rate of 144,000 barrels a day in 2005.

Mr. Speaker, in just seven years this industry has contracted by almost 50 per cent. The energy sector is now predominantly gas-based. Revitalization of the petroleum sector—and the oil sector—is critical to the revenue generation, sustained employment and the security of supplies for the refining sector, as well as for the domestic and regional markets. But it faces major challenges arising from the restructuring taking place in the global energy sector, and from the low emphasis placed on upstream investments over the period 2005 to 2010.

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Mr. Speaker, you would know that it takes seven years between the time we decide we want to do a bid round and when we actually get output flowing into our system from increased investment activity.

So, Mr. Speaker, we recognized that everything starts with upstream activity, and to enhance this we have commenced an aggressive programme aimed at expanding this activity. We are very heartened by the response so far, as far as the drilling of new wells expected this year. We have also just completed the most successful deep-water bid round in almost a decade. [*Desk thumping*] Our initiatives to attract investment in this area will continue, and to enhance this activity we are proposing to introduce new fiscal incentives for the deep horizon, i.e. wells drilled at and beyond a true vertical depth of 8,000 feet on land and 1,200 feet in the shallow marine area, as well as for new activity in existing fields.

Proposed changes to section 15 of the Petroleum Taxes Act will allow a grant of a capital allowance, calculated by reference to an amount equal to 140 per cent of expenditure to be granted to those approved deep horizon projects on land or shallow marine areas, where costs of exploration work are incurred between January 01, 2013 and December 31, 2017. This does not apply, however, to an exploration dry hole finance, administrative and other indirect costs. So what we are doing here, Mr. Speaker, is that we are not giving up any revenue to elicit this activity. We are saying if you drill and you find oil we will give you a break on the SPT, but if you find no oil that is your cost. There is no incremental revenue that will be given up.

Proposed changes to Part A of the Third Schedule of Supplemental Petroleum Taxes would also make the SPT rate equal for pre-and post-1988 contracts issue. The changes will effectively lower the tax rate, an important condition in attracting needed investment into our exploration sector. Furthermore, the proposed introduction of the new field SPT rate for shallow marine areas, certified by the Minister, under clause 6 of Part A of the Third Schedule, is expected to enhance the effect of the lower harmonized SPT rate for marine areas. These initiatives we feel, will prove to be fundamental in increasing the competitiveness of our fiscal regime.

So, Mr. Speaker, what we have attempted to do is to create a comprehensive regime of fiscal incentives, particularly geared to three general areas. First, energy as I said, and construction, but the third area is the policy reform area, the reform of measures which would ensure, for example, things such as ease of doing business—reforms that would give more benefits to people who access the national insurance system, by the same time open up the opportunity for the national insurance system to earn more income by increasing, in a very manageable manner, the contributions which individuals make to the fund, and the accumulative effect of all of those contributions will ensure that the fund is properly addressed.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I want to say that we are moving aggressively to expand and diversify our economy. In the short term, our focus is on a return to growth. In the medium and longer term, our focus is on continuing diversification of the economy. We are particularly heartened by the initiatives we are seeing, particularly, in the financial services sector and the success achieved so far with attracting new investment in this area which we expect to accumulate over time, and we are particularly pleased with the efforts which we have seen in the area of improving the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, with these short words, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Mr. Colm Imbert (*Diego Martin North/East*): [*Interruption*] I know you cannot take it. [*Laughter*] Mr. Speaker, I know the Minister does not like me speaking after him, but there is a reason for that because every time I speak after him, I expose—[*Interruption*]

Miss Mc Donald: That is right!

Mr. C. Imbert:—the weakness of his presentation. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, we have before us a Finance Bill, 55 pages long, which we got last week, and inside this 55-page Finance Bill there are 24 pages dealing with national insurance. So what the Minister has effectively done, by what I call political sleight of hand, is slipped major changes to the national insurance system without explaining any of them, and some of these changes are going to come as a shock to quite a few people in Trinidad and Tobago. Since in his usual style—I am afraid to say—the Minister did not explain, introduce, any of the things that he is doing. It is incumbent on us on this this side to deal with it.

One of the first problems with this Bill is that it is amending a fundamental section in the National Insurance Act and, Mr. Speaker, it is including for the first time a section dealing with a compulsory system of registration of self-employed persons; in other words, compulsory national insurance. When I saw that, Mr. Speaker, I wondered whether this Bill had the relevant recital and the relevant clause which would allow for a special majority. Because instinctively, my view was that if you are going to make a system of insurance compulsory, you are infringing on people's fundamental rights and you will require a special majority.

I want to tell the Minister, because he has interfered with so many different pieces of legislation, in my opinion, the vast majority of this Bill no longer qualifies as a money Bill and it will require the approval of the Senate, which is quite different to the normal situation, where you are increasing taxes and so on, which does not require a vote in the Senate.

So I went and took a look at the original National Insurance Act, Chap. 32:01, Act No. 35 of 1971, and I looked for the section that dealt with the Constitution. If you go into that legislation, Mr. Speaker, Chap. 32:01, Act No. 35 of 1971, section 1(2) states:

“This Act shall have effect notwithstanding sections 1 and 2 of the Constitution [that is, the Constitution set out in the Second Schedule to the Trinidad and Tobago (Constitution) Order in Council 1962].”

Now, this was before the Republican Constitution of 1976, and it is no longer a question of infringement of sections 1 and 2 of the Constitution; it is sections 4 and 5 of the Constitution. I am satisfied that this is so, and I am wondering why the eminent legal luminaries that advise the Minister have not looked at the constitutionality of what you are doing.

How can you tell a self-employed person that they must pay national insurance contributions, if they do not want to, unless you pass this law with a

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special majority? How can you make it compulsory for national insurance, a national insurance system, for self-employed persons unless you have the requisite recital and the requisite special majority? I am satisfied that this is so. The Minister could say what he wants. I am satisfied when this reaches in the other place it will have to be dealt with appropriately.

Let me also elaborate on a nickname I gave the Minister last week, which some persons may not have realized what I was driving at. I gave the Minister a nickname, “last minute Larry”, but I will now explain the context. If you go to the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act, this is Chap. 74:01, you will see in section 3(2):

“In the case of the imposition of any tax under subsection (1) the Order”—we are dealing with Provisional Collection of Taxes—“shall, subject to the provisions of the Act, have effect for a period expiring at the end of four months after the commencement of the Order.”

So the Minister has four months from the time he publishes the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, during the budget process, to come to this Parliament and confirm the taxes that are detailed in the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order.

I have the Order, Legal Supplement Part B, Volume 51, No. 155, dated October 01, 2012, Legal Notice 353, and this dealt with increase in the taxes on gambling tables and other devices, and imposition of taxes for the collection of motor vehicle tax with respect to motor cycles, et cetera, and the taxes relating to driver’s permits.

You will note that I said that this Order was dated October 01, 2012. So if you count four months from October 01, 2012, you will get the end of January 2013. What is today’s date?

Miss Mc Donald: The 28th.

Mr. C. Imbert: January 28. When are they going to the Senate? Is it Wednesday?

Miss Mc Donald: Wednesday!

Mr. C. Imbert: January 30. One day before the expiry of the deadline for the confirmation of the matters in the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act.

Mr. Volney: Small thing.

Mr. C. Imbert: Oh, you hush! Mr. Speaker, there is a noise emanating from behind me. Would you speak to the Member for St. Joseph, please?

Mr. Speaker: Yes! You continue to speak.

Mr. C. Imbert: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, the Minister has come with just three days to go and is introducing 24 pages of amendments to the national insurance system. Twenty-four pages! The whole question of self-employed persons, the whole question of making it compulsory, but let me tell you what else the Minister is doing which he did not tell us—*[Interruption]*

Dr. Moonilal: In the budget debate—*[Inaudible]*

Mr. C. Imbert:—and it is necessary—No, he did not tell us in this—*[Interruption]* Mr. Speaker, I am hearing this sotto voce. It is incredible! That is why you did so badly last week. *[Desk thumping]* “Do not know what is going on; you cyar get anything right.” You are living in a little world of your own. Today, Mr. Speaker, the Minister may have spent a few words on the national insurance system in the budget address which I happen to have in my possession. *[Interruption]* Mr. Speaker, I am sure you are hearing the murmurs as well.

Mr. Speaker: Member for St. Joseph, could you allow the Member to speak in silence?

Mr. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, really, I will have to make good on my promise to write you and ask you to just move him down so for me, please. I really do not like this man behind me—making noise, disturbing people.

2.45 p.m.

But, Mr. Speaker, let us go back to the issue at hand. The fact of the matter is the Minister has come with three days to go making a significant number of changes to the National Insurance Act. I am certain inside of there, there are a number of errors; a number of errors.

I have already pointed out that the legislation requires a special majority, Mr. Speaker. But, what the Minister did not tell this Parliament and has not told the country—and it is necessary for us on this side to do so—is that contained in this legislation is a proposal—well, it is not a proposal because it is going to happen—that persons who have never paid a single contribution—*[Interruption]*

Miss Mc Donald: That is right.

Mr. C. Imbert:—in their lives; self-employed persons who have never paid a single national insurance contribution in their lives, who are between the ages of 51 and 56, will receive what is called “age credits”, Mr. Speaker.

Miss Mc Donald: Just imagine this!

Mr. C. Imbert: To get an understanding of what is going on, Mr. Speaker, we need to go to the Eighth Actuarial Review of the National Insurance System as of June 30, 2010. Of course, the Minister, I have to say he pretends—“Ah doh have any other word”—that none of this exists because he never spoke about it. He has not introduced this legislation. He has not explained to the country what is going to happen from February 01.

But let me explain, Mr. Speaker. [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for Port of Spain South, please!

Mr. C. Imbert: If you go to the Eighth Actuarial Review on page 67, the number of self-employed persons is estimated at 130,890 in Trinidad and Tobago. They represent 23 per cent of the total labour force. Among them, 30,607 are age 50 and over. So these age credits which are contained in—let me go to the specific clause where the Minister has decided to give persons age credits, Mr. Speaker. If you just bear with me, Mr. Speaker, I will find it.

Hon. Member: “Take yuh time, take yuh time!”

Mr. C. Imbert: I will find it. The Minister has decided to give persons age credits—[*Interruption*]

Miss Mc Donald: Look it here, page 26.

Mr. C. Imbert: I will find it, but I am looking for the particular table.

Miss Mc Donald: Table A9.

Mr. C. Imbert: Thank you. I am looking for the particular table. Yes, page 26:

“Table A9

Table of Age Credits
For Self-Employed Persons

Age as at 4th March 2013	Years to Age 65	Age Credits
56	9	300
55		250
54		200
53		150
52		100
51		50”;

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Now, to get a proper understanding of what all of this means—and I must repeat that the Minister has avoided this, completely avoided half of the legislation before us. As I said, over 20 pages deal with the National Insurance Act. He has not dealt with them at all!—it is necessary to establish what does this mean. What does an age credit mean?

If you go to the national insurance website at this point in time and you look under the section that deals with persons who would have not achieved the minimum 750 contributions, these persons are entitled to a retirement grant. A lot of persons who have not made 750 contributions throughout their working life, when they retire and they apply to the National Insurance Board, they receive a retirement grant. The retirement grant is three times the value of the total contributions.

So in this legislation, the table is telling us that certain persons who have never paid—and I have to stress that—they have never paid a single national insurance contribution in their lives are going to get 300 credits, and it is going to be multiplied by three because that is the benefit available for persons getting a retirement grant. All these people would have to get retirement grants; they cannot qualify for pensions because in that period between age 51 and age 60, they would not be able to make 750 contributions, Mr. Speaker. It takes about 14 to 15 years to reach the 750 contributions. So anybody from 51 and up who is self-employed who has never made a contribution, they will not qualify for the pension, but what they will get instead is the retirement grant which is three times their contributions. According to this table on page 26 of the Bill, someone could get up to 300 by 3: 900 contributions.

Well, what is a contribution? In order to understand what is a contribution, Mr. Speaker, you have to go to, again, the National Insurance Board, Table of Contributions for persons who are making voluntary contributions as self-employed persons, and let us take a typical person. Person earning between \$3,813 and \$4,376 per month, that is not—that is a typical wage earner in this country, Mr. Speaker. The voluntary weekly contribution, Mr. Speaker, \$107. So let me do the mathematics for you: \$107 by 900 by 30,000 persons. Do you know how much that is? Mr. Speaker, \$1.5 billion. That is going to be the effect of the impact of this measure on the National Insurance Fund.

So, we have the actuarial review telling us, the Minister himself admitting that the fund is underfunded—does not have enough money to meet all the required contributions at this point in time, and he says that we are going to manage it by a

small increase of 0.1 per cent and 0.3 per cent. Then, slips in all these self-employed people—30,000 of them over the age of 50—and says, “They will be getting age credits” and, as I have said, I have worked it out for you, \$1 1/2 billion. Where is this \$1 1/2 billion coming from? Why should someone who has never made a contribution in their life be in receipt of a retirement grant of \$20,000 or \$25,000 or \$30,000? Why should someone, never made a contribution ever, all of sudden, they are getting a gift of \$25,000? What about all the people who are paying their contributions all the time? How come they are not getting an extra \$25,000 having paid all their contributions? Mr. Speaker, this is entirely inequitable! [*Desk thumping*]

When the National Insurance System was introduced initially, nobody got anything. There was no question of contributions so at that time, it was appropriate. There was no infringement discrimination against anyone because nobody was involved in a national insurance scheme. So that it was appropriate at that time to give people some sort of waiver to get them into the system, but now you have people making contributions; 600,000 of them as the Minister has said. What is the basis for this discrimination against persons who all of their working lives have been making contributions to the National Insurance System, and persons who never made a contribution will now get a retirement grant and I have worked it out? As I have said, \$20,000, \$25,000, \$30,000; putting strain on the NIS Fund of \$1 billion or more.

Mr. Speaker, could the Minister please explain that because he did not tell us. He did not tell us anything!

Hon. Member: It is already underfunded.

Mr. C. Imbert: It is already underfunded. They already have predictions here if you do not deal with the problem, the fund, from this year, I believe, from what I recall—the liabilities of the fund are going to exceed its assets from 2013 from my recollection of what is in the actuarial review. So could the Minister please tell us: what are you doing? Where did you get all of this from? Who told you that you could take \$1 billion of taxpayers’ money and just hand it to people who never paid a contribution in their life? Is this some kind of political gimmick? What are you doing? I would like the Government to tell us: what are you doing? Explain why you are victimizing working people who have paid their NIS contributions for the last 20 and 30 years at the expense of persons who have never made a contribution. So I await the Minister’s answer to that because he told us nothing when he introduced the legislation.

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The other thing, Mr. Speaker, is one expects in a Finance Bill that you would follow through on the things that are mentioned in the budget address. That is the normal practice. So I went and I took a look at the Minister's budget statement. It is his, "yuh know", so the hon. Minister opposite cannot say it was delivered by somebody else, it was delivered by him. So I went to take a look at the measures and what I saw: Incentives for the Clico Investment Fund; he is going to proclaim the Electronic Transactions Act—well, I do not think he did that. He is going to give a relief for the purchase of CCTV cameras exempt from customs duty and value added tax—I did not see that in this piece of legislation. Contributions to sporting activities; taxes on gambling devices; changes to the National Insurance System—just about four paragraphs on that—housing development; SPT rates; he raised the price of gas and he will bring motorcycles into the tax net.

So where in all of that, Mr. Speaker, do we get a justification for the clause in this Bill that changes the definition of a taxi? Why has the Minister not told us why he is changing the definition of a taxi? Why? You know, one expects when Ministers come to this Parliament that you will go through—it is 55 pages; you did not even take 55 minutes, took less than that; much less than that. One expects you would go through and explain—if you do not have any regard for us on this side, at least have regard for the national community and the Speaker—and go through clause by clause and explain what you are doing.

I would like the Minister to tell the Parliament, since you did not tell us, what is the policy behind clause 8 of the Bill? [*Desk thumping*] What is the policy behind clause 8 of Bill? Because in clause 8 of the Bill, you have decided that you are going to change the definition of a hiring car or taxi from a vehicle that carries six passengers to a vehicle that carries eight passengers. What is going on? Is this intended to help a particular group who has an interest in vehicles that could carry nine people including the driver? What is going on? Why all of a sudden a taxi suddenly changed from your regular four-seater or six-seater to a nine-seater? Is a minibus going to become a taxi?

Is this some kind of surreptitious way of dealing with the failure of the Government to deal with the private PH taxi situation which they promised to deal with two years ago where they published regulations with respect to the arrangements that would govern the regulation of private cars and so on? Two years ago, they published that; nothing! Absolutely nothing has come out of that! There has been no movement whatsoever to regulate the proliferation of vans and other vehicles that are now being used all over Trinidad and Tobago to transport people. We all agree that we need to address this matter and we all agree that the

best way to deal with this matter is to come up with a system, so that these people who are driving these minibuses with the “T” registration and so on, and the “P”, would be covered by a policy of insurance.

Because what is happening now, Mr. Speaker, is that you have all these “T” vans and “P” vans all over the place, up and down all over the country and they cannot get insurance for themselves, for their vehicle and the passengers. So, if there is an accident with one of these private vans, nobody is covered—the vehicle involved in the accident and the unfortunate person who they may have come into contact with.

3.00 p.m.

There is also the question of people carrying people for hire in a public service vehicle where there are certain requirements like a police record and all that sort of thing. None of this is being applied to these private cars. You know the former Minister of Works came with great fanfare, great fanfare two years ago—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Hypolite: Drum roll and saxophone.

Mr. C. Imbert:—drum roll and saxophone and said that the Government would deal with this; they have done absolutely nothing. Now, we see a strange amendment to the definition of a hiring car, from six passengers to eight passengers. Now, Mr. Speaker—*[Interruption]*

Hon. Member: “Dat will fix it.”

Mr. C. Imbert:—“ah doh even know if dis could fix it. Yuh hah to take out one ah de seats,” *[Laughter]* because these small buses, these omnibuses, are for nine passengers, they are outfitted for nine passengers, some of them for 12. I am sure once in your life, Mr. Speaker, you would have travelled in a maxi taxi, you know these things are 12-seaters and 11-seaters and so on. “So, wey is dis eight-seater thing all about? What kind of vehicle has eight seats, yuh know?”

Hon. Member: Prado!

Mr. C. Imbert: So, we are having a major change to a transportation policy, and the Minister has not said a word, and has not updated this Parliament on what is being done with the proliferation of all of these unlicensed, unregistered illegal vehicles. I am appealing to the Government, “yuh doh have much—”*[Interruption]*

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Mr. Speaker: Member for Diego Martin Central and Member for St. Joseph, you are disturbing the proceedings and the Member. Hon. Member, you may continue.

Mr. C. Imbert:—yes, I am appealing to the Government “dey doh have much time to go, yuh know.” [*Interruption*] Mr. Speaker, you know, you just spoke to him, and he is still talking. Could you speak to him again, please? [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: I did not hear that one, but continue.

Mr. C. Imbert: “He goin again!” Mr. Speaker, I am going to write to you and ask you to relocate the Member for St. Joseph, I mean that. As soon as I am finished speaking I will do that letter to you. I hope that it will fall on favourable reflection.

Mr. Speaker, we have here as I said, a major change in our transport law and the Minister has not told us what he is doing. As I was saying before I was interrupted by the person behind me, the Government does not have far to go. Before you leave Government do something about all of these private vehicles. As I have said, we are more or less in agreement, there is no argument here. Both of us on both sides of the House are of the view that this sector needs to be regulated, and these people need to be brought into the system. We do not want to kick them out, we want to bring them in. There was a move in progress in 2010 which it appeared was being followed through with and then just suddenly died a natural death. You know the same untidy, unsafe, unwise arrangement continues. I am appealing to the Government, deal with it. It is just talk, that is all they do, they just talk.

Now, the Minister also glossed over the—[*Mr. Imbert stops and looks at the Member for St. Joseph*] [*Laughter*]—the Clico Investment Fund—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Hypolite: Member for St. Joseph.

Mr. C. Imbert: “He cyar help it.” It obviously is one of his days. “Is full moon or something like dat.” [*Laughter*] The Minister glossed over the Clico Investment Fund. I took the opportunity to go and look for the prospectus for the Clico Investment Fund. Again, launched with great fanfare by this administration. In that prospectus, the Ministry of Finance made an invitation to bondholders—people who held bonds in Clico, the last 10 bonds from bond 11 to bond 20—that they would give them 40 units for every \$1,000 of face value by the Government, of Government 11 to 20 bonds.

What that meant is that each bond was supposed to have a face value of \$25. Now, today—[*Interruption*—I tell you. I went online on the Trinidad and Tobago Stock Exchange, and the opening price for the Clico Investment Fund—for those who are interested, the symbol is CIF. The opening price was \$22.46. The bid, for those who do not understand what bid and ask is, the offer was \$21.50. So, we have a situation where the Clico Investment Fund was launched about a month ago, three weeks ago? Not too long ago and it has already lost 10 per cent of its value, 10 per cent of its value!

Now, when the various Ministers of Finance came to this Parliament and trumpeted you know, this wonderful solution to the Clico problem, did they tell us or did they tell people who have these bonds, these elderly people, people who are not well, who depended on this money for their medicine and so on, to pay their rent and so on, did they tell them that within days of exchanging their bonds for units in the Clico Investment Fund they would lose 10 per cent? Mr. Speaker, they are down to 90 cents on the dollar already down to 90 cents on the dollar. And who knows where the fund is going to go? Who knows? It is a question of confidence, you know. I hear the Minister talking about confidence. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: “Dats right.”

Mr. C. Imbert: I hear the Minister talking about the economy and how—he made a very strange allegation that, on the revised numbers, the CSO is telling us that the economy will grow by more or less 1 per cent, whatever that means. I wonder if .5 per cent means 1 per cent? Then he said very quietly, Mr. Speaker, in a soft voice, that when you go into the actual numbers themselves, this alleged 1 per cent growth—which we will wait and see if it is real—was in the services sector. What does services do? Services consumes wealth, services sector you have to pay for stuff. It is not a producer of wealth with the sole exception perhaps of the tourism sector.

Mr. Cadiz: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. C. Imbert: “Ah cyar leave you out.” In general, the services sector, is a sector that measures what people buy, what they consume. So, the Minister told us that this alleged growth is in the services sector. It really does not do anything for us, but manufacturing declined for yet another year, Mr. Speaker, and that is a problem. This is now the third consecutive year under this new administration that we have had a decline in manufacturing. I mean, this cannot continue, this cannot continue.

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I heard the Minister talk about the gambling sector and made some lame excuse, oh, he does not understand why there has been no comprehensive overhaul of our gambling laws, and perhaps he will find out when he goes to implement the new taxes on baccarat tables and slot machines and so on. Shocking words coming from a Minister of Finance—he does not know but he would find out. The fact of the matter is that manufacturing is declining, and it is declining every single year since this Government came in. That is where the future of this country is.

The former Minister of Trade and Industry knows that; he is now in the Ministry of Tourism, but he knows. He is a businessman and he knows that—he is in the services sector but—[*Laughter*] he is a consumer, but it does not matter. The fact is it is in our manufacturing sector, that is the answer to our problems, because the Minister spoke about the oil sector—the figures showed you—the Minister has admitted that it is declining, third consecutive year.

The Minister made the point that it takes seven years between the bid round for drilling, seven years between the time you complete a bid round, such as the one they just completed, before you start to earn any money as a country. So, they did the bid round in 2012 and according to the Minister's own calculations—I suspect it is longer—this country will earn no money from drilling until 2019.

Hon. Member: You would not be here.

Mr. C. Imbert: What are we going to do between 2013 and 2020, actually? What are we going to do? Obviously the focus has to be on the other productive sectors in the economy such as manufacturing. The Minister told us nothing. Where is the stimulus in the fiscal measures today in this 55-page Finance Act which as I said deals with an illegal compulsory system of bringing self-employed persons into the National Insurance System? Half of it deals with that.

Where in the Minister's presentation did he tell us what the Government is doing to stimulate the non-oil sector and to stimulate manufacturing in particular? Nothing! [*Desk thumping*] Just platitudes about unemployment remains at just over 5 per cent. "Way yuh mean remain?" It was 4.9 per cent when you read the budget, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Member: "He drunk."

Mr. C. Imbert: It was below 5 per cent when he read the budget. He says it remains at just over 5 per cent; inflation moderating, he would not tell us how much. What does that mean? "It gone from 12 per cent to 11 per cent?"

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. C. Imbert: That is what I said. When we look at—let us take a look at oil production, because I heard the Minister make a statement which is patently incorrect, that the oil sector has declined by 50 per cent in seven years, that is completely wrong. I have the figures here from 2005, 2006, 2002, et cetera. And just by way of reference, in 2002, the total oil production was 130,000 barrels a day average, it is now 81,000 barrels a day, that is not 50 per cent, “what kind ah maths dis gentleman is doing?”

Let us deal with oil production in 2012, Mr. Speaker. We started off the year with average production of crude oil and condensate of 85,491 barrels a day. By the middle of the year that had dropped to 82,138 barrels a day. We ended out the year, November, 78,846 barrels per day. Now, when we hit the mid-80s we were at the lowest level of oil production in this country for 50 years, that was when we hit the-mid 80s. Now, we are 78,000 barrels a day. So, you could imagine that must be lower than the oil production in this country for the last 75 years.

Let us look at oil production in 2010, Mr. Speaker. What was oil production in May 2010 when they took over? One hundred thousand, eight hundred and fifty one barrels per day. So, just rounding it off, when they came into office, the total production of oil and condensate was 100,000 barrels a day. Today, it is less than 80,000 barrels a day. A decline of in excess of 25 per cent. Our oil and condensate production has declined by 25 per cent since the new Government came in, in May 2010. [*Desk thumping*]

So, you know, they talk a lot but they do not deal with the reality. I heard the Minister speak about Standard & Poor’s, Moody’s and so on, but he did not add in the piece, yes, they maintained our stable outlook, yes, the stable outlook created by the PNM. [*Desk thumping*] Yes, they maintained it. We created it and it has been maintained. It is not a question of us moving up you know, it is us treading water, Mr. Speaker, but if you read—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member has expired.

Motion made: That the hon. Member’s speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Mr. N. Hypolite*]

Question put and agreed to.

3.15 p.m.

Mr. C. Imbert: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If one takes the time to read the outlook from the rating agencies, it would not be the superficial, sanitized version that we got from the Minister. The rating agencies have made it clear they are a bit concerned about the increase in our debt—it is now close to 50 per cent—our debt service ratio is close to 56 per cent. They are concerned about that. Anybody would be concerned about that, Mr. Speaker, and if we do not do something about oil production—they talk about the most successful bid round but, as I said, it will take until 2020 before any income comes to this country from any wells that are drilled in 2013 and are found to have a probability of hydrocarbon reserves.

In the interim, what is the Government doing? The Minister told us that—I mean, a lot of these things are very superficial statements. What is he saying? He said that they are going to use the PPP modality. Real gobbledegook! The PPP modality—what on earth does that mean? To stimulate growth without placing a burden on the Government. Nonsense!

Mr. Speaker, this Government speaks about PPP so glibly, it is necessary to explain what the three Ps mean. It is a private/public partnership, but the taxpayers still have to pay. All it is, is a transfer of the provision of services from the public sector to the private sector, but it is not free. So that if you encourage the private sector to get involved in the provision of services or infrastructure, as the case may be, they are going to charge you for it because the private sector is operating on the basis of capitalism. They have to make money, so they have to invest their capital in a project and they have to earn a return, otherwise it does not make any sense. So this buzzword, just thrown outside there, “PPP modality”, means nothing. At the end of the day, taxpayers are going to have to pay through their nose for any PPP, or P or two Ps that this Government intends to introduce in this country.

You know, rather than just throwing out letters and words, it would be nice if the Government would come and explain to us what are their plans. How do they intend to get the private sector involved as the engine of growth? How do they intend to build wealth in this country? How do they intend to stimulate the non-oil sector? I want to repeat: the oil sector will not show any significant increase in output for another seven years or so, so we have to go to the non-oil. Could we please have, for once, some kind of intelligent discourse coming from the Government with respect to how they intend to treat with the non-oil sector, which is the sector that must carry us for the next seven years?

If you go back to the budget of 2012, you will see a disturbing trend is taking place with value added tax collections. There is a decline in value added tax collections, or the targets that have been set are not being realized.

Miss Mc Donald: What about land and building taxes?

Mr. C. Imbert: Forget that! That seems to have gone into a deep, dark hole.

The thing is, if you look at all of the indicators—decline in manufacturing, they are not realizing their targets in terms of value added collections. It all speaks to an underlying weakness in the economy and this weakness is not going to be cured by the Minister of Finance and the Economy just coming in here and telling us one or two words—

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Lofty!

Mr. C. Imbert: I call it glib, that inflation-moderating employment remains at just over 5 per cent and so on; and Standard & Poor's has maintained its stable outlook for Trinidad and Tobago. That does not help us.

Just to—I will have to say—surprise hon. Members opposite, I am in complete support of the measures dealing with the stimulation of construction. [*Desk thumping*] I cannot say anything bad about them, except—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Please, please, Members!

Mr. C. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara just came back into the Chamber. He “cyar” help himself.

Mr. Roberts: “Who studyin you boy?”

Miss Mc Donald: “Who you callin boy?” Language!

Mr. Speaker: Member, please.

Mr. C. Imbert: No behaviour, but, Mr. Speaker—that is why you lose 12:0. That is why you lose all 12. No behaviour! But Mr. Speaker, let us deal with the measures to stimulate the construction sector. There is an error in the legislation. The Minister has pointed it out. The ceiling in terms of the cost of residential properties is supposed to be \$1.5 million and not 950 and the Minister told us he is going to circulate an amendment to deal with that.

I want to point the Government to something. They need to be very, very careful. Now that they are increasing the value of a residential property that will qualify for exemption from taxes on profits for sale or rental, I want to warn the Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs, in particular, and the Minister of

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Finance and the Economy that you need to be very careful about what you are doing. At the present time, if one goes to the Income Tax Act, section 43(h), the exemption in respect of a house, the cost of construction which, exclusive of the cost of land, would not exceed, at this time, the ceiling is \$450,000. That is something that was introduced not too long ago—I think about a year or so ago. Previously it was \$250,000 and it went to \$450,000.

The amendment that is being made, if one looks very closely at the amendment that is being made—let me get the precise clause; that is clause 9 of the Bill—if we go to clause 9 of the Bill, on page 39, this is where the error occurs:

“(c) in section 43—

(B) by inserting after paragraph (h) the following paragraph:

‘(i) nine hundred and fifty thousand dollars where construction commenced after 1st February, 2013.’”

If you look at the Income Tax Act, section 43, you will see a series of amendments going back to 1967 where, in 1967, the value of a house that qualified for these tax exemptions was \$20,000 and, as you come up in 1975, it was \$40,000; in 1979, it was \$80,000; after that, it was \$250,000. It is currently \$450,000 and the Minister has said he is circulating an amendment to bring it to \$1.5 million.

Now, I think it is necessary to explain how these exemptions will operate because the Minister did not. These exemptions are exemptions on profits made from the sale or rental of houses. This is intended to stimulate construction of houses in the private sector. We already have the Housing Development Corporation involved in its public housing programme, but this is intended to complement the public housing programme with renewed activity in the private sector. So this is aimed at housing developers, who would own their own land or have some arrangement with respect to land, who would construct a house and sell it or rent it.

The way the legislation works is that, in order to qualify for these exemptions, you build a house—once you are below the ceiling, which would now be \$1.5 million, which is a massive increase from \$450,000—and you sell the house, you do not have to pay any tax on profits; or if you rent the house and you make a profit from renting the house, you do not have to pay any tax on the rental income. It is certainly an incentive for persons in the private sector to get involved in the construction of houses whether for sale or for rental.

In order to qualify, you have to be a registered trader and if I go to the housing regulations made under section 74 of the Housing Act, a registered trader is somebody registered as a trader in newly constructed dwelling houses; and a trader is somebody who offers houses for sale or rental.

What we have in Trinidad and Tobago right now are a number of builders and that is why I am warning the Minister. If you go into the Income Tax Act, you will see that these provisions are not intended to apply to persons who are builders; so they are not intended to apply to contractors. You may have a number of contractors who are simply builders. They are not developers. They do not own the land on which the house is located. They are not involved in the sale of houses. They are simply constructing the house for a fee. There are a number of builders who may be benefiting from this provision in the Income Tax Act because what this allows them to do is to write-off all their profits and exempt themselves from income tax.

So now you are pushing this thing up to \$1.5 million, I am calling on the Minister to be extremely vigilant because you may find a number of contractors coming through here who are not traders in houses, who are not bona fide developers, who are just builders and will find themselves being registered and will get the exemption. So a word to the wise is sufficient.

In terms of the incentives, the only problem is the approvals process, which the Government has recognized. [*Interruption*] Yes, a lot of “smartmen” will try to go under the radar to get away from paying tax, saying they are traders when, in fact, they are just contractors.

Mr. Speaker, the other problem is approvals and I heard the Minister say—again, the Minister is new—that he will deal with approvals; he will set up a committee under the Ministry of Finance and the Economy. I have lost count of the number of committees that have been set up by successive Governments to deal with the whole question of building approvals. These committees do not work.

Long ago, under the UNC as a matter of fact, there was a Bill brought with respect to the national development council or national housing council. There was an organization that was recommended to deal with the whole question of regulatory approvals. If you want to get involved in a multi-family housing development, first you have to get Town and Country Planning approval. That might take you years—two years if you are lucky. When you finish with that, you have to get WASA approval. That is a “next” year; T&TEC approval, a “next” year;

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fire services, a “next” year. Then if you could survive for that five years, you are then facing the regional corporation, which might be another year and the councillor for the area. Do not forget the building inspector.

Right now, you have to have, in local parlance, “real belly” to get involved in these developments. That is why a lot of people engage in illegal activity. They do not have the patience or the resources to go through this harrowing process for six or seven years while their asset remains idle.

You may have a piece of land; you want to develop it, but you know you are facing six years before you get your final approval from the final agency, which is the regional corporation.

I wish the Minister luck, but instead of establishing a committee—that has been done before—a committee where you bring the Ministry of Works; you bring WASA; you bring Town and Country Planning; you put them all in a room and you quarrel with them. That has been done before. It is not sustainable and I would urge again the Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs, to go back to what was done—actually it was NAR; it was not UNC. The National Planning Council was the name of this organization and I cannot understand why this country, for the last 15 or 20 years, has not been able to establish this organization that would deal with this approvals process and take the whole process away from the bureaucracy at this point in time. If the Government brings something like that, to put that into place, I would completely support it.

These provisions in here, with respect to stimulating the construction of commercial properties—because that is in there as well—in terms of stimulating the construction of car parks, which are desperately needed, especially in Port of Spain now that the wrecker has found some life and is picking up cars at midnight. You know, Mr. Speaker, they are wrecking cars at midnight in Woodbrook now? “People gone down on Ariapita Avenue to have a little drink and spin around twice and their car gone” at one o’clock in the morning. What traffic jam would you have at one o’clock in the morning, Mr. Speaker; but this is happening and it is really—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: All right Members, cool! Allow the Member to speak!

3.30 p.m.

Mr. C. Imbert: I understand the exuberance of the police, but what are you doing at one o’clock in the morning wrecking a car on Ariapita Avenue that “ent” troubling anybody?

Hon. Member: And on a one-way street.

Dr. Khan: Making money for the wreckers, that is what you are doing—making money for the wreckers.

Mr. C. Imbert: I am glad, Mr. Speaker, I understand Members on the other side have suffered at the hands of these “night owls” out there prowling at one o’clock, two o’clock in the morning, picking up unsuspecting people’s cars. That is something that needs to be looked at as well, but the point is, I totally endorse the incentives for the construction of car parks; we just do not have enough of them in Port of Spain; we do not have enough of them in San Fernando; we do not have enough of them in Chaguanas. All of these areas require multi-storey car parks, and these incentives, if managed properly, would see an emergence of construction activity towards car parks. So it is commercial buildings, residential units, multi-storey car parks, and I endorse it entirely, but it would not work with this committee idea that the Minister has, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, there are some other things in this Bill that make absolutely no sense. If I go now to the end of the legislation, clause 16, where they are amending the Companies Act, and if we go over to page 53, clause 16(e) in section 516 of the Companies Act, by deleting the word “year” and substituting the word “month”. In order to understand why this provision makes no sense and it is draconian and punitive, and I have to use the word “nonsensical”, one has to go to the budget statement of the previous Minister of Finance in 2011, and the Finance Act of 2012. Mr. Speaker, the previous Minister of Finance announced an amnesty for persons who had not filed their company returns and other documents relating to the registration of companies, and the amnesty was supposed to end in the middle of June/July 2012, and was subsequently extended to the end of December 2012.

There are lots of people with small companies who may not have filed their returns for many, many, years, and under the previous legislation it was \$100 a month. For every month that you had not filed your returns you had to pay \$100 a month, and there may be three or four documents that you have to file, so every month a person would have been in arrears \$300, \$3,000 a year; if you had not filed for five years, \$15,000.

If you had gone to Trinidad House at the end of December 2012, you would have seen the line going out the door, because people were rushing to take advantage of this amnesty on penalties for the filing of company returns. The

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previous Minister had said he was changing it from \$100 a month to \$500 a year. Now, that in a sense, a reduction, because \$100 a month is \$1,200 a year, he was changing it to \$500 a year.

This new Minister slips in here, does not tell you anything, because right now the law at it stands is that the penalty is \$500 a year for not filing your documents with the Companies Registry, he is changing it to a month. So you are going from \$100 a month, changed to \$500 a year, now going to \$500 a month, or \$6,000 a year for each document.

Now, this cannot be the intention of the Government. The Minister did not deal with it. I would love to know who dreamt this up. You only have one month for those people who have experience in filing returns. The law only gives you 30 days to file your returns after the due date, and what the accountant say, is that it is very, very, difficult to get everything together within those 30 days. So what the accountants were looking for was perhaps an increase in the period of time to file your annual returns, from 30 days to 90 days. We “ent see dat”, what we see instead is an increase in the penalty from \$100 a month to \$500 a month for late filing of company returns.

Is this some form of secret taxation, or is it just a mistake, because I cannot understand why the Government wants to punish little people like that, because the people who would not have filed—the big companies file you know. The conglomerates, Neal & Massy and all of them, they meet their deadline you know, but the little companies, the little mom-and-pop stores, those are the ones who have difficulty in filing their returns, they are now going to be facing a charge of \$500 a month, per document, for every month that they are late with the filing of their documents.

So I urge the Minister to correct that. That cannot be right. Make it \$200 a month or something like that, but increase the time for filing returns from 30 days to 90 days because that is what is needed. It is not just that the penalty makes no sense, it is that the time in the law is entirely impractical.

Mr. Speaker, I urge the Government, this Bill is primarily—as I said, there are 20-odd pages on the changes to the National Insurance System. As I have said, they have put in this age credit thing which could impose a strain on the National Insurance Fund of \$1 billion, if they implement what they are planning to do, if they implement this 300 tax credits. Let us say the average is 150 and they are saying that the average self-employed person earns \$5,000 a month—if you read the Actuarial Review—that is what they are saying, that is what they are telling

you. Your average self-employed person earns about \$5,000 a month, and, as I said, if you are involved in the voluntary National Insurance Scheme your contribution would be \$100 a month, and if you do the calculations you will see that what they are trying to do will impose a burden on the fund which is already in jeopardy of \$1 billion.

As I said, it is highly inequitable, it is unfair, it is discriminatory to persons who have been paying their contributions for the last 20/30 years, to be now faced with the prospect that persons who did not pay are going to get a gift of \$20,000, \$25,000, \$30,000, and, as I said, I am certain that requires a special majority.

I do not know if this will all fall on deaf ears as usual, Mr. Speaker. I have heard the Member for Chaguanas West indicate that it will—okay, just like your campaign fell on deaf ears. [*Desk thumping*] I guess it will fall like that, but we are about serious business here.

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. C. Imbert: Yes, we are about serious business here. It is the responsibility of the Government not to come here and make this Parliament a pappyshow. This Bill has 55 pages, the Minister completely failed to address serious and fundamental changes that he intends to make to the National Insurance System, and, also, other aspects of the legislation, such as this increase in penalties for filing returns.

I am hopeful. What I will tell the Minister, because I believe his side will not tell him because they just do not know, that all the deadline of four months applies to—the deadline that I called out in respect of the Provisional Collection of Taxes—that deadline only applies to those provisions that were published in the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order in October 2012. It does not apply to anything else. So the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order did not deal with national insurance, it did not deal with any of these things, it dealt with motor vehicle permits, it dealt with gambling taxes and so on, that is all the deadline applies to.

So I would urge the Minister in his quiet moments, between now and the time he goes to the other place, take a good look at some of these controversial and far-reaching measures that he is introducing in this Finance Bill, and if these measures are not governed by the four-month time limit in the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act, then I think there is time for proper reflection and reconsideration. Because this is going to be a shock to “the little fella on the street, the gardener, the fella who does wash cars, the person who sell bene balls

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at the airport in Tobago, the person who sell nuts” on the pavement on Fredrick Street. This is going to be a shock to them because they are now going to be told, that you must—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: “Doubles!”

Mr. C. Imbert: “Doubles” vendors, yes. You must pay national insurance whether you like it or not, and the Parliament just pass a law to that effect, and if you do not pay it huge penalties will be coming at you because in the National Insurance Act the penalties for non-payment of NIS contributions are draconian, Mr. Speaker. [*Interruption*] Yes, the little old lady selling Crix at the side of the road.

Hon. Member: “And tulum”.

Mr. C. Imbert: Nobody told them. The way the Minister played it in October, the way the Government spoke about this thing, was that it would be voluntary; nobody told them it would be compulsory. Nobody told all those vendors around the savannah right now, who selling a Solo, a red solo and a roti that they now have to join the National Insurance Scheme or face jail, or face severe fines and penalties if they do not want to.

Hon. Member: Whip them up. Whip them up.

Mr. C. Imbert: Well, it is a fact, it is going to happen, it is our responsibility to let people know this. And this is why I say that this Bill requires a special majority and I urge the Government not to be stubborn, but to consider this matter, very carefully. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development (Hon. Errol McLeod): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. [*Interruption*] You had groaned harder than that just now. [*Laughter*] Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to be able to speak on this Finance Bill today, and I want to extend congratulations to the hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy for acting as speedily as he has acted on a host of very, very, important measures that are aimed, generally, at providing some social floors, and, at the same time, injecting—as much as we might be able to do at this time—both confidence and investment funds to bring our economy out of the doldrums into which it was thrown by two important occurrences: the global financial meltdown in 2008—I mean, the effects of which a number of countries around the world are still suffering and, of course, the mismanagement of the affairs of Trinidad and Tobago. Primary in that mismanagement must be identified the Clico fiasco, for which we will have to pay for a long time to come.

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3.45 p.m.

I am sure that even those who get up and speak glibly against what we have done, that in their consciences, if any remain, they would be thanking this Government for having rescued the Clico situation to the extent that we have done. [*Desk thumping*]

The Member throws some perhaps even idle jabs at what we are doing and then walks out, but I am sure he would hear what is said.

Hon. Member: He always does.

Hon. E. McLeod: Mr. Speaker, it is true that our oil production has declined considerably. It is true that an investment in E & P today would yield results in about seven years from today. I think that it was with that kind of measurement the Member for Diego Martin North/East estimated that what is being done today would realize benefits in 2020, seven to eight years from now. I think he might be correct, insofar as that is concerned.

But the Member must also tell Trinidad and Tobago that the very low production we are experiencing now is as a result of no investment in E & P seven years ago, under their management of the affairs of Trinidad and Tobago. That is the reality; that is the truth. One should not try to run away from it. Instead of investing in E & P and maintaining at least the oil production that we realized at that time, and at best improving that production, they sought to invest billions of our hard earned dollars in a gas to liquids plant, the technology of which was not tested, was not tried, was not proven. So Trinidad and Tobago was used as a guinea pig essentially; that is what happened. But that was a means calculated by them, through which they were able to siphon our funds for their own personal— [*Interruption*]

Miss Mc Donald: Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 36(5). [*Miss Mc Donald rises*]

Mr. Speaker: Member, both of you all cannot stand at the same time. Point of order, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Hon. E. McLeod: Sorry, Mr. Speaker.

Miss Mc Donald: Imputing improper motives.

Hon. Member: To whom?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Minister of Labour, and Small and Micro Enterprise Development, the Member is objecting because the Member is of the view that

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you are imputing improper motives to her side. If that is so, I ask you to refrain from doing so. Continue, hon. Minister.

Hon. E. McLeod: Mr. Speaker, the record will show that the Government of seven years ago superintended over an investment into gas to liquids refining that proved to be detrimental to the well-being of Trinidad and Tobago. That is on the record. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Please.

Hon. E. McLeod: Mr. Speaker, I thought that I might also respond on another issue raised by the Member for Diego Martin North/East. I am certain that our colleague, the Minister of Finance and the Economy, can respond very ably to all that was said by that person. But I thought that I might just give my two-cents' worth to correct the record on the eight-seater vehicles that the Member for Diego Martin North/East spoke about.

I understand that those eight-seater vehicles can be identified as the Paramin jeeps. Given the terrain over which people must travel, a particular kind of vehicle is required. Honest, law-abiding people wanted to ensure that they were not "in fraction" of the law, they were not committing infractions of the law, and they were fought down by representatives who thought they should not be accorded the privilege of having eight-seater vehicles registered and licensed.

I am informed that it was Anthony Smart who struggled to ensure the licensing of such vehicles. I am advised also that there was a proposal to amend Part I section II of the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, to provide for a hired car or taxi to be registered for not more than eight passengers, since persons have been requesting for higher capacity vehicles, with seating capacity for eight passengers, to be registered as taxis, and that this would assist, in some regard, in easing traffic congestions on the road. This was in addition to what was particularly sought after by people in Paramin.

Mr. Speaker, the emphasis, it appeared to me, put on that section of the Bill presented by the hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy, dealing with certain issues under the National Insurance Scheme—that particular point made by the Member for Diego Martin North/East about bringing people compulsorily under national insurance, as a big point requiring a special majority; as though the action of this Government is to punish, to penalize in some form, those informal-sector self-employed people, who are not now covered by the national insurance and who are not contributors to national insurance, and that what they should be entitled to should be retirement grants rather than pensions and so on.

But national insurance is not only about retirement grants. It is about a host of other benefits. It is necessary, as we seek to educate the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that we open up the entire package for their consideration.

The last time we amended the Maternity Benefits Act, and that has certain relationships with the slew of benefits covered under the National Insurance Scheme, but I will come to that. It is important that we tell the whole truth when we come before this Parliament and therefore before the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It is very, very important.

I want to identify just about three issues in my contribution to this matter before the House. I will focus on three core areas, namely: the improvement of social protection, ensuring that we have the competencies to facilitate growth of the economy and establishing and building an environment that would nurture and grow business, more so micro and small enterprises in Trinidad and Tobago.

What is being projected in this Bill is something that has been avoided for as long as the National Insurance Scheme was brought into being—1972 I think it was. There are many people who would have engaged in private businesses, self-employed people, and who remained outside of the business of national insurance. Indeed, they had not been provided for. We are now attempting to bring them in. These people would have operated their little businesses and so on, and would have maintained themselves on the basis of what they earned in these little businesses that they operated. When they would have reached age 60, age 65, they would have immediately enlisted themselves for old age pension.

Are we not trying to bring all of our people under an insured scheme? If that is what we are attempting to do, then we must ensure that we open the envelope wide enough to accommodate everybody, [*Desk thumping*] or we will continue to have an old age pension bill that is as high as all the bills of our various registered pension plans put together.

Then what are we going to be doing, Mr. Speaker?

Miss Mc Donald: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. E. McLeod: First time you are hearing that?

Miss Marlene Mc Donald: No, the logic.

Hon. E. McLeod: Well, you perhaps do not talk among yourselves often enough.

Mr. Sharma: They do not.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, just take notes, please.

Hon. E. Mc Leod: And when you do, there is an absence of logic in your discussions.

Mr. Sharma: Absence of many things.

Hon. E. Mc Leod: Mr. Speaker, you see, there have been too often the occurrence of people beginning to think about survival after retirement from active service, on the 11th hour of their going into retirement. I recall, quite some years ago, certainly in the early 1980s, when for the first time I was nominated to the management committee of the Employees Benefit Plan in Texaco Trinidad Incorporated, Textrin, Pointe-a-Pierre, I took upon myself the responsibility to talk with every worker who was not at that time a member of the plan. We ensured that in our succeeding collective agreements and our policy formation that membership in the contributory pension plan became a condition of employment. So that new employees would not be employees if they did not subscribe from day one to the pension plan, to the medical plan and such other contributory plans.

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But there were workers who were employees of the company before the pension plan came into being, and they had an opportunity, within I think three years, to join the plan and a number of them perhaps because of the earlier formulae that applied that gave people very, very small pensions and so on—a number of them. You had quite a few educators about the place who themselves did not know what they were talking about, but they were able to convince some people, “boy if you buy insurance and so on you better off than to be in a pension plan”.

So that a couple of us younger people, and perhaps more enlightened than a number of us, we took the responsibility to go and talk to these people. I remember a particular line was, if you were to contract a life insurance scheme for \$20,000 and your premium is X whatever it is, 20 years from that day your coverage is \$20,000 or whatever inflation might cause it to be.

If you are a member of a contributory pension plan which has improvements coming to it through the process of negotiations, collective bargaining, every five years, every three years, ever so often, then you would find that your pension plan, particularly if it is on the basis of benefit guarantees as against perhaps contribution guarantees, you would find that on your retirement what you get is

going to reflect the values of the day. Whereas a life insurance plan is going to give you, 25 years after, the sum that you assured 25 earlier. Are you with me, Mr. Speaker? Good. We got the great majority of the workers to become members of the pension plan.

Now, how do you provide for those persons who are self-employed and who are not contributing to your insurance plan, but who would come at some time later on and depend on the State to give him a monthly sum of money to take care of—and in a number of cases—his wife and children, unemployed and so on and all of that kind of inconvenient situations, Mr. Speaker.

So, we are trying to put an end to that and bring as many of our people as possible, in not all of them in one fell swoop, under the protection of this thing. But, there might just be that problem as to bringing a 51-year-old person into a scheme and guaranteeing benefits at age what, 60 or 65 later on. But I am sure that all of what is said is going to be considered and all of the necessary adjustments, if any—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: You crazy?

Hon. E. Mc Leod:—would come about. The comfort of social protection of having many children contributing to meeting the expenses in retirement is no longer a reality. I have in the course of my own life expressed to many young persons that it is important to plan your retirement the day you begin to work and make provisions for same.

So, I am pleased, Mr. Speaker, to see that clause 2 of the Bill grants a retirement pension for some of us here now.

Hon. Member: Uh hmm.

Hon. E. Mc Leod: Ah ha? I have heard this—this was, ah ha.

Mr. Imbert: I got mine already.

Hon. E. Mc Leod: You got yours already? Ha, ha, ha, ha.

Mr. Imbert: I am a “pensioner yuh know”. [*Crosstalk*] Ha, ha, ha.

Mr. Sharma: You perform like a pensioner.

Mr. Imbert: “Twenty-two years ah here.” [*Crosstalk*] Twenty-two years.

Hon. E. Mc Leod: So, you are going to be entitled to your pension for legislators—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: “Ah get it already.”

Hon. E. Mc Leod:—of not less than \$3,000 per month. Clauses 6 and 7 identify a range of enhanced benefits in relation to fixed grants, minimum survivors benefit and calculated benefits. It is these that I was specifically pointing to, trying to indicate that to elaborate on what is seen as perhaps the more difficult or contentious part of these measures, without identifying what you might describe as being good or perhaps more wholesome, is really to deal with this in a manner that is unfair.

These initiatives, Mr. Speaker, are intended to alleviate poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion and to improve citizens’ well-being, and it is all part of our efforts at enhancing social protection coverage and the benefits associated with that coverage.

Hon. Member: Very good.

Hon. E. Mc Leod: This is especially for those who we might put among the vulnerable in society. Social protection is considered as a fundamental tool in recovery from the global economic and financial crisis, and many of its measures act as automatic stabilizers in the unsettling circumstances that we have realized since 2008.

Mr. Speaker, the Director General of the International Labour Organization—well, the former director general, the immediate past director general—Dr. Juan Somavia, he had this to say. He said:

“Social protection as a crisis instrument is a very fundamental tool because it actually increases economic demand...”

So all of these people whom we are trying to bring under the cover of this social protection will have some means, albeit small, by which they can call on goods and services thereby lending their own promotion to economic activity. Somavia said:

“Social protection measures are also essential for battling poverty, and the vision of social protection floors is rooted in the fact that 75 to 80 percent of people around the world”—not just in Trinidad and Tobago—“do not have social security...social protection measures...protect...they empower people enabling them to move into the labour market, they serve as economic stabilisers.”—Somavia.

So it should be pointed out, Mr. Speaker, that the Government has adopted a two-dimensional strategy for the extension of social security; a horizontal dimension by expanding the scope of ensured persons to include all self-employed persons, and a vertical dimension of providing higher levels of protection for differently-abled persons, for survivors, for women, for retired persons and also for injured persons—injured on the job or in their private whatever—to name just a few.

These measures are in keeping with the guidelines provided in ILO recommendation number 202 on Social Protection Floors, and that was adopted last year at the international labour conference in which Trinidad and Tobago played a very major role.

They are also in line with the international thrust by the United Nations to have countries establish, maintain and progressively increase social protection floors as a fundamental element of national insurance systems.

That recommendation 202 calls on ILO member states to establish as quickly as possible and maintain social protection floors comprising basic social security guarantees, and at paragraph 4 of that recommendation there is the note that the guarantees should ensure at a minimum level that over the life cycle all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security, which together secure effective access to goods and services.

So I was making the point that it is not just a pension on the attainment of age 65 or is it age 60, it is also medical care, health and other protection, survivors' benefits and so on, injury benefit.

The amount of money is small and we have improved it on a number of occasions in the past, but I would like to let this honourable House know that the protection that we offer people in Trinidad and Tobago is among a few across the world that are held up for high acclaim. [*Desk thumping*]

When the National Insurance Scheme was brought into being in 1972, yes, there was, I think Mr. Lennox Paul was his name, uh hmm, and it took a number of consultations across the country. I remember the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union taking serious objection to a number of the proposals that were contained in the National Insurance Scheme. "Yeah"? Those objections were with good supportable positions; I was there, I know. They had to explain why should we have a—how they called it then—marriage almost, of the private pension benefit with the national insurance benefit.

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No, if you are in a private pension plan that came about as a result of negotiations, collective bargaining, and both the employer and the worker can afford their contributions, why do we take the benefit of that private plan and have it reduced to a level that is commensurate with the benefit of the National Insurance Scheme? To help whom? To help the employer? You are not helping the National Insurance Scheme because you are contributing to that too, on the two-to-one basis—that is, the employer twice times and the employee once. “Yeah”? And we fought very strenuously against that amalgamation, maintaining both plans in their distinctly separate forms. “Yeah”? And it has been working quite well. It has been working well, and I would recommend, Mr. Speaker, that this House gives support to the measures that I enunciated in this Finance Bill that is brought before us today.

Mr. Speaker, this Government has ensured that we have set the guarantees at a level which affords a decent standard of living. We have also taken cognizance of the vulnerabilities at different stages of the life cycle, and we have sought to address these from children, adult to retirees, the sick, differently abled and insured—and injured, I beg your pardon—and we are working assiduously to ensure that our social protection floor is progressively increased and in no way manifests itself into a ceiling. A National Insurance Scheme is going to continue to be a work in progress—[*Interruption*—as time goes on, and we become a bit more sophisticated, there will be amendments to improve a number of areas—if not all of the areas—in the measure that is before us.

All of this, Mr. Speaker, is achieved at a very small increase to contributions—0.1 per cent for employees; 0.2 per cent for employers in 2013 and again in 2014. Other countries around the world are facing challenges which we are not certainly facing at this time. We do not yet have that challenge, but it is important that we remain aware of the need to continue to manage the economy in a manner to ensure that those who have laboured for the nation can be assured of a comfortable retirement when they become eligible so to do.

Clause 6 of the Finance Bill seeks to introduce—this point has been made—the compulsory insurance. The registration of self-employed persons as proposed would not only ensure that the necessary contributions are made and secured for use at retirement—or for health reasons—but would also allow the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development to better plan its programmes to assist micro and small businesses. As these micro and small

businesses come into being—I mean, they must have their feet wet in all areas of business required to really contribute to their own well-being and to that of the broader society of Trinidad and Tobago.

As you are aware, Members are aware, that the small, the micro and small businesses, to remain sustainable and productive, we expose them to training, business support and job opportunities which will strengthen their portfolio. All of this will also support the move to bring the informal economy in line with the formal economy. Lots of businesses are going on outside there and nobody knows. Some of them would like to be involved, but they need to be exposed to the correct information and education about what is being done in their own good stead.

My Ministry has been playing a lead role in doing this, in relation to micro and small enterprises, including through the National Integrated Business Incubator System and the FairShare Programme. IBIS is designed to provide the micro and small enterprises with the necessary training, the physical infrastructure, financing—both seed capital and equipment financing—operational support and networking to develop them into sustainable and competitive businesses.

The FairShare Programme seeks to ensure that registered businesses have the opportunity to get a fair share of the contract for services required by both the public and private sectors by actively encouraging agencies to use these companies and monitoring performance to ensure improved quality and assist in solving challenges with these companies.

One of the main challenges that countries around the world face today is that of equipping their people to become more active and more involved, to find employment in constantly changing workplace environments and to cope with and respond to change throughout their lives. We need to respond to this challenge with approaches that are appropriate to our own capabilities and long-term development objectives.

The road to long-term growth is rocky. It is. And we are small, and we see what is happening with larger countries in the world. We are small in every respect. Yet, having a workforce with the appropriate skills will help Trinidad and Tobago to forge ahead and overcome the obstacles in its path. So, we must be about building a workforce with the best skills and talents that are competitive in the global market.

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Clause 10 talks to amending the corporation tax, and this will provide for an allowance to companies in relation to all reasonable expenses they incur in the training and retraining of their employees up to 150 per cent of such expenditure. This happened before, you know. “Yeah”, we had this. I do not know if the hon. Member for Port of Spain South remembers.

Miss McDonald: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. E. Mc Leod: Oh, you were not paying attention. [*Laughter*] There was a deductible that employers enjoyed. “Yeah”, I think to the tune of 150 per cent of their investments in human resource development, particularly through training, apprenticeship schemes and so on. You do not know about it? But it was removed.

Hon. Member: “Now it coming back.”

Hon. E. Mc Leod: It was removed during those tough days of structural adjustment. [*Interruption*] “Yeah”, and we are bringing it back into the general play. And you have to head that way. You have to head that way. We had some of the most progressive apprenticeship schemes in this part of the world, and it was found that things were becoming too expensive. There was too much social spending.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Minister of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development has expired.

Motion made: That the hon. Member’s speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Hon. C. Sharma*]

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: But before you continue, I think it is a good time for us to have some tea. I would like to suspend the sitting until 5.00 p.m.

4:27 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5:00p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Hon. E. Mc Leod: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Very quickly, Sir, I was complimenting clause 10 that talks to corporation tax and the reinstatement. I suggested that it was a reinstatement of a measure that obtained some years ago. One of the benefits of this is to encourage training and retraining so that we can come about the appropriate skills and, to some great extent, the experiences that we would require for the improved economy that I am sure all of us are hoping for. One of the recommended areas for action identified is that of addressing

labour market mismatch and promoting structural change. In this regard, Governments are called upon—and this is by the ILO—to step up efforts to support skills and retraining activities, to address the gaps between the demand and supply of work skills and qualifications.

Here in Trinidad and Tobago, we are well on our way to addressing these mismatches in labour demand and supply, and this is evident, Mr. Speaker, in actions already started by my Ministry and the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training. Last week, I think it was—two weeks ago, we hosted a symposium on workforce development and we had with us some international experts who joined our local experts in exchanging views, perspectives and information on workforce development. Training and retraining of workers, especially our young people, featured prominently in the discussions that were involved.

So we can expect over the course of this fiscal year to have more timely and relevant data available to employers, to employees and to job seekers on labour demand, so as to inform courses of study, retooling and reskilling. My Ministry is working to undertake a comprehensive labour market analysis and together with the research to be undertaken by the Centre for Workforce Research and Development—established under the purview of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine—informed actions can be taken in relation to skills development.

One area that requires greater attention in the development of our economy is the role of returning citizens who possess skills and competencies in various disciplines. Based on their experiences and their international exposure, qualified returning citizens would be instrumental, particularly in contributing to the diversification of our economy. The wealth of knowledge that can be obtained from returning skills and competencies can help to propel our economy. Through a strategic coordination between the skills of returning qualified nationals and the domestic capacity for economic diversification, the Government's mandate of a people-empowered society becomes even more sustainable.

Greater emphasis must be placed on attracting and retaining such individuals as a means of preventing the brain drain of our economy. A number of people are coming back home and a number more could be encouraged to come back home as the more developed economies struggle to get back on to steadier footing.

So, clause 15 of the Bill would also amend the Customs Act—that was explained by the Minister of Finance and the Economy—and not only support the

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ease of doing business, but will also help to create an environment to induce nationals living abroad to return home and set up businesses here and so set about reducing the brain drain with which we are plagued.

On the other side of the coin, we are expanding the opportunities for qualified individuals to work abroad and gain valuable skills in a different work environment which they will bring back to this country. Already we are involved in the Canadian farm workers programme. This time we have sent, I think if my memory would serve me correctly, 987 workers who would be employed for periods between five and eight months, I think. We are also exploring, and shortly we should be informed after I have gone to the Cabinet, we should be exploring some opportunities in the energy sector in Alberta, Canada. There is a great potential for Trinidad and Tobago skilled labour. You know, we do not often enough compliment ourselves for very important developments that have taken place in this country.

You know, if I might get back to the question of our oil production and its decline and so on, the experts would tell us that the Trinidad geology, in Trinidad and Tobago, is a very complex geology and the experts consider ours to be a graveyard oil province—a graveyard of geological formations and so on. It is really, really very difficult, and so if you have somebody trained, really trained in these operations in Trinidad and Tobago, that person—with all things considered—can demand the best dollars in those other provinces where their skills and so on are sought after. It is very, very, very important, and we can fill a number of vacancies in Alberta, Canada once we do it right and, as I said, shortly we should be coming to the Parliament to make an important statement in that regard.

So that on the other side of the coin, we are expanding the opportunities for qualified individuals to work abroad and gain valuable skills in a different work environment and they come back home and do even more justice to Trinidad and Tobago. I am sure that the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West yes? Through her own relationship will agree with the point I just made. [*Mrs. Mc Intosh nods head*]

Hon. E. McLeod: I know, he knows it, you see.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, the world economic situation remains challenging. For countries in the world, the priority is to ensure recovery, growth and employment generation, and that is what is perhaps among the very central elements of the measures brought here by the Minister of Finance and the

Economy. Stimulating growth is obviously one of the most important means of exiting the current financial crisis and becoming more competitive. On this note, permit me, Mr. Speaker, to reiterate the Government's commitment to industrial peace and stability, and my own resolve to execute my responsibility as conciliator, and in the prevention of labour dispute that could be economically and socially destabilizing to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

I was going to say something but I better—I am pleased to inform that since assuming office up to this time, we have seen the successful negotiation of 132 collective agreements. [*Desk thumping*] Let me hasten to identify very slowly, to identify exactly what I am saying, because there are those who challenge every single thing that we say; there are those who challenge every success that we realize, and already, having heard that we settled—with the intervention of the CPO's office and the intervention of the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development—we settled 49 collective agreements, major collective agreements. [*Desk thumping*]

That number is questioned, and you hear “But this one is not settled. It is in the Industrial Court, so how could the Minister be saying that they settled 49?” Well the one that is in the Industrial Court, Mr. Speaker, is not included in the 49 that I talk about either. But it is strange to some that we have been able to settle things without a “big song and dance”. You follow?

I thought that I might make the point and I wish to emphasize that the practice of good industrial relations is not dead. Indeed, the collective bargaining practice and procedures and so on are very much alive in Trinidad and Tobago and it is through the system of collective bargaining that 132 collective agreements were settled. It is not that the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development settled 132 collective agreements. It is the free practice of the system that facilitated this, yes. But there are those who do not want to hear this as much as they would be saying to their membership, “you know, we are not accepting less than we are entitled to and we will shut the place down” and so on. Now, I can speak this way, Mr. Speaker, because of my own experience.

5.15 p.m.

I thought there would be colleagues in the movement in Trinidad and Tobago who would not necessarily want to exert too much of their energy in reinventing the wheel. Lots of struggles and so on have taken place and what we are supposed to be attempting to do is putting another layer on the very solid foundation that had been cast previously. But for some of us there has to be a song and dance; there has to be big noise and so on.

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The collective bargaining process in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker, I feel very proud of it. We have had some hiccups and people have struggled; people have marched and people have taken strike action, as it is their right to do as enshrined in the laws of Trinidad and Tobago. I hope that on the basis of that understanding, there will be a greater subscription to working together rather than some of us having the agony of great pain and so on.

The micro and small enterprises, for which I have responsibility, play a significant role in economic and social development. Not only will these measures assist large businesses, but they will assist the growth and development of small and micro enterprises also. There is a very, very important one. I mean, we see our sister comrades come even to the Parliament, well decked, and we are looking forward to the day when they will all be well decked in fashion and design that carry a Trinidad and Tobago mark. [*Desk thumping*]

Clause 10 provides incentives for the fashion industry, and it seeks to provide an incentive that will no doubt support the development of the fashion industry in Trinidad and Tobago. Companies involved in promoting the fashion industry will be allowed, from 2013, a deductible, an allowance equal to 150 per cent of the actual expenditure in respect of such promotions up to a maximum of \$3 million, and it is doing well. So that the next time we see foreign designs brought into the House by whoever the Member might be—Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, and the well decked Member for St. Ann's East—we will see Trinidad and Tobago fashions, so that we contribute to the development of our own local industry. I am sure that you will support that. Very well.

Mr. Sharma: And they will look good in it too.

Hon. E. McLeod: This was a promise made by this Government, Mr. Speaker, in the presentation of the Budget Statement 2013, as a means of developing a most viable and important sector in the creative industry.

Propelled by the demonstration of our unique talents in fashion on the global stage and by the knowledge of the economic and social benefits of the fashion industry, we recognize that there must be more incentives to encourage development of the local industry, and my Ministry is a member of the Fashion Industry Development Committee, and since 2011 we have been exploring ways of organizing and developing the fashion industry to meet the new and emerging demands globally.

Additionally, my Ministry is currently finalizing a proposal for a fashion incubator modelled from similar international programmes as part of the IBIS

programme. So there are benefits all around, and as we encourage people to venture into this kind of development, we are suggesting that they must also be brought into the realm of national insurance coverage so that when they would have completed their years of a very active working life, they will be assured of a pension with which they can maintain a reasonable and decent standard of living.

Clauses 14 and 15 of the Finance Bill, Mr. Speaker, provide benefits for our returning nationals. I think I dealt with that, but there are one or two points I need to make under that Head as I wind up my contribution. Two major clauses include full relief from motor vehicles tax in some cases, and an increase in the value of household effects which may be admitted without tax, from TT \$100,000 to TT \$250,000. These significant tax concessions aim to encourage and facilitate the return of citizens who have resided abroad for at least five consecutive years, with the recognition of the advantages that these persons may bring to this country, such as specialized skills and experience which may have beneficial effects on the local economy.

It also recognizes the fact that many returning nationals may have been providing financial remittances, Mr. Speaker, for their relatives during their time abroad and thus contributing to the economy of the nation even while working abroad.

Mr. Speaker, I am reminded here—I think I announced this a couple weeks ago—that in 2012 the wages earned by the 900-odd persons whom we sent to the Canadian Agricultural Farm Programme amounted to TT \$70 million. I do not know how much of that is remitted back here, but it is a sizeable sum of money and if we are going to make contributions out of such sums of money to assisting family and relatives and so on, back in Trinidad and Tobago, we are contributing important activity to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. We are seeking to expand that, and there are certain incentives that we are identifying here, as people would want to make that kind of contribution.

One of the global trends being recognized is the return of migrants to their countries of origin. This must be seen in a positive developmental perspective and we must make every effort to make this transition easier and less expensive. On the other side of the coin, we are expanding the opportunities for qualified individuals to work abroad and gain valuable skills in a different work environment which they will bring back to this country.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to reemphasize a point which I made earlier at the start of my contribution, and that was that the Trinidad and Tobago oil industry,

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or those parts of it which are fully under our ownership and control, can come back to better strength than it is now realizing. It is going to take some time because the industry is, by nature, one in which you do not see the next day, fruits to the investment that you would have made yesterday.

If we had made important investments in the human resource development of our persons employed and in our infrastructure and, you know, the whole exploration and production efforts that were necessary—if we had done that seven years ago, in 2006, when we had all of the financial circumstances that would have been relevant to such investment, today we will not be decrying the sad state in which our exploration and production facilities have fallen. We must know that what we do today is going to, in large measure, determine how tomorrow will be. CLR James told us, in one of his very favoured works, the future is in the present.

Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Mr. Speaker: Before I call on the next Member to speak, I would like to revert to item No. 3, “Announcements by the Speaker”.

Hon. Members, I have received communication from the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Member of Parliament for Siparia and Prime Minister, who has asked to be excused from today’s sitting of the House. The leave which the Member seeks is granted.

FINANCE BILL, 2013

Mrs. Patricia Mc Intosh (*Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to make a contribution to the Finance Bill under review in this honourable House this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, I heard the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre speak of fashion and I could not help but note the very bright red shirt that the Member for Diego Martin East wore—a colour of joy, jubilation, happiness and rejoicing, and I saw the Member for Tobago West enter the Chamber all in black.

Hon. Members: Mourning.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: All in black, the colour of mourning. [*Desk thumping*] Probably it has some significance, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy in his 2013 budget statement identified many fiscal measures to support public policy initiatives outlined in the budget. Mr. Speaker, he cited—and I have the budget

document here; I am quoting from it. He cited incentives for building the Financial Institution Support Services Industry, particularly in respect of the Clico Investment Fund; he cited incentives for enhancing the creative industries, particularly the fashion industry and the film industry.

He spoke to incentives for improving the business climate; he spoke of incentives in terms of national security, in respect of non-taxable special allowances for special reserve police. He also spoke to incentives to encourage corporate social responsibility; the imposition of taxation on the gaming industry; the national insurance system and increased maternity benefits and survivor benefits; and the inclusion of the self-employed in the NIS system.

He also spoke to the increase in the disability assistance grants; tax exemptions for housing development; tax exemptions in respect of land development; import duty on tyres; the harmonizing of the supplementary petroleum tax rates in the energy sector; the reduction of the fuel subsidy; fees for renewal of driver's permits; imposition of taxation in respect of motorcycles, school buses and omnibuses, which will now be brought within the tax net. He spoke of increased VAT threshold in respect of the business levy; the tax incentives to the private sector in respect of the transfer of CEPEP and URP workers to that sector and the exemption from corporation tax for five years in the construction and rental of commercial buildings.

Mr. Speaker, we are here today because the hon. Senator is seeking approval from this honourable House to amend several pieces of legislation in order to provide for such benefits, allowances, tax exemptions, tax increases and tax impositions. Mr. Speaker, I have to note that there are 15 pieces of legislation that we are dealing with here today and I think it is not very fair that the Members should be given such an important Bill that has far-reaching consequences on the lives of our citizens with so many pieces of legislation and so much detail.

5.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, one can easily in that short space of time, miss certain nuances and certain details which could negatively impact the lives of our citizens. I would like to note this, it is not a good thing. What we might be doing here is missing some salient features. We will pass legislation that is not good legislation and we will have to return to this honourable House to amend or repeal such legislation. We must not do this again.

Mr. Speaker, I want it on record that I am very happy, sincerely happy for all of the recipients of benefits, whether they are individual citizens or corporations,

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et cetera. I am very happy. As a matter of fact, I myself stand to gain as a legislator, as a parliamentarian. I am very glad to see that I would be getting a pension. I thought I had to do all this hard work without a pension. So, I am very glad. I am counting my pennies for my retirement. It is coming soon. So I was glad. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Speaker, I am a patriot, and as much as I am happy to be a recipient of the Government's goodness, I am concerned about our country. I am concerned about how we will support all of these benefits that we are giving to our citizens, though they justly deserve them.

Mr. Speaker, at a time when the world economy is still grappling to become stabilized, at a time when our own economy could still be called fragile despite certain little shades of stability—if you want to call it that—it is still a fragile economy. I am wondering how long we would be able to sustain such largesse and generosity on the part of the Government.

Our budget for 2013 was the largest budget in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. A budget of \$58.6 million with a deficit of—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Billion.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh:—billion, sorry; thank you.—with a deficit of \$7.6 billion. When the Minister stated that he managed to reduce last year's budget to \$3.1 billion, slashing it by \$3.5 billion, he might have been correct and I would still like to examine that. But the fact remains that we continue to operate in a deficit and have been doing so for the past three years, and it seems to me—I am not an economist—that we will continue to do so for the next four to five years. As I said, let us wait and see.

Mr. Imbert: Four to five?

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Or more.

Mr. Imbert: You mean two to three. “They gone in three years. How yuh reach four?” [*Laughter*]

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: The global economy as I said is still in a state of flux. Europe and the USA are struggling to stabilize their economies. We are not an island unto ourselves. We will always experience the repercussions of the ups and downs and the turmoils in the economies of the developed world.

Despite all our efforts, we remain an oil and gas economy. Our energy sector contributes 45 per cent to our national GDP, and until this changes, the Trinidad

and Tobago economy will always be subjected to the vagaries of the prices of these commodities on the international market. These prices have a lot to do with supply and demand. Now we are experiencing a slight respite in prices. Prices are high.

Mr. Indarsingh: Respite [*Pronounces word re-spite*]

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Respite. [*Pronounces word res-pite*] Respite. Please learn. Respite. Mr. Speaker, I do not mind if they correct me, you know, but they must know what they are saying. [*Crosstalk and desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: He never went to school, you know.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: No, no, no, Caroni Central. He is trying to correct me and he does not understand English. [*Laughter and desk thumping*] Understand English before you come to a principal.

Mr. Indarsingh: Principal indeed.

Mr. Warner: Respite. [*Pronounces word res-pite*] is right.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Mr. Speaker, at this time—thank you, Sir. Thank you, Member for Chaguanas West. At this time prices are high, so we are experiencing a slight respite and—[*Interruption and crosstalk*]

Mr. Imbert: You want a respite from that.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh:—because it is the winter months and oil and gas is needed in the demand for heating. As we approach spring and summer, the prices are going to drop. The reason why we are experiencing a slight increase in our revenue is partly because of this phenomenon of higher oil prices.

Mr. Speaker, when the Minister stated and I would like to read this, please. I am quoting from the *Guardian* newspapers page, A10, on January 24, 2013.

He said:

“...the deficit reduction was achieved by higher than projected revenue of \$1.2 billion— including higher oil revenue—”

So this underscores my point, that higher oil revenue is really assisting us. That is only half of the story that he said there. I am very glad to have heard him state that we are also experiencing and have been experiencing a decline in oil production from 185,000 barrels a day in 2010, as my colleague from Diego Martin North/East said, down to 78,000 barrels a day in 2012.

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I know the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs has set a very ambitious goal of 114,000 barrels per day in 2014. This is not a question of politics. In the interest of our country and our national development, I do hope that he achieves that very ambitious target—I hope so.

Mr. Speaker, there are not only declines in oil production but also declines in LNG, ammonia and methanol as well, which are—all of them—our major foreign currency earners. Furthermore, the price of these commodities which were quite high last year is showing a steady downward trend.

So as we debate the issues that arise in this Bill, I feel that we have to exercise great financial prudence. Let me paint a possible scenario: if oil and gas prices decline, if—it is possible, because they have done so in the past. Should they decline—and if oil and condensate production do not approach acceptable levels, what is our position? What is our position? They already said that manufacturing is also declining. What is our position? How will our economy support all these incentives and benefits and grants?

I have to ask. You see, I do not share the over-optimism that I see coming from the Minister of Finance and the Economy. I want him to convince me. I wish he could convince me. I want to be convinced. But, I do not share the optimism given the entire holistic scenario globally and locally.

What new projects, tangible, that we can see, has this UNC Government brought to the table since it came into office in May 2010?

Miss Ramdial: Plenty.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Well, let us see them. Do not talk about them. What new foreign direct investments has this UNC Government been able to attract? [*Crosstalk*] Mr. Speaker, I know there are several memoranda of understanding that have been signed—several. And, we are hopeful. But to date, there is no tangible evidence of any project having started. I cannot see it. I wish they would show it to me.

This UNC Government is continuing to spend money while we are operating in a deficit budget and in an economy that, as I said, can still be termed fragile. We seem to be predicating our revenue on projects that have not as yet been realized. We are counting our chickens before they have hatched and we are spending money accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, to tell you the truth, I know the Government—I am not saying they are not trying. They probably are, but I am a little concerned.

I want to re-emphasize, a drop in oil and gas prices, and further decline in oil and condensate production, will lead us into a position where we will have our recurrent expenditure, our emergent expenditure—expenditure that we did not imagine. It is like running a household, Mr. Speaker. You do not know that the fridge is going to go bad this month and then everything seems to go badly at the same time. The washing machine has fallen down, you bounce the car, the child get sick, and all the expenditure seems to fall on your head at the same time.

When we have this recurrent expenditure and the emergent expenditure that we did not plan for, how are we going to sustain all these benefits?

No one is willing to stop our economy operating in this manner. We seem to be walking an economic tightrope.

Miss Mc Donald: Spending frenzy.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Economic tightrope. That is right. You know, we are not looking and taking example from what has happened in the developed world, because it is exactly a spending frenzy that led Greece and Portugal, even Spain and Italy, into the economic morass from which they are still struggling to emerge. They cannot raise their head as yet. So I must be worried.

As I said, I am not an economist. I just look around and observe, and I try to rationalize: why are we doing these things? Not that our citizens do not deserve them. They do. But, we might have to take them back.

Miss Mc Donald: Because they are not sustainable.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: I hope that we shall not have to come to this honourable House to repeal any of these amendments and to terminate any of these benefits or allowances because, you know what will happen then? The Member for Chaguanas West is looking very sadly at me. [*Crosstalk*] I do not want to be a prophet of doom and gloom. I am just sounding a note of caution and asking this Government to exercise great financial prudence in respect of our country's finances. [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Mr. Speaker: Members for Port of Spain South and Tobago West. I do not know what you all have in common. But, please, do not disturb the Member who is making a contribution at this time. And, especially the Member for Port of Spain South, you seem to have a particular liking for Tobago West. [*Laughter*] Continue, hon. Member.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Mr. Speaker, thank you. It is Tobago love, Mr. Speaker.

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I am fearful we might go the way of some of the European countries and fall over our own fiscal cliff. We have to thank God, at least we have the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. I am very happy about that. It is very well-established, established very well under the PNM.

I would like to read a little bit. You know, it is so easy to do research these days, once you are knowledgeable of the technology, once you can use the technology. So I went on the Ministry of Finance and the Economy's website and I looked up the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund which was established with the passing of the HSF Act, No. 6 in March 2007. Mr. Speaker, through you, I am very much aware that I am speaking to you, but through you, I know there is the national community listening.

“The purpose of the fund is to save and invest surplus petroleum revenues derived from production business in order to

- “Cushion the impact on or sustain public expenditure capacity during periods of revenue downturn whether caused by a fall in prices of crude oil or natural gas.”

It proposes to:

- “Generate an alternative stream of income so as to support public expenditure capacity as a result of revenue downturn caused by depletion of non-renewable petroleum resources;”—all of which I have been speaking to. And, thirdly, to:
- “Provide a heritage for future generations,”—our patrimony—“of Trinidad and Tobago, from savings and investment income derived from excess revenues.”

5.45 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, this is what this fund is for and I am happy. Now, the Minister said that he has grown the fund. He said the fund has grown and I will quote him. He was speaking on the Finance Committee Report last Tuesday:

“...in spite of our aggressive fiscal stimulus, the country's fiscal savings continue to provide a...safety net with the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund recording approximately US \$4.7 billion at the end of fiscal 2012. So, notwithstanding the fact that we continue to operate with a deficit...”

You see all these things he is addressing.

“...the fact is that we have continued to make transfers to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund and I expect that by the end of this year, that Fund will be well in excess of US \$5 billion.”

He goes on to say:

“In fact, Mr. Speaker, I intend, within the next two months, to bring a further report to this House with further recommendations regarding how we should treat with the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.”

You see that last part, Mr. Speaker, I am not going to deal with that last part here, but I am quite anxious to see what the Minister is bringing in terms of how we will treat with the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund.

Mr. Speaker, he said he grew the fund, but do you know what the Minister failed to say? He never mentioned that when the People’s National Movement demitted office, there was some US \$3.6 billion in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. He did not say that—\$3.2 billion, and with the accumulated interest, \$4 million, \$3.6 billion.

Miss Mc Donald: Almost TT \$20 million.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Almost TT \$20 million.

Miss Mc Donald: “That’s right!”

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Mr. Speaker, these things were not said. So what did he grow it by over the last how many years since the Government has been in office? Well, he has only been here a few months now—since September—but from \$.4 billion, am I right?

Miss Mc Donald: Exactly!

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: So what is the song and dance? The PNM left a firm and solid foundation that this Government is lucky to be riding on. Lucky!

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, I am very happy that the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund is growing. As I said, this is not politics. This is about country, and we need that fund to cushion any adverse impact that the global economy and the local economy can have on our citizens. It will safeguard our nation against any economic downturns, globally or locally.

Mr. Speaker, however, when the Minister spoke, I was unavoidably absent from the House last time because of unforeseen circumstances. I have been battling the virus. However, I listened to what he was saying in my bed where I

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had to be, where the doctor had put me, but I still felt I needed some verification because I have learnt that you cannot always take what the Members opposite say, *carte blanche*. We cannot trust them and section 34 has taught us that very painfully. We cannot trust them. A very cruel teacher section 34 was, a very unforgiving teacher, so I wanted to verify.

So I went on the Ministry's website, again, pulled down some more information on the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund because I wanted to see their reports; their reports to be had and statements. I wanted to see how much was deposited when. I thought I would see something. Mr. Speaker, I have it here—from their website—and I checked it up to this morning. There is not a single annual report. You have annual reports published.

Mr. Speaker, this is taxpayers' money. They want to see what is happening to their money, to their lives, to their country, to their future. Everyone can go on the website and should be able to get the information. There are annual reports from 2007, 2008, 2009, go right up till 2011. At this time—we are in 2013—all the figures should be in, so that we should have a report for the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund for the fiscal year 2012 which ended in December. We should have had that report. Then when I looked at the quarterly reports, you have quarterly reports from 2008 come right back. All the quarters—July to September, October to December, January to March, April to—All the quarters going right up, and all we have for 2012 is for January to March. So you have that big gap.

I feel that if the Minister of Finance and the Economy can come here and boast that he has grown the fund to US \$4.2 billion at the end of fiscal 2012, I feel, as a responsible Minister, that he could generate reports and publish the relevant documents and statements so that the national community could see what is happening to our money, our patrimony.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to just briefly deal—I am not going to be very long. Illness is not a lovely thing and I will need to sit shortly, but I need to deal with a few clauses. I want to look at clause 3 which deals with the special reserve police, and they would grant this allowance which is already being enjoyed by members of the protective services of \$1,000. I am happy for them. The regular police are enjoying it and it is now being extended to the special reserve police. I am happy because they all belong to the protective services and they put their lives on the line to protect and serve us.

Mr. Speaker, while I am happy for them I have to ask—and I see the Minister of National Security is there looking at me—what about the 78 SAUTT officers

who were retained? Three hundred were sent—highly qualified—home last September, but 78 were retained. They have not been paid for the past—this will be the fourth month that they have not been paid. They have not been paid for four months. Why do I know? They came to me. They have not been paid for four months. This is the fourth month.

Mr. Roberts: All of them came?

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Representatives. And while we are offering benefits to the protective services—and they well deserve it—what is happening to these 78 SAUTT officers? Are they not members of the protective services also? Are they not laying their lives on the line for the citizens of this country? Why are they being treated unfairly? Why are they being discriminated against? I do not understand it and we need their services. These are highly competent and qualified men. We need their services, especially, in the face of the high crime rate in the country.

Mr. Speaker, today is the 28th and we have 32 murders. When I opened the papers this morning, I saw in the *Guardian* newspapers, page A6—no, this was Saturday. Since Saturday I saw, “Violent crime very high in T&T, says Williams”. It says:

“Acting Police Commissioner Stephen Williams admitted yesterday that violent crime was ‘very high’ and reducing that fear was a big challenge for the Police Service.”

At least he is honest. He is not trying to hide it.

“And, he said, one of the goals of the police this year was to decrease serious crime, including murder by 23 per cent.”

I wish him well. I hope he does. “Yuh know when yuh read out these things, you know what dey say over there? She like crime. She want de crime to get bad.” Who would want that? It could be me, it could be my children, it could be my husband, it could be my colleagues. Who will want crime to rise, Mr. Speaker? This morning when I opened the *Guardian*, two murders marred the weekend. Monday 28th on page A5, two murders. We are up to 32 and then I have another one here. They have not been murdered, but people outside their home. A couple in their garden feeding their dogs were shot. What about the 12-year-old boy who was shot in his mother’s car—[*Interruption*]

Miss Mc Donald: Yes, on his cheek.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh:—on his cheek. Mr. Speaker, do you know how many people are in the hospital nursing wounds? You see it? They have not died. I hope none of them do, but some of them are in critical condition in the hospital nursing their wounds.

So, Mr. Speaker, having said that, I do not understand why the SAUTT officers—78, nice little number there to assist—well trained, highly trained to assist our police. My dear colleague on the other side, the Member for Chaguanas West, I want you to see about them for me please because I do not think it is right and I do not think that we must punish them.

Mr. Speaker, a word on the gaming industry. When we debated the budget in October, the question of the gaming industry came up and it was of great concern to Members on both sides. A very controversial topic. This Government does not seem willing, it does not have the political will or the determination to dismantle or address the issues of the gaming industry.

There are issues, especially given our value system, because there is a negative social fallout associated with the gaming industry. However, it is here and the Minister says that he thinks that it is very important for the entertainment industry. I think that since it is here, I would like to see this Government enact proper legislation that will give the Government greater oversight and control over the operations of the gaming industry. Not just tax them because, as I say, since they are already here, the very high and punitive taxation that is being imposed on the gaming industry will tax half of them out of the business. It will tax half of them out of their existence and some might say that is good. You see, we are juggling with positions here. You might say that is good.

I do not know if that is a strategy that some of them will have to close shop, the smaller ones especially, and the bigger ones might have to reduce their workforce. What this means is that we are creating a situation where thousands of citizens, those directly employed in the industry and those indirectly employed, offering services and so, will be on the breadline. They will be unemployed. I am bringing this point up here because I know many of my constituents who work in the gaming industry; so many of them, especially single mothers, and I know what will happen to them. Mr. Speaker, budgets are not to create unemployment and hardship for the citizens of any country. Budgets are to create a better quality of life for all citizens.

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Mr. Speaker, let me just go to the Litter Act and I would like to quote from the Bill:

“...the Bill would amend section 24(9) of the Litter Act, Chapter 30:52 to increase the fine from fifty dollars to five hundred dollars.”—very good—
“Persons who would be liable to payment of the increased fine include—”

And they list all the number of people throwing litter out of their car, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. No problem with that.

Mr. Speaker, I strongly agree that we need strong legislation to deal with the issue of littering in our country. Our country is a mess. We need a much healthier, a more sanitary and more aesthetic environment. So I have no problem with the Litter Act. People throw all sorts of waste on the street and quite apart from creating an environment that is unsanitary, unhealthy and visually revolting, we have to deal with the destruction that flooding brings when our rivers and drains become clogged with litter and the contamination of our water supply. I understand that contamination of the water supply is one of the leading causes of cancer. So we have to look at that.

Mr. Speaker, my question is: do we have an adequate number of trained litter wardens to work with the police—of course, who will enforce—to enforce the legislation? Do we?

6.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, why I am saying this is because too often legislation is passed and never enforced. Enacted and never enforced! I really do not want to be a part of a group that is passing legislation that I know will just lie there and people would just litter as they did in the past, business as usual and nothing would be done.

In addition, this UNC Government has failed to pass the Beverage Containers Bill which seeks “to provide for the establishment of the Beverage Containers Advisory Board...a deposit and refund system” for bottles and a system for collecting them to reduce pollution. Very good! I would love to see that. But the debate on the Bill was aborted in the other place after Opposition, as well Independent Senators, cited political interference in the process and asked for the Beverage Containers Bill to be referred to a select committee for deliberations. Mr. Speaker, I want this Government to stop playing politics and get this Bill passed. Stop playing politics with our environment and stop playing politics with the lives of our citizens, please.

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Mr. Speaker, as I speak of creating and maintaining a healthy, sanitary and aesthetic environment, I cannot help but think of CEPEP and, to some extent, URP, who provided invaluable services to communities. What has happened to CEPEP and URP? I will go back to another point later. Why have the CEPEP and URP teams been whittled down to a skeleton force so much so that their absence in communities, especially PNM communities, has resulted—and I can speak for my constituency, Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West—in unhealthy, unsanitary and environmentally, unfriendly spaces. My constituency is overgrown with bush that creates a haven for rodents and a breeding place for mosquitoes.

I remember—and I am not trying to just give credit to the PNM, but under the PNM, the CEPEP workers were all over, and I am sure every single citizen could attest to that. We used to see them all over, the place was clean. Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West was sculptured. All the bush was cut down and nice. Now, it is a mess, Mr. Speaker. Of course, people were employed. No one has a job. If I need to get any bush cut, I have to get in contact with the Chairman—very nice man and he responds to me—Mr. Adesh Deonarine—very, very nice to speak to—but he sends a team, “dey play around for a day or two, dey go, dey doh cut the grass, dey doh do anything” and the position is the same. There is no system. There is no organized system and no structured approach about how this will be done.

Mr. Speaker, furthermore—I am sorry the hon. Minister of Health is not here—dengue is on the rise. The figures are not being released.

Mr. Roberts: Just so dengue on the rise?

Hon. Member: Just so!

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Dengue is on the rise because of all the bush and unhealthy and unsanitary places. One of my constituents begged me to bring this issue of dengue to this honourable House because two of her friends died in the past month from dengue. I want to quote this newspaper article where the Minister—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: I do not want you to go into areas that maybe in your own mind, are quite legitimate. I would like you to stick to the clauses. You dealt with crime; that is not part of this debate. You dealt with SAUTT, not part of this debate. You are now going on to CEPEP and URP and the environment, not part of the debate.

All I am saying and thing is that if you can connect those points, it would be very useful so that all of us would be able to follow. Just connect your points to

the legislation or maybe to some—you are responding to what a Minister said and you can make reference. But, I do not want you to go all over the place because you believe this might be important. That is all I am saying to you.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: No, Mr. Speaker. I studied—I have to say study, you know I am from education—I studied my work. When I spoke about SAUTT, it was in connection with the protective services that are here in the Bill. When I spoke about the dengue and so, it is in connection with the litter that is all over my constituency and all the constituencies. [*Desk thumping*] I connected all my points. I am very aware of your stance on these things and I do not want to run afoul of you because I know that you are in charge of this honourable House. I know this is your domain and your jurisdiction, Mr. Speaker, and I do not want to run afoul of that, so I did my research and I linked.

I would like to refer to an article where the Minister said he is probing. I am not going—because, Mr. Speaker, my constituency, people are falling ill with dengue because there is too much—and people are afraid and they asked me to bring it to this House—because of the bush and the litter. The hon. Minister, on a *Newsday* article on page 37 [sic], January 24, it said:

“‘Possible dengue death’ under probe, says Fuad.”

Mr. Roberts: Possible, possible!

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: I quote:

“Health Minister Dr. Fuad Khan is now investigating a death at the Mount Hope Hospital to determine if dengue was a factor.

With no tangible dengue statistics, Khan admitted there was a ‘dengue’ problem in some areas of the country.”

He admitted that there was a dengue problem in some areas of the country and that is what I have brought here stemming from the Litter Act. [*Desk thumping*] But, let me leave that because the Members on the other side like to muzzle me. [*Laughter*] Yes, they like to muzzle me because they do not want to hear me speak the truth.

Mr. Seemungal: “Buh yuh eh saying nothing.”

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: But when they stop saying lies—untruths, untruths. Sorry, Mr. Speaker. I know “lies” is not a parliamentary word. I learn from you, Mr. Speaker. [*Laughter*] When they stop saying untruths about the PNM, I shall stop saying the truth about them. [*Desk thumping*] I am appealing to the Ministers

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of Health, Local Government, and even the Minister of the Environment and Water Resources, to collaborate and do all in their power to resolve this situation.

Let me go on to the disability grant and hope that I can link my things there. The disability grant which is—clause 7 of the Bill would amend section 11(a)(3) of the Public Assistance Act, Chap. 32:03, to increase the monthly disability allowance from \$1,300 to \$1,500. I think for mentally disabled people, from \$800 to \$1,000. Mr. Speaker, I could not believe this.

Disabled people, physically or mentally, there is so much expenditure associated with their care to sustain them with a decent lifestyle. There is the medication, and you cannot always get it from the Government and sometimes it is not available. The medication is very expensive. They have disposable sanitary wear that they use, special diets, transport, wheel chair—I have gotten one or two from the Minister of the People and Social Development, Member for Caroni Central, but not enough wheelchairs—therapy, supervision for them when their family has to go to work, and to talk about \$200 in this day and age!

I mean, if you are going to give, I think one grouping that is deserving of much better treatment, in respect of benefits and allowances, is the disabled. I am making a plea for the disabled here, Mr. Speaker, that their allowance be increased beyond that 200 “pawsly” dollars. Come on, hon. Minister, show some empathy and caring and compassion for the disabled and increase those allowances.

Hon. Member: “Pawsly”? What is “pawsly”? You have a dictionary?

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: The last thing I would like to talk about is the fashion industry in clause 10. Mr. Speaker, it must be noted—[*Crosstalk*] Yes—that the establishment of an institutionalized—formally institutionalized fashion industry was the initiative of the People’s National Movement and the brainchild of Prof. Kenneth Julien who established the Caribbean Academy of Fashion and Design at the University of Trinidad and Tobago. I would like to quote from the website:

“Modeled after the best design schools in the world, The Caribbean Academy of Fashion and Design at the University of Trinidad and Tobago...is the first school of its kind in the Caribbean. With the collaboration of professionals from Paris, London and New York, CAFD trains future designers and marketers in the art and business of fashion”—and—“an eye towards developing an emerging fashion industry in the West Indies.

This is achieved through structured programmes designed to promote analytical, critical and conceptual development. The development of each student's creativity is supported by a strong foundation of workroom or boardroom techniques and critical thinking skills.

Students have the option of working towards earning a 2-year Diploma or 4-year BA (Hons) Degree in Fashion Design or a 2-year Diploma in Fashion Management.”

That came under Dr. Kenneth Julien at the University of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Sharma: At what cost?

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: But, you know, this UNC Government is too hypocritical. When it assumed power in May 2010, it did its very best to dismantle the fashion industry at UTT firing the fashion experts who were contracted from the fashion centres of the world to guide and train the students pursuing—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the hon. Member has expired.

Motion made: That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. *[Mr. N. Hypolite]*

Question put and agreed to.

Mrs. P. Mc Intosh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Government plays games. When it assumed power in May 2010, it did its best to dismantle the fashion academy at UTT. They fired all the fashion experts who were contracted from the various fashion centres in the world. Some of them—we should have been proud—Trinidadians who were on Savile Row in London, “yuh know”, people of renown, to come here and train and guide our students pursuing fashion design, so they could graduate a very high calibre—they could produce a very high calibre of graduates. The programme was suspended and many students left in a quandary. Now, this Government is seeking to rekindle and kick-start the fashion industry by giving tax incentives and I am glad that they are doing it, but they must not play the games.

Since this Government assumed office in May 2010, it has been dismantling PNM projects and initiatives, restarting and rebranding them and claiming them as their own. This Government must understand that it cannot fool all the people all the time. Mr. Speaker, what they are doing here by taking our projects—you see, we gave them a platform for growth. That is what we left for them. But, when

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they call it their own, this is a very dishonest act that has characterized the operations of this UNC Government since its inception, since it assumed power. [Desk thumping]

But, what governments do when they assume power, when they come into power and they do not have a plan of their own, is usurp the plan of others, and this is exactly what they are doing—this UNC Government is doing with the plans of the PNM—usurping them.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you. [Desk thumping]

6.15 p.m.

Mr. Herbert Volney (*St. Joseph*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very happy for the opportunity to speak on these measures contained in the Finance Bill, 2013. I hope that I do not have to hear much of what I just heard from the Member for Point Fortin later on in the evening. So, before my headache gets worse, I propose to do my bit for a brief while and to make some contributions towards the measure.

First of all, let me congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy for getting the measures before the House in time as you can see. We have all realized it is quite an all-embracing package of amendments to laws, and also introduction of exemptions and other bits of progressive movements in the right direction for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It is to the credit of the legislative draftsmen and also to the hard-working public officers in the Ministry of Finance and the Economy, that he has been able to put together this Bill in the time by which it has to be brought to Parliament.

Before I get into the Bill itself, I would urge the hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy to consider a point that was made by the Member for Diego Martin North/East, as regards the compulsory national insurance changes for person who have not contributed. I am not saying at a cursory glance that it may be a measure that requires a special parliamentary majority, but just out of an abundance of caution, if it is required, I think that we should take the steps to have the necessary amendments made at committee stage.

Tonight, Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak for the retired judges of our country, given that part of the legislative amendments and measures here relate to the Retiring Allowances (Legislative Service) Act that pertains to legislators. For some time now, the Retired Judges Association has been making representations to Governments for an improvement in the lot of retired judges. Let me first of all

declare that I have an interest in what I have to say being myself a proudly retired judge, who has embraced retirement for better things in life—that is, to come out and make a difference to the lot of people by way of introducing legislation that I have and to make parliamentary contributions as I continue to do.

There is a special case for retired judges in that what the population may not be aware of, and I particularly address this to Minister of Finance and the Economy who may not have remembered that for some time now retired judges have been asking for help. This is a small group of persons who have, in most instances, given up the luxuries of private pastures, green pastures, to make a contribution to national development on the bench. They fall into the only category of workers—and workers they are—who are restricted in practising in their profession of the law for some 10 years after—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: You can make reference to judges en passant, but I would not want you to use clause 2 which deals with parliamentarians to introduce judges and then that becomes a debate, and people will want to respond to that. That is wholly irrelevant in the context of 36(1). I will give you some elbow space and room but you can raise that en passant, but do not linger too long on that matter, lest other Members believe they can respond to an irrelevant point. So, could you be guided accordingly, please.

Mr. H. Volney: Mr. Speaker, I agree entirely with your ruling, and I trust that the hon. Minister will be guided by my comments. So, I move on. *[Crosstalk]* There is in clause 2 of this Bill provision for the amendment to Retiring Allowances (Legislative Service) Act to provide firstly for a retiring allowance to be paid. What may have missed those responsible for considering this measure is that there is a provision for a surviving spouse to lose the surviving spouse's allowance if she does not remain unmarried. It means that for parliamentarians who have young wives and young children—*[Interruption]*

Hon. Member: Like yourself? *[Laughter]*

Mr. H. Volney: Did you hear that, Mr. Speaker? *[Laughter and crosstalk]*

Mr. Imbert: You disturbed me right through.

Mr. H. Volney: Like myself, if I may confess. *[Laughter and crosstalk]* Should I pass on and my surviving spouse—*[Interruption]*

Hon. Member: Young spouse.

Mr. H. Volney:—with young children, should find herself in difficulties because of the meagre salary being paid to parliamentarians, it would mean that

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the whole purpose of this legislation here—to improve on the lot of parliamentarians or legislators, and by extension their surviving spouses—would be defeated if she should remarry in order to help the lot of his or her surviving dependants. In this day and age I want to think that that is discriminatory. It goes against all modern ways of thinking and this has remained in our law books for way too long. I am very sorry that the Minister of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development—who is always quick to respond to these old colonial habits that we continue to keep after 50 years of independence—is not here. So, that at the appropriate time an amendment may be brought to remove that anachronism of colonialism from our law books.

You see, Mr. Speaker, while it is that I wanted to start my contribution on the issue of the retiring judges' allowances, that particular provision in the law, as remains, applies equally to the surviving spouse of a retired judge. So, while it is that one of my colleagues feels that it is relevant, I will abide by your ruling and I will not go further in that direction.

Now, Mr. Speaker, in my respectful view, it is nothing short of parliamentary effrontery for the Member for Diego Martin North/East to claim that our esteemed Minister of Finance and the Economy has not explained to the country and to this honourable House the variables behind these measures. I ask the question, where has the Member been since budget day? Has he not been Member in this House? Perhaps he does like his colleague the hon. Member for Diego Martin West and, as soon as it becomes unbearable to continue to hear constructive parliamentary debate, he leaves his seat and disappears, other than when he is being asked to vacate the House. [*Laughter*] Has he been asleep, like Rip Van Winkle all this time?

Nothing could be further from the truth, as the new Minister of Finance and the Economy has consistently been straightforward with the nation on all financial matters ever since he has become the Minister of Finance and the Economy. Now, I would like also to credit the hon. Minister and his Government—the Government of which he is the Minister of Finance and the Economy—with the brilliant idea of the age credits and the introduction of compulsory joining of the National Insurance Scheme.

How would it be financed? This was the question of the Member for Diego Martin North/East. Quite clearly, this Government has shown that through prudent fiscal management it has been able to make the pie go much further in its reach to the poor, than those Governments of the recent past, including one of which the Member was part. This can be achieved and has been achieved by the

cutting out of the corruption of the past—from the purchase and refurbishment of the *MV Su*, the church project, the overruns at the diplomatic centre and the eTeCK park to mention a few.

Hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East, we all know that you are blessed with goodness and financial reward for a life where you have served yourself, do not begrudge the poor. Do not begrudge the poor! I repeat, do not begrudge the poor!

6.30 p.m.

Help to uplift them by taking seriously the saying that we as parliamentarians, in particular, must be our brothers' keepers. The elderly people in my constituency of St. Joseph will be very happy to see this sort of relief in this parliamentary measure—some sort of relief for the old and poor people in the areas of Bangladesh, Mount D'Or, Mytawa, Upper Mendez Drive, Agostini Road, Cotton Road, down in Bamboo No. 1, where the PNM dare not show its face, in Petit Bourg.

We on this side, that is the People's Partnership Government, are showing by these measures today that we are serious about helping the poor—I repeat, the poor—for we in this Government care about all the people who in earlier life made a sterling contribution—from selling doubles, from farming chive and tomatoes in Paramin and Aranguez, for their contribution to national development that we are all enjoying today.

These people, in their simplicity, did not think about providing for themselves in their old age and that is why this caring Government of the People's Partnership recognizes the need to bring long-needed help to the poor people who are getting old and for whom the People's National Movement Government never thought, or did not have the political wherewithal to bring a measure like this to help them in their retirement. What your former Government has not done, this Government has done today in this country.

Now, I would like to touch briefly on what the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West has said of the CEPEP and the URP, and about the conditions in the constituency of Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West. I know that the hon. Minister responsible for CEPEP can answer for himself, as indeed the Minister responsible for the Unemployment Relief Programme. Suffice it for me to say that the number of CEPEP contracts in the constituency of St. Joseph also has been reduced since May 24, 2010; but that is not to say, Mr. Speaker, that there has

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been a decline in the quality of cleanliness in my constituency. We in the constituency of St. Joseph have, over time, acquired certain lifestyles of helping ourselves with sanitation and the maintenance of our environment for ourselves.

CEPEP was never intended to do the work that households formerly, before CEPEP, did for themselves. CEPEP was intended to assist, Mr. Speaker, and if there are conditions that are intolerable in the constituency of Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, it is because of a lack of leadership in that constituency. If I should invite my hon. colleague, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, to take a little drive in St. Joseph constituency, she will see that, with the limited CEPEP contracts that we have, we have been able to keep the constituency clean. It is a matter of leadership. It is a matter of good governance. If it is that the Member wants to learn about good governance and leadership, I invite her to spend a day with me in the constituency of St. Joseph.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member would seem to suggest that, because there was a change of Government, the number of CEPEP contracts in her constituency has been cut. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is not a vindictive Government. This is a Government that seeks equity in the distribution of the national pie in all regards. Under the last administration, most, if not all of the CEPEP contracts, were distributed in the PNM-controlled constituencies along the East-West Corridor and there were very few, if any, in Opposition-held constituencies.

What this Government has sought to do was to share the national pie by more evenly distributing the CEPEP contracts across the national front. What that meant is that that heavy endowment of CEPEP contracts along the East-West Corridor was shifted, in an equitable way, throughout the country. So nothing could be farther from the truth than what the hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West has said.

As regards her little attack on our Government, as regards the mistrust of the Opposition, given what has happened with section 34, let me remind the hon. Member that, as far as I recall, she voted for section 34, as did all of her parliamentary colleagues. What has caused the change of heart was not section 34 per se, but its proclamation in doing exactly what the hon. Member said should be done, which is to implement the law as quickly as possible, so that we in this parliamentary Chamber do not have this as just "a talk shop", but that when we pass legislation, we implement it. It is in that process of implementation that, Mr. Speaker, the problems that followed arose.

So having said that, Mr. Speaker, I have had my say and I thank you for the opportunity for the moment.

Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon (*Point Fortin*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am sorry that I do not have much to respond to in terms of the last speaker's contribution, but he did make the point—it is not applicable to me because I certainly do not have young children—that if you are a legislator and your wife is young and so on and that she should remarry that person would not benefit from the pension.

I just want to say that I know this to be standard practice and the understanding behind that is if you do remarry, your new spouse would in fact take care of you. So I do not understand your argument. I believe a man with your exposure and experience should really be aware of this practice.

I go on to the other things. I want to, though, if you would allow me, Mr. speaker, to go on to some of the previous speakers and there were just one or two points I wanted to respond to. Out of the box, when the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre spoke, very surreptitiously as usual, we heard about the gas-to-liquids plant. He always seems to want to talk about this and to emphasize it and that this was one of the ills of the PNM and that we did so badly with that project. Of course, he hastens to add that this was part of an overall upgrade at Petrotrin. He avoids speaking to that. He talks about the gas-to-liquids plant going bad alone because we all know that it went into receivership.

He would not speak about the upgrade, which was undertaken by the PNM Government and which was highly successful and which is the gasoline optimization programme, the ultra-load sulphur diesel plant, the liquid fuels pipeline project and so on. All of these upgrades—and I am taking this, if you would allow me, from their document, which is the *State Enterprises Investment Programme, 2013*, and which lists the benefits of this upgrade programme done by the PNM administration, which they are only now completing. It goes on to say that this project—and they are making reference to the gasoline optimization programme—will impact positively on profitability and viability of the company's future operation and enable the company to meet international standards.

So we know what is behind the upgrade programme that we did. They have spoken to the benefits of it and, of course, that is the PNM way of doing things—planning, taking on huge but necessary projects. If we had not done that, there was no way—you see that 80 per cent that the Minister of Finance and the Economy spoke about, the petrochemical and energy sector's contribution to

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Trinidad's exports? That 80 per cent—there is no way we would have been able to uphold that and meet international standards and be competitive had we not undertaken these large-sized projects.

It was not very kind of him to speak of it, especially when, I believe, he might be aware that there is a company that is interested in buying the assets of the GTL project. I am sure that the Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs is aware; the Minister of Finance and the Economy is also aware that there are those who are willing to invest in this plant and that there is a strong possibility that it can be operationalized. So, again, it was very clever on the part of the Minister of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprises.

Then, the Minister of Finance and the Economy made another point about the ease of doing business and they were quite proud that Trinidad and Tobago is ranked now as 69 of 185 countries. He speaks about them probably getting to the rank of about third in the countries, saying that they will be able to achieve it; that Trinidad and Tobago will be a place where it will be easy to do business. But, Mr. Speaker, any person wanting to do business at this time in this country would probably Google other indices and perhaps they would look at the Global Competitiveness Index of 2012/2013. Easy, just Google and you will see that Trinidad and Tobago does not rank very high on it. This is 2012/2013. I do not have the exact ranking, but I do remember looking at it. The website gives you the information.

I remember looking at the three most problematic factors why we are not globally competitive—and this is a recent index that I looked at—and one of them was an inefficient government bureaucracy, so that under this Government, I want to say that the government bureaucracy remains very inefficient and that really the Government has not been able to modernize or revolutionize the public service. It certainly has not been able to be innovative. I still hear from energy companies here that it is not easy doing business in Trinidad and Tobago. They are attracted for a number of other reasons, but at the same time it is there for you to see—Google Global Competitiveness Index 2012/0213. One of the most problematic factors is the fact that we still have an inefficient government bureaucracy, which this Government has not been able to attend to.

6.45 p.m.

Another reason they gave is that the perception of corruption is high. You can see for yourself. I see the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara is looking on at me in amazement, but it is there, it is on the Internet. Perception of Corruption is high

and that is a very recent index that I am looking at—the Global Competitiveness Index 2012/2013. But am I surprised? I am not at all surprised that this is what is going to be said about this Government.

Just another minor point: the Minister of Finance and the Economy also spoke to the fact that he is looking forward to the involvement of the private sector in achieving economic growth in Trinidad and Tobago. Of course, it is the private sector who are the ones who are going to be, most likely, the ones that are going to push this economy forward, but they cannot do it unless, of course, you have a government that is able to encourage and to put the right policies in place so that you can do that. He talks about this but I really do not see that the private sector has bought in to this Government and their shenanigans as well, and I do not know where we are really going with that one.

Mr. Speaker, to go to the Bill, the Finance Bill 2013, an Act to provide for the variation of certain duties and taxes, and to introduce provisions of a fiscal nature and for related purposes. I think, Mr. Speaker, I have to agree that I would have no problem with this Bill at all, from the point of view that the objectives of this Finance Bill are good, which is to ensure that the fiscal measures employed by the Ministry of Finance and the Economy have a judicious mix of incentives to foster greater economic activity while, at the same time, safeguarding our revenue base to maintain a level of tax collection.

This is healthy, this is progressive, because the long and short of it is that it is to provide for the general welfare of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So the general import of the Bill I would say is good, and, therefore, we would want to support it. And, of course, I am very happy to benefit from the particular clause which deals with the pension for Members of the Legislature, those who perhaps would not have reached the earlier requirement of eight years. Let me say that I am pleased about that as well.

So I am saying the general import of this Bill is good. I am happy about that. It is admirable, but I am really concerned as well, though, because you know that this Government has a very woeful track record of execution, so that you can have all these lofty measures that the Minister of Finance and the Economy speaks of, but if you have a terrible track record of execution then, you know, you are not going to be able to achieve a lot of things: you are not going to be able to put in place, you are not going to put in all the other supporting features that need to be put in place as well.

At the end of the day I am not sure that you would really—progressive, yes, but I am not sure that you would actually achieve this greater economic activity

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which is what this Bill, really, is intended to do in the long run. I mean, it is the alteration of duties and taxes, but at the end of the day that is the purpose of it.

Mr. Speaker, my colleagues spoke to many areas of this Bill and, of course, the Member for Diego Martin North/East actually did expound very well on the national insurance matters and, therefore, I would confine myself to just two or three clauses of the Bill and avoid repetition, and so on. So I am saying well intentioned, but I am not sure that this will have the desired effect of ensuring that Trinidad and Tobago has a revenue base that can satisfy the objectives, which were so well articulated by the hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy.

The problem I have with this Bill—and I am so sorry for the Minister of Finance and the Economy—is that many of the things he is trying to do there, I believe they are contrary to policies being articulated by this very same administration. So I am saying, he may be well intended; I know his background; I know where he has come from; he is a serious man, but I am saying that I believe that many of these policies are contrary to policies articulated by the very administration in which he sits and, therefore, this can only serve to undermine the goals that he and his Ministry have set out.

I go to clause 11, which speaks to the Petroleum Taxes Act in the Third Schedule, which is to provide incentives in the form of capital allowances for deep water drilling and, I know, of course, that is meant to encourage deeper exploration and production. Of course, we are aware that our reserves of oil and gas are dwindling and that the Government has embarked—in fact, we had embarked and the Government is continuing that drive to shore up our dwindling reserves, because we are so very reliant on it.

As I said, it amounts—and we said it earlier—40 per cent of this country's GDP comes from energy revenues, and also the contribution to our exports and to our foreign exchange earnings amounts to about 80 per cent, the Minister of Finance and the Economy said. All of these things are very, very, serious pieces of legislation, and, of course, even though we speak to diversification, it recognizes the importance—the still great importance and major role that is played by the energy sector in oil and gas in terms of revenue generation in Trinidad and Tobago.

So, the Minister came and he spoke a lot about diversification because we do have concerns about the dwindling reserves, and even if we were to have increased exploration and so on, I think it was spoken to earlier about the seven years in terms of when you really are able to benefit from this great exploration

drive. So he has spoken about diversification but the fact is we still have not gone there yet, and there are still other sectors, for instance—and he did not talk about it at all—there are other sectors that we should be developing and placing more emphasis on, and this is tourism, for instance.

Mr. Speaker, my concern then is the contradiction about wanting to diversify, wanting to, I assume, develop, and they had spoken about this in past discussions—developing the tourism sector as well. I honestly do believe we are talking revenue generation, we are talking diversification, but I honestly do believe, on the other hand, this Government, this administration, is really undermining tourism, and I am concerned about that.

Mr. Speaker, you cannot come here and talk about revenue generation and diversification and so on, and you are undermining tourism. Mr. Speaker, and you may not be aware of it. I want to explain. You may not be aware of it and I suspect that you too will be shocked. You too will be shocked, Mr. Speaker, because this UNC administration—and I am going to tie it to the Bill—has begun a campaign calling on citizens to boycott Tobago.

Mr. Robert: What!

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Yes. I cannot believe it, Mr. Speaker, and I know you will be shocked as well, but we cannot—[*Interruption*—please allow me to bring this into the Bill.

Mr. Sharma: Nonsense! Where is the evidence?

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Mr. Speaker, this is what we are hearing of, this is what we are reading, and I am going to speak to the evidence because once we are talking about the economy, the Minister of Finance and the Economy has spoken to that in the Bill, we have to be concerned about developing those areas. But I am saying how is that possible when members of the administration are also calling on the citizens of Trinidad to boycott Tobago?

Clause 11 speaks to providing incentives under the Petroleum Taxes Act to further our dependence on oil and gas—it is there—but at the same time there is that encouragement, a primary encouragement to boycott a source of revenue for Trinidad and Tobago, and I am concerned about that. Everyone, I suppose, uses the social media quite a bit in Trinidad and Tobago. If you ask me, it has become one of the most efficient and most used means of communication in Trinidad and Tobago. There is a particular blog; it is called the Team UNC-COP blog.

Mr. Roberts: Mr. Speaker, 36(5). I was allowing you to go on, but I was waiting to hear the evidence about this Government boycotting Tobago, and if her evidence is some blog or some unknown thing, please can I put a stop to this now?

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, the Member is saying that what you are saying is totally unfounded and we have to take the word of the Member on behalf of the Government on this matter, and I would ask you to refrain from that. You are implying and imputing improper motives to every Member on the Government Bench, as it relates to where you are heading. So, I would ask you to refrain from doing so, and if you so desire to pursue that you can bring a substantive Motion and submit it to the Speaker, please.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Of course I abide by your instructions, Mr. Speaker, but it is just that I am appalled that this is coming from senior Members of this Government.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member, could you take your seat? You are accusing senior Members of the administration of embarking on a programme to boycott. The Minister of Sport, who is acting as Leader of Government Business, has vehemently denied what you are saying. You continued even though I intervened, so I am asking you to desist once more from that line you are pursuing. If you wish to submit a substantive Motion you can do so, please.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Okay, Mr. Speaker, let me go to the very humiliating—and I am on the point of the revenues which was very insulting to the people of Trinidad and Tobago which came from a senior Member of the party—a statement that was very, very, insulting and that statement was by the Member for Chaguanas West, and I am sure he cannot deny it. The effect of statements like that is that our revenues—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Roberts: 36(5), Mr. Speaker, 36(1), relevance; 36(5), continuing to impute improper motive without connecting whatsoever.

Mr. Speaker: Member, I know where you are heading myself and the Members are objecting to where you are going. I would ask you to, again, refrain from that. I do not think we should get into that business where you are heading, and just make your contribution but do not get into that area that can impute improper motives to Members, and if you are deciding, as I said, to go that route, please submit a substantive Motion because you are dealing with the conduct of a Member and 36(10) speaks, very clearly. If you are querying the conduct of a Member please submit a substantive Motion.

7.00 p.m.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Mr. Speaker, again, I go with your ruling, but let me come back to the point that my concern is for the revenues coming out of tourism. That is my concern: the fact that our tourism revenues in Tobago and the Tobago economy have been affected. I am sure you would agree with me, that ties in to the general purport and intent of this Bill, which is revenue generation and ensuring that we achieve economic growth. I am concerned, because silence says volumes. I am not sure that Members of the Government have, in fact, responded in a way that we would have expected.

The other concern is when statements are made. This Government has to be careful about the public statements that are made and the impact that they have on our revenue. When we speak to confidence, this is at the very heart of it: things said, things done, and that affects our economy. [*Desk thumping*] Things said and things done.

Clause 11 speaks to exploration, the encouragement of further exploration activity, but we have—and I agree with it—there is one little point that I did not agree with too much, which is when the Minister said that the benefit, the break will only be for those companies who in fact find oil and gas. I believe it is oil if you are talking deep water. However, if you should not be successful, the benefit does not apply. I have some concerns there. I have not had much time to think about it and discuss it with persons connected with it, but I think you would want to widen the net if you want to encourage people to get into the business of exploration and coming into Trinidad and Tobago. I want the Minister to address his reasoning behind that.

I am saying that there are those persons who are in fact in the waters of Tobago at this time. There are those companies that are in those waters exploring the potential for energy, and of course hoping to take advantage of clause 11, which is to provide capital allowances to be used when they calculate their supplemental petroleum tax. This is why I am saying you have to be careful.

These are companies that have to report to their head offices. It impacts their further willingness to continue to do business under this Government. Again, I wonder what they must be reporting. They certainly would have concerns. Therefore, on the one hand, I want to commend the Minister of Finance and the Economy for this benefit under the Petroleum Taxes Act in clause 11 of the Bill, but of course my concern remains. Things said, things done and the effect it has on it.

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This is doing business. When it comes to the nitty-gritty and the nuts and bolts, it has to do with relations. It has to do with trust, confidence, integrity and so on. These signals that are being sent have not been entirely that of I would say, a worthy government that one would want to do business with. I am concerned.

Mr. Speaker, you have stopped me, and there are other things that I would have wanted to raise. I therefore will in fact be doing a Motion on this, because I am really concerned about the very contradictory nature of this Government: saying one thing when you come to the Parliament, doing other things otherwise. [*Desk thumping*] That is my concern.

I can tell you, I can quote from a particular source, you know, Mr. Speaker. I want to make reference and I can quote. I hope I am allowed.

Mr. Speaker: Do not quote and use people's quotations to impute any improper motives or to raise the conduct of any Member. You cannot use quotations for that purpose. So, I would give you advanced notice.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Well, Mr. Speaker, it seems that I am going to be very limited in terms of my speech.

Mr. Speaker: You will be very limited once you are raising the conduct of a Member.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Ah, Mr. Speaker, but I think you are anticipating.

Mr. Speaker: Yes, I am. I have the power to anticipate.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: But I am really concerned about this question of free speech in the Parliament, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Member, take your seat. Do not query or question me, otherwise you would not speak for the rest of the evening. Do not query me as Speaker. If you have a problem, file a Motion of no confidence in the Speaker, but do not query what I am ruling. When I rule, you follow, and desist. Just continue, but desist from the path you are treading. Continue.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will in fact comply, but of course the point was made.

I was speaking to the fact that I find the Bill contradictory. Let us go to clauses 14 and 15. What is addressed? The incentives are outlined in terms of exemptions from customs duty for your car and household effects; that is clauses 14 and 15. This is to encourage nationals to return home, come back home and invest money in this country. Well, again, Mr. Speaker, I cannot imagine that

anyone would want to do that under this current Government where confidence is in question, where you may choose, let us say, to buy a piece of land in Tobago. That might be one of your options. Open a bed and breakfast or a small hotel, and you would find that they are not going to be successful in the business of their choice. We could well understand why that is so, because we are not sure how the hospitality business is going to be doing in Tobago.

I am speaking to the contradictions that I am getting, clauses 14 and 15. That is something the Government has been doing for a long time; putting measures in place to ensure that people are encouraged to return home. We want people to come back and bring their talents back to Trinidad and Tobago, to invest in Trinidad and Tobago. At the same time you cannot mouth these things and not back them up with genuine interest and concern. That is what precisely I am talking about.

I am going to cut short this contribution, and say that yes we speak to all these oil and gas revenues that we are expecting from this country. I am not sure that this Government is distributing its resources equitably. I am not sure that Point Fortin is receiving its fair share under this Government. I can understand what the Minister of Finance and the Economy is doing, but I still believe his colleagues continue to bypass the people of Point Fortin. They continue to bypass the people of La Brea. It is only when they boycott and picket that they get some response. They even boycott the people of Fyzabad, because Fyzabad people are calling and saying that nothing is being done for that constituency as well.

In many of these areas, the constituents remain in absolute abject poverty, in many of my neighbouring constituencies. So the question of the generation of revenue, I am saying yes to, but the uses to which these revenues are being put, that is what I have a concern for.

Mr. Sharma: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: I am asking what—[*Interruption*] Member for Fyzabad, you have nothing to say. I am sure you are not going to respond to me.

Mr. Sharma: There is nothing to respond to.

Mrs. P. Gopee-Scoon: What is in it for the people of Point Fortin? When we approve this—and I do support this—but I want to know what is in it for my constituents. How will they benefit from these tax revenues which are supposed to be shared equitably with constituencies, to satisfy all the people of Trinidad and Tobago? I have a concern because when you look at the figures and you look at

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the objectives, you would find that there is particular effort, particular effort, to shore up particular constituencies. For instance, I can say that the Siparia constituency seems to benefit quite a bit. Even the Member for St. Joseph was just speaking and suggesting that there was a disproportionate distribution of resources. I want to say that I totally agree.

If you would allow me, I would want to read into the record a story which was only recently in the *Sunday Guardian*, January 13, 2013, under the headline:

“\$2 million in Nedco loans for Penal”

And I quote:

“The National Entrepreneurship Development Company Ltd (Nedco) plans to lend \$2 million to more than 100 small businessmen in Penal over the next six months. CEO Ramlochan Ragoonanan said the southern town has shown potential for growth and the agency is eager to make entrepreneurs out of as many young people as possible.”

He went on to say that:

“...Nedco loans will be available to vendors, food caterers and small manufacturers.”

He said that:

“We want to encourage people to start their own business. Loans would be from \$1,000 to \$500,000. We are also granting loans to taxi and maxi taxi owners”—et cetera, et cetera—“people in the Carnival industry and Cepep contractors.”

Of course, Nedco just opened its tenth branch in Penal. I am very, very happy for Penal that they do now have a Nedco branch there.

I do not know that I have read recently any similar commitment. That is the point I am making. Yes there is a branch in Point Fortin, but I do not know that I have read about any other similar commitment given to any part of the country by Nedco as a state enterprise. As I said, I am happy for them, but I do not know for a fact that—let us say La Brea—that Nedco has put aside any funds for the young business persons in that area. I do not know that the people of La Brea—Member for Caroni Central, I am not sure that your people do, in fact, have a Nedco branch there or that there has been any commitment by Nedco to provide vendors, caterers and small manufacturers with a \$2 million facility as well. You would very well understand, Member for Caroni Central, that people cannot live on hampers alone.

Again, I am sure that my colleagues, even from Laventille East and Laventille West, I do not know that your people have had commitments from Nedco in terms of developing their small businesses and so on, and Port of Spain South. No such commitment. Revenue generation is good, and that is the general purpose of this Bill, but again it must be expended proportionately, not haphazardly. There must be considerations for equity.

I listened only last week, and I am sure it is recorded in *Hansard*, to the Member for Oropouche East when he outlined his grand vision for the country. He spoke about driving from north to south along the highways, with the COSTAATT campus in Chaguanas, the children's hospital in Couva, then the UWI campus in Debe, and of course just for good measure he threw in the Point Fortin hospital, which I do not think we will ever see. But what you would realize is that every project he mentioned in his dream was in a UNC constituency. I do not know it was in any COP constituency or so; every project was in a UNC constituency.

Mr. Speaker, I am highlighting this because that is just not the way in which we operated. The very highway that is spoken to so much, the Point Fortin Highway, we are the ones who developed it, the PNM. It was very unselfish of us, but what did we do? Did we plan a highway from Point Fortin to San Fernando, and that is it? No, we also included the Mondesir to Debe route to ensure that there was development in Penal and Debe. That was our thinking.

7.15 p.m.

It is the very, very thing which happened when we were developing Point Lisas. Did we take Point Lisas and put it in Point Fortin? Did we take Point Lisas and put it in La Brea or any of those constituencies? No. We took Point Lisas and we put it—because we were dealing with a Trinidad and Tobago project—in a traditional Opposition area and it is because it is our belief that this is how it should be done and that is the kind of practice that we have always shown, that the resources of this country must be equitably shared and this is why Point Lisas is where it is today, in traditional Opposition territory.

So as I said I am pleased about the general intent of the Bill, but I am not satisfied that Point Fortin is benefiting. There are a number of things that are still outstanding and I want to hear from Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs for instance about when we are going to get the 400 houses at La Fortune, a project that we left on table in 2010, in fact, it was perhaps 75 per cent

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completed. All that was needed to be done was a sewerage system and also the actual 25 per cent construction and this, Mr. Speaker, to date, two and a half years later we do not have it. I am very, very concerned about that.

I said I am concerned about the development of Point Fortin as well. I have raised it so many times with the Minister of Tertiary Education and Skills Training—UTT campus for Point Fortin; no word on that. So we are hearing campuses opening all over the place, even in Tobago. Tobago was so lucky on account of that election to have that campus opened just for the occasion.

Well then I am still waiting to hear about the UTT campus in Point Fortin. All the other opportunities that I have asked him about—the ttconnect Express, mobile computer library training, ACTT students caravan, all kinds of short courses and so on, YTEPP programmes and re-training programmes as well, welding courses, air conditioning and refrigeration. I gave him a list of more than 50 courses that I have asked for, and of course, the MuST and MIC merger further into Point Fortin as well. I have asked for all of those things, and of course, it has fallen on deaf ears. So I am not sure that Point Fortin is getting its fair share of the pie.

I am really not going to say too much about the Point Fortin Hospital because the Member for Barataria/San Juan and Minister of Health has in fact given his commitment that the sod would be turned in the first quarter. Well we are half-way in the first quarter and nothing has happened yet, but I am trusting that it will.

Mr. Speaker I know that they are going to point fingers at us and say well that should have been done by the PNM. But, that cry has been on for the last 25 years and it has been the governments of the other side, non-PNM governments that have been in office for more than half the period and they have not done anything about it; this UNC Government, the NAR government and also the UNC government, as well. So they too have done nothing at all. The point is that you have given the commitment and I am seeing other hospitals being built, I am concerned, but if you say that we have a gentleman's agreement, you say first quarter, first quarter is almost done and I want to hear about that.

The other main concern that I have, again, you are talking increased revenues which this Bill intends. I want to know that the basics at least the people of Point Fortin would get. When are we going to have the commissioning of the La Fortune water treatment plant? Everything was in place before we left office. Everything was bought. All of the preliminary works were done. In fact, in terms of the water pipes, water mains and so on, all that had to be done was done. The

Point Fortin Desalination Plant, purchased, paid for, everything before. Two and a half years later no desalination plant, no commissioning of the La Fortune Water Treatment Plant as well. I have written about these things; absolutely no responses.

I have written about the aged sewerage plant in Techier Village; no response to that as well. The desilting of the Guapo river I have asked for; nothing as well. So, I am really concerned that Point Fortin is not getting its fair share of the pie. I spoke at length about the expectations with regard to the Point Fortin highway in terms of jobs, and I am waiting to see the process that is going to be laid out to ensure that our people who get the jobs are in Point Fortin and also our small and medium-sized contractors do in fact benefit.

So I want to say I have—yes, I would say any Bill with objectives to ensure that we have incentives that would foster greater economic activity, I would support, I would want to support, but it is one thing on the other hand to mouth these things and to advance these goals when in fact you have a Government that is incapable and lacks the capacity and capability to ensure that these things are in fact materialized, that they do materialize, and that the people of Trinidad and Tobago do benefit.

As I have said, there is contradiction coming—there is the Minister of Finance and the Economy saying one thing, and there are other people, other Ministers, saying other things, I am going to be raising a Motion to get into the meat of this as to why, to explain further about these contradictions. So, Mr. Speaker, thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of State in the Ministry of Finance and the Economy (Hon. Rudranath Indarsingh): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I rise to join this debate to provide for the variation of certain duties and taxes and to introduce provisions of a fiscal nature and for related matters.

I am deeply saddened at the response or the contribution of the previous speaker, the Member for Point Fortin, and immediately I want to take the opportunity to set the record straight on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago that is led by our Prime Minister and the Member for Siparia. Those on the other side, and I find that the Member for Point Fortin overdid it here this evening—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: Oh really?

Hon. R. Indarsingh:—in terms of attempting to promote this sense of divisiveness—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: What?

Hon. R. Indarsingh:—and so on as she continued to—[*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: Nonsense!

Hon. R. Indarsingh:—focus on the issue of Tobago, and I want to set the record straight in saying that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is fully committed towards the union of Trinidad and Tobago and will continue to ensure that there is a sense of unity in the way that we operate as a Government in fulfilling our discharge—[*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. R. Indarsingh:—and responsibility to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and more so the 41 constituencies of this twin-island republic because the very provisions of this particular Bill are really designed to raise revenue that would see a sense of focus from this particular administration as it relates to prosperity for all across the 41 constituencies.

Mr. Speaker, the previous speaker seems to be falling in a consistent policy in terms of utterances emanating from the other side as it relates to being disingenuous, misleading and engaging in a sustained [*Crosstalk*]—I will speak until the Speaker—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Browne: Mr. Speaker, 36(5), the same one that they moved a short while ago; imputing improper motives Standing Order 36(5).

Mr. Speaker: Members, I have allowed a certain flexibility and elasticity, but I would like us to focus on the Bill. I have ruled on the matter involving the Member for Point Fortin and I do not think that we should reopen an issue that I have already ruled on. So, I would ask the Member for Couva South, in making a contribution, do not make reference to some of those statements that I have already ruled on. Just make your contribution in a broader context and in light of the specific clauses before us. Thank you.

Hon. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I would so be guided as it relates to your ruling, but more importantly the Member for Point Fortin attempted to—[*Interruption*]

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: You gone again?

Hon. Member: You gone back there?

Mrs. Gopee-Scoon: “Yuh gone back again?”

Hon. R. Indarsingh:—point in a sense of direction that this administration was being discriminatory in its approach to how it was allocating resources to the constituency of Point Fortin and the Opposition constituencies and so on. [*Crosstalk*] When we continue to raise and realize our revenues, as I said, we have focused and will continue to focus in relation to ensuring that there is growth and there is a sense of input into all the constituencies. This is a new type of governance in terms of what is being pursued by the People’s Partnership administration and something that is new to you all in terms of the way that you conducted yourselves when you all were the Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

Dr. Browne: Well said.

Hon. R. Indarsingh: But more importantly, Mr. Speaker, as the Member spoke she attempted to indicate that there was sense of or a lack of confidence forthcoming from the private sector as it relates to the economic and fiscal policies of the Government, and also the Member attempted to go in the direction of indicating that there was a sense of the Minister of Finance and the Economy saying one thing and Government Ministers pursuing policies that were different in relation to what has been enunciated in the budget presentation.

I want to assure the Member for Point Fortin that Minister of Finance and the Economy fully understands his role and responsibility in leading the Ministry of Finance and the Economy, and by extension pursuing visionary and progressive policies in his first budget presentation which has provided a platform for growth and development.

In fact, just to underscore and reiterate what I have just said as it relates to what has been indicated, I merely want to quote, for example, from the *Guardian* when it commented on the financial work that this Government has been doing in an article written by Aleem Khan published on January 17, 2013. I want to quote from the now chairman of Republic Bank Limited, Mr. Ronald Harford, who indicated or who commented that:

“Giving his outlook for 2013 RBL’s Harford said: ‘I am encouraged by some signs I’m seeing. There are endless requests for proposals or contracts, in the newspapers. These have a gestation period’”—and, of course—“‘which can take six months to a year to get done but at least things are moving, right? So I think we’re going to see some activity while people marshall themselves to take themselves to take advantage of the opportunities that the requests for proposals offer.’”

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Additionally, Mr. Speaker—also as we look towards what is being pronounced in relation to what is being done, the Trinidad and Tobago *Express* newspaper also had an article written on January 16, 2013 by Carla Bridglal under the headline “McAl Group optimistic for 2013”. And I quote:

“The ANSA McAl group, one of the largest conglomerates in the region, is optimistic about Trinidad and Tobago’s business prospects in 2013, the group’s financial sector head, Nigel Romano, said...”

He went on as he was:

“Speaking to reporters at the opening of ANSA Merchant Bank’s newest branch at...Grand Bazaar...in Valsayn. Romano said: ‘The group is expanding, especially Carib (Brewery) and Abel Building Solutions. The group is very optimistic about the (economic) prospects for the country and for the region...’”

7.30 p.m.

So this in itself will tell you, Mr. Speaker, that there are those within the business community of Trinidad and Tobago and the private sector who are displaying a sense of confidence in what has been pronounced upon in relation to the fiscal measures in the 2012/2013 budget presentation, and in relation to having a sense of confidence as it relates to the economic policies of this Government. So, the prophets of doom and gloom who are hell-bent on attempting to mislead the population of Trinidad and Tobago, and are being very disingenuous as they go about their role as the Opposition in this country will be forced to take a second look at what they are pronouncing as it relates to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

In fact, too, there is a recent headline in the newspapers where it has indicated under the headline, again, “Inflation down to 7.2 per cent”. I want to reiterate, “Inflation down to 7.2 per cent”, Saturday, January 26, 2013.

“Final inflation figures released by the Central Statistical Office (CSO) for 2012 show that headline inflation, which is driven by food prices, fell to 7.2 percent in December from 8.1 percent in November and a high of 12.6 percent in May.”—of 2012.

So, Mr. Speaker, this again shows that the pronouncements of the previous speaker, the Member for Point Fortin, and those who would have “spoken” previously on the other side—

Mrs. Mc Intosh: Spoken. Spoken.

Hon. R. Indarsingh:—spoken previously, they are attempting again to mislead the population and there is no basis—[*Interruption*]—they have no basis in terms of making their pronouncements. In fact, the previous speaker, indicated too that in Point Fortin—she spoke, the Member spoke very broadly about the lack of resources, but was not specific in terms of what was being denied as it relates to the people of Point Fortin and the Opposition territories.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to note that this particular piece of legislation would be beneficial to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and, by extension, to ensure comfort and stability for the future generations of this country. Mr. Speaker, as I said, the primary focus and commitment of this Government remains to be the improvement in the quality of life and standard of living of all our citizens which is built around our pillars of sustainable development, focusing on people-centred development, poverty eradication and social justice, national security and personal security, the development of the information and communication technologies, a more diversified, knowledge-intensive economy, good governance and a sound foreign policy.

These pillars will allow us to achieve our overall mission of prosperity for all which is now Government policy in terms of the manifesto of the People's Partnership Government.

Mr. Sharma: Well said. Well said. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. R. Indarsingh: Mr. Speaker, in our efforts to improve growth and wealth for all, we propose to continuously examine and monitor all the programmes that we have rolled out in the fiscal presentation, the last budget presentation, and we are following through. We are following through in ensuring what was pronounced in the budget presentation actually becomes a reality, and it is laid out and it is clearly spelt out in these provisions of this Finance Bill.

Mr. Speaker, as I continue to develop my contribution here this evening which focuses on the issue of stimulating growth and generating prosperity, the overall policy position continues to be one of ensuring that we continue to build on the official reserves of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund since it has been established in 2007. In fact, there are those on the other side who attempted to pay glowing tribute and accolades as it relates to the responsible governance of the PNM in terms of establishing this particular fund and ensuring that it was built and built up.

But what they have failed to say, and I think the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West failed to say, was that this administration continued to

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ensure that it displayed a sense of fiscal prudence and responsibility which was further substantiated by the Member for St. Joseph, in ensuring that the reserves of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund continue to be built to the point that at the end of September 2012, it stood in the vicinity of \$9.823 billion and closed at approximately US \$10.28 billion by the end of 2012.

Mr. Speaker, from what I have seen that has been spelt out in the Finance Bill, we are building on the people's budget which has, as I said, a focus on human development and poverty eradication, and the development of the health system, the education and training, and the infrastructural development of our country. Over the last two and a half years, this administration has been able to reduce the percentage of persons living below the poverty line from 18.7 per cent to 14.7 per cent. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, over 80,000 senior citizens have had their pensions improved and improved to where, now, it is the minimum pension that is being enjoyed by the senior citizens of this country, \$3,000 per month, and we must remember that it is those on that side that attempted to take away this particular benefit when they termed and coined it the Senior Citizens' Grant.

Mr. Imbert: What! [*Crosstalk*] [*Desk thumping*]

Miss Mc Donald: Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, 36(5), that is not a true statement. That is not so. Standing Order 36(5), that is not true! [*Crosstalk*] That is not true!

Mr. Speaker: The Member has objected to what you have said. If you know that statement to be inaccurate, I would advise you to desist from that course.

Hon. R. Indarsingh: Mr. Speaker, I will be guided, but I could recollect that it is this—

Hon. Members: Oh, no, no, no! [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. R. Indarsingh: Mr. Speaker, if my memory serves me right, [*Interruption*] during their tenure of office, it was a Senior Citizens' Grant, and it was this administration that had it officially restored [*Desk thumping*] as a senior citizens' pension.

Mr. Samuel: That is true, it was a grant.

Miss Mc Donald: Not true!

Hon. R. Indarsingh: So, in that regard, I am making my pronouncement as it relates to this particular issue. [*Interruption*] And, in addition to that, we have

ensured that over 25,000 persons have been the beneficiaries of public assistance grant and over 24,000 persons have been the beneficiary of 24,000 disability grants over the last two and a half years. *[Interruption]* *[Desk thumping]*

In addition, Mr. Speaker, there has been a strong sense of focus as it relates to the future of the children of Trinidad and Tobago as it relates to life-saving surgeries for children who are not in a financial position to access proper health care, through the establishment of the Children's Life Fund, the construction of early childhood education centres—*[Interruption]* Mr. Speaker, the Member for Diego Martin North/East is constantly murmuring.

Mr. Speaker: All right.

Mr. Imbert: I do apologize.

Mr. Speaker: Yes, Member for Diego Martin North/East, you seem to be disturbing the proceedings. Continue, hon. Member.

Hon. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I said, this administration is building upon that sense of focus and commitment to the future of Trinidad and Tobago in terms of its children, and we are seeing this in the development of early childhood education centres, in terms of 29 which are being built and 24 are currently in progress, and also we saw the construction and opening of the St. Barbara's Spiritual Shouter Baptist Primary School, *[Desk thumping]* and repairs to over 520 early childhood education centres, taking into consideration primary and secondary schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago and in excess of 55,000 laptops being distributed to school children *[Desk thumping]* who were successful at the Secondary Entrance Assessment examination, and, from where I sit, this particular Bill—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Imbert: Stand!

Hon. R. Indarsingh:—has tremendous benefits for the workers of Trinidad and Tobago, and whether you are a legislator, whether you are employed or in active service at the moment, you have retired and now a recipient of the National Insurance System of Trinidad and Tobago, whether you are a special reserve policeman, the measures which are outlined in this particular Bill stands to be of tremendous benefit.

Miss Cox: Stand. Stand.

Hon. R. Indarsingh:—stand to be of tremendous benefit to all and sundry. And again, Mr. Speaker, this is indeed in keeping with our commitment as we continue to place—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Please Members, allow the Member to speak.

Hon. R. Indarsingh:—workers at the centre of our programmes and policies, in terms of working to build a productive nation.

7.45p.m.

We as a Government recognized that labour within Trinidad and Tobago should be organized as a positive force for economic development and we made that sense of commitment that we would partner with the labour unions to work beyond the frontiers of traditional collective bargaining of higher wages and better working conditions.

In addition to this, Mr. Speaker, we gave a commitment that the Maternity Protection Act 2000 will be amended to provide for 14 weeks of maternity leave in keeping with the standards that exist, at the International Labour Organization and—in addition to that—that now is being reflected in the amendments in relation to the national insurance benefits which are in this particular piece of legislation and it is clearly seen in relation to the changes within the national insurance system.

The Minister of Finance and the Economy has made it clear that there would be an increase in benefits as it relates to the maternity grant, the special maternity grant, funeral grant and the minimum retirement grant which would all increase by 50 per cent in 2013. [*Desk thumping*] In addition to this, sickness, the maternity allowance, the invalidity, survivors and employment injury benefits will be increased by 25 per cent in 2013 and 20 per cent in 2014.

There is a further commitment, Mr. Speaker, that the minimum survivors benefit in respect of spouses, children, dependent parents and orphans would also be increased. So, that in itself will tell you that as a Government we are mindful of the measures that must be put in place to ensure that insured persons and their dependents continue to receive the level of income protection afforded to them.

A strong financial base must be maintained to support long-term increases in benefits under the national insurance programme. As a result there will be a marginal increase in the present contribution rate by 0.1 per cent for employees and 0.2 per cent for employers in both 2013 and 2014. In addition, the maximum insurable earnings covered under this particular national insurance shall increase from \$8,300 in 2012 to \$10,000 in 2013 and \$12,000 in 2014.

Mr. Speaker, it is also important to note that during this said financial year, national insurance coverage will be extended to self-employed persons. We

recognized that there has been a steady increase in the number of self-employed persons in the labour market who are concerned about securing long-term financial security for themselves and their dependents and hence, the reason that the Government is moving in this particular direction—to ensure that the self-employed fall into the wide ambit of our social safety net and to ensure that there is a sense of coverage and benefit existing.

Additionally, the People's Partnership administration remains committed towards achieving excellence in the delivery of meaningful social security products and services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Interruption*]

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs (Hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal): Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 10(11), I beg to move that this House continue to sit until the completion of the Bill before us. I beg to move.

Question put and agreed to.

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Hon. R. Indarsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying, when the pronouncement, as it relates to the special duty allowance was made for officers of the Defence Force of Trinidad and Tobago, who continue to serve this country with a sense of loyalty and commitment, there were concerns from stakeholders and so on about whether special reserve officers will benefit from this allowance that was enunciated by the Government. Again we listened in keeping with our commitment to dialogue and listening to the pronouncements and concerns of stakeholders, and this is why this is being dealt with in clause 3 as it relates to ensuring that the Special Reserve Police Act is amended to take care of this benefit for the special reserve police officers of Trinidad and Tobago.

In addition to that, from an industrial relations point of view and the industrial relations front, we remain committed as a Government to ensuring that there is settlement of all outstanding negotiations that we inherited from the last administration as it relates to their failure to have a sense of empathy and a sense of understanding of where workers' concerns needed to be addressed through their commitment to the collective bargaining process.

We continued to settle—and I do not want to read; I could read into the record the outstanding track record of achievement in terms of the negotiations that we have settled within recent times, but I merely want to say that this sense of

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commitment and follow-through were seen recently about a week ago where the Estate Police Association signed on behalf of the officers attached to Petrotrin, a new collective agreement for the outstanding period, again, showing the commitment of the Government to follow through on the collective bargaining process.

And as we go forward, and as we raise the revenues that have been projected as a result of the fiscal presentation, we will ensure as a Government that the collective bargaining—we will ensure free and fair collective bargaining is pursued by all, to ensure that, as we empower workers from a purchasing point of view, it would further contribute to economic growth and development and we would ensure that the current period of negotiation is addressed and addressed in a timely fashion to bring about a sense of stability to all concerned who continue to work beyond the call of duty in building Trinidad and Tobago from a public sector point of view and a private sector point of view.

Mr. Speaker, there is no sense of contradiction from where this Government intends to go, through the Minister of Finance and the Economy. We understand that there is the need for fiscal prudence and for proper management of the revenues of this country. We will ensure that we do it in a responsible way. We will ensure that there is a sense of focus as it relates to reducing the inefficiencies and the wastage and certainly we will focus on projects that will continue to be of benefit to all and sundry in the 41 constituencies of Trinidad and Tobago, but we will ensure that the accumulation of revenue and wealth will trickle down to the benefit of the ordinary citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: Before you speak, Member for La Brea, may I take this opportunity to remind all Members of this honourable House—and I want to quote Section 55(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago—those especially who feel that freedom of speech is absolute. Section 55(1) of our Constitution says, and I quote:

“Subject to the provisions of this Constitution and to the rules and standing orders regulating the procedure of the Senate and House of Representatives, there shall be freedom of speech in the Senate and House of Representatives.”

Members, may I remind you, sometimes we get a bit overly emotional about matters. But in this House I want to appeal to all Members on both sides, please when you are making your contributions do it in a dignified manner that would lift the standard in this House, and that we conduct our affairs with a certain

degree of decorum. Remember we are leaders in this country and the nation looks towards us, and I deprecate, very seriously, any attempt by any Member in this House to lower its standards. I will not preside over such a House. I will uphold the dignity of this Chamber, and I appeal to all Members, please, conduct yourselves and ourselves generally in a dignified manner.

Do not use here as a platform that you probably would rather use outside. This is not a platform for any kind of politics that is going to create what I call any kind of impression that we are lowering our standards in the House. So, I just wanted to indicate that, so that Members when they are making their contributions, please, do it in a dignified manner.

Mr. Fitzgerald Jeffrey (*La Brea*): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I listened to the Member for Couva South, the Minister in the Ministry of Finance and the Economy, and I wonder about his contribution.

Mr. Speaker, I will not waste much time on the last speaker, except that there were three points that need commenting upon as well as from the mover of the Motion. The Member for Couva South spoke about workers at the centre of this Government. Mr. Speaker, I have countless copies of the firing of people by this Government. I would just take one, Mr. Speaker, from January 13, 2013, page A3 in the *Trinidad Guardian*, article written by Anika Gumbs-Sandiford where the following people have been given marching orders: Errol Grimes, Leselie Figaro, Steve Fletcher, Claudette Goddard, Annamay McMillan, Richard Williams, Andy St Clair, Jennifer Cudjoe-Brathwaite and Sarah Lezama but, more than that, when we look at these people they are highly qualified people as well as in terms of experience, very experienced.

For example, Dr. Steve Fletcher, he has 31 years' experience in water. He has a Bachelor of Science degree, a Master of Science degree in Hydraulic Engineering and a PhD in Systems Designs and he was sent home.

Dr. Browne: In a UNC party card.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Leselie Figaro, 28 years' experience, a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering, a Master of Science degree in Production Engineering. Annamay McMillan, 25 years' experience, a Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial Systems Engineering, a Master of Science degree—
[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: I think it is a good time for us to take a break. Dinner has arrived and we will take half of an hour to have dinner and we shall resume at 8.30 p.m. This sitting is now suspended until 8.30 p.m.

8.00 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

8.30 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

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Mr. F. Jeffrey: [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, just to continue from where I left off about the people who were unceremoniously asked to either take VSEP or else. We mentioned Annamay McMillan-Haynes, 25 years' experience, with a Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial Systems Engineering, a Master of Science degree in Production Engineering and Management and a certified IT service. Claudette Goddard, 32 years' experience, a Bachelor of Science degree in Natural Science, a Master's degree in Analytical Chemistry; Jennifer Brathwaite, 34 years' experience with a Bachelor of Science degree in Management and an executive MBA; Richard Williams, 32 years' experience, a Bachelor of Science degree in Management Studies, a Master's degree in Management Studies and Counselling; Andy St. Clair, 18 years' experience, a Bachelor of Science degree in Economics and a post-graduate in Utility Management; Sarah Lezama, 10 years' experience with ACCA and an MBA. Yet these highly qualified and experienced personnel have been given marching orders. Mr. Speaker, that could not be, with a Government that has workers at the centre of their operation.

Mr. Speaker, I want to look at the whole question of fiscal responsibility that the Member for Couva South spoke about. I laughed because, Mr. Speaker, you know something? Foreign travel by this Government in two-and-three-quarter years already exceeds what any other government has done in five years. We had four administrations under Eric Williams, of five years each; you had one by George Michael Chambers; one by ANR Robinson; one by Mr. Patrick Manning and one by Mr. Basdeo Panday. In five years, foreign travel was far less than what has taken place under this present administration—very significant.

And if you are talking in terms of—[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Members, please allow the Member to speak.

Mr. F. Jeffrey:—fiscal responsibility, this is a case for us to think about.

Mr. Speaker, I want to move on to one of the points made by the hon. Minister about litter wardens. He mentioned 147 litter wardens would be recruited, and I

ask myself—I read the newspapers every day. I make it a point of duty to listen to the news and nowhere have I heard about this 147 litter wardens to be recruited. It tells me a story, Mr. Speaker, that those 147 litter wardens are not going to come from supporters of the People’s National Movement, nor members of the COP. You are not going to get litter wardens from them. All are going to come from the UNC-controlled constituencies.

Mr. Roberts: Mr. Speaker, I am trying my best—36(5). The Member said that these are to be recruited and now he is saying where they come from—36(5).

Mr. F. Jeffrey: What is the problem?

Mr. Roberts: You are imputing that we are going to hire people surreptitiously when we have not. It is “to be”. “To be” means advertisement to come, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: All right. Member for La Brea, whenever a Member rises on a point of order—he did not indicate; yes, 36(5)—you are to take your seat and let the Member—

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Okay.

Mr. Speaker: Let me follow what he is saying carefully and I will guide him. Continue.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to recommend that in the drive to address the littering problem in Trinidad, raising the fine from \$50 to \$500 and the recruiting of 147 litter wardens will not be the panacea to the problem. Mr. Speaker, one of the major problems, as far as littering is concerned, has to do with mass transport—those private buses and public buses and so on, and even maxi taxis—when they have excursions. One could see people pelting beer bottles, “styrotech” plates and cups through the window. Mr. Speaker, this is something that we need to address.

You know, Mr. Speaker, I want to advise that in the recruiting of the 147 litter wardens, I want us to recognize where the problem lies. Let us look at some of the areas where a lot of the excursions go to. In Point Fortin, we have the Clifton Hill beach, Granville beach, Columbus beach. In La Brea: Carrot Shed bay, Station beach, Vessigny, Vance River, Erin, Los Iros and Palo Seco. St. Ann’s East, we have Las Cuevas, Tyrico Bay and Maracas. Diego Martin West: Carenage and Chagville. Mayaro, we have Mayaro beach and Princes Town/Tableland, Gran Chemin. Toco/Manzanilla: Manzanilla beach.

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Mr. Speaker, it would be worth the while that in the recruiting of those 147 litter wardens that we take those into consideration and make sure that we have litter wardens from Point Fortin, La Brea, St. Ann's East, Diego Martin West, Mayaro, Princes Town/Tableland and Toco/Manzanilla. They would have an interest in ensuring that the environment is kept clean and, therefore, this is an area I want us to look at.

Mr. Speaker, I heard the hon. Minister spoke about the transfer from CEPEP to other sectors and I am a bit puzzled because in my La Brea constituency what I am seeing is the transfer of people from other sectors into CEPEP. Let me give you an example. Mr. Speaker, there is a multimillionaire businessman who is involved in construction, who was given CEPEP contracts. Mr. Speaker, you know what is hard? I had asked for two more CEPEP teams to serve the Santa Flora/Erin area, and you know what happened? That said gentleman was given two more teams to come down in that area.

I am saying, what happens to the people from that area who had applied for CEPEP contracts? Mr. Speaker, it hurts, because I know the serious unemployment situation down in that area. Mr. Speaker, just to share with you a little: In Erin, people are no longer interested in fishing. You know why? Because of the piracy on the high seas, because of the over-fishing and so on, it is no longer an attractive work. Mr. Speaker, when you deny them the CEPEP contract, what you are, in fact, doing is that you are really tightening the noose around the people's necks. So, Mr. Speaker, I hope that whose ears it deserves to fall on, let it fall.

Let me move on from that. I want to talk a bit about the whole question of reasonably-controlled unemployment at 5 per cent. Mr. Speaker, I wonder about this 5 per cent figure because, you know, when we look at the situation in PNM-controlled constituencies—and certainly in La Brea—unemployment is closer to 50 per cent than—

Mr. Roberts: To what?

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Fifty per cent—extremely bad; very ridiculous. That is why, for example, the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, when I raised the question on the Order Paper, he could not give me any answer because it is serious, and we need to address the unemployment situation.

Mr. Speaker, I want to continue because we need to look at this thing very seriously. Mr. Speaker, you know something? Let me share with you something. In the La Brea constituency, TGU, which was a major employer during the construction phase, is no longer in the construction phase. It is now fully

operational and, therefore, many workers who were involved in the construction are home. Many of the CEPEP workers who were employed under the PNM administration, when this Government did a restructuring, many of them did not get jobs back in CEPEP, neither did they get jobs elsewhere.

Mr. Speaker, TOFCO has had to retrench workers because of the lack of jobs. On the other hand, what we see—and the hon. Minister, quite rightly, mentioned some of the mega projects that are going to start this year. Mr. Speaker, when we look at the scenario—and I could take the situation in Trinidad and Tobago—in my La Brea constituency we are not seeing any investments, neither foreign investment nor by the Government. However, in UNC-controlled constituencies, hear what is the problem: National Cycle Centre in Couva, \$225 million; Skills and Technology Centre in Debe, \$39.3 million; Children Hospital in Couva, US \$150 million; COSTAATT campus in Chaguanas, \$32.7 million; UTT campus in Chaguanas; UWI campus in Debe, \$509 million, and those Government Ministries in Chaguanas; airport to go into Couva, and we have an Oncology centre for Siparia.

Mr. Speaker, you know what is the net effect of that? Plenty employment would be created. For those mega projects you are going to have medium, small and large contractors getting piece of the action. So that when the hon. Minister talked about self-employment, having to make this regular contribution and so on, that is full well. In those areas you have full employment and, therefore, those self-employed people will be able to meet their contribution. On the other hand, in my La Brea constituency where there are precious little opportunities for employment, what is going to happen? Those who are self-employed will find it extremely difficult to really make regular payments to the national insurance.

Mr. Speaker, I could tell you, there are many self-employed people in my La Brea constituency who, in the years 2011 and 2012, did not get any work to do. They looked for, “eh”. They just did not get any work because, you know, Mr. Speaker, this Government has a way of operating. Once you belong—or they believe you are a supporter of the People’s National Movement, “crapaud smoke yuh pipe”. But, Mr. Speaker, as I always tell the Member for Fyzabad, “Long rope for magga goat”. [*Laughter*] Let them laugh, Mr. Speaker; two years again to go and the truth will be told.

Mr. Speaker, let me tell you exactly what is happening because with the unemployment situation, look at what is happening, plenty mamaguy, Mr. Speaker. In the La Brea constituency, on June 27, 2010, we were told by the then

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Minister of Energy that we were going to get a plant producing cement, pulverized lime and calcium carbonate.

8.45 p.m.

On July 11, 2010, we were told about a photovoltaic plant, a \$2 billion investment that would create 5,000 jobs; on September 22, 2010, we were told about another \$2 billion plant that would produce plastic and glass; on May 23, 2011, we were told about pharmaceuticals, methanol to petrochemicals and methanol to olefins; on August 01, 2011, synthetic crude, \$4 billion project; on January 11, 2012, Island Steel Complex, US \$600 million, that would create 3,500 jobs during construction and 400 permanent jobs; May 24, 2012, ship building and repairs; December 07, port construction and December 10, methanol to petrochemical US \$850 million. Mr. Speaker, not one of those projects was started in La Brea. Not one.

Mr. Warner: Ten days.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Mr. Speaker, this is no laughing matter. This is no laughing matter at all. How could you take people for a ride? Those young ones who are in schools, who are expecting jobs in the end—nothing! Nothing! They will get to vote someday. They will get to vote someday.

Dr. Browne: Local elections coming up.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Mr. Speaker, the Member for Chaguanas West should understand that “he get away by the skin of his teeth” in the last internal election, so unless he is willing to spend more money—“yuh could go ahead. Yuh already went in Tobago and yuh know how much money yuh spend. Free cell phone, \$1,000 sneakers, \$500 in jersey and wha happen—12/0.” Time coming! Time coming! [*Desk thumping*] Time coming! You have fun. You have fun.

Mrs. Mc Intosh: Time longer than twine.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: “Aie-yaie-yaie, tell dem Pat. Tell dem.” Mr. Speaker, I want to go to the Bill—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Roberts: Thank God.

Dr. Browne:—because it has some areas that we need to look at very closely. Mr. Speaker, the first thing that is missing from this Bill, what is the total cost to the taxpayer for this fiscal package. In order words, you notice in clause 3 we do not know what is the duty allowance for members of the special reserve police. In clause 3 that is not quantified. We have quantification in other areas. But in clause

3 we do not know what this duty allowance is. In addition to that, we really need to know what is the cost to the taxpayer of the overall package. That is extremely important, as far as I am concerned, Mr. Speaker.

Dr. Khan: You cannot tell the cost if you do not know who is coming back. Who is coming back? How could you tell the cost if you do not know who is coming back?

Dr. Browne: Estimate.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Mr. Speaker, in the Bill we have a lot of references to persons who qualify and the insured person who is eligible. I think we want to find out what we really mean, when we are talking about persons who are qualified. How are they going to be qualified for some of these benefits? We need to look at that very closely. Because really and truly, and I speak about those who are engaged as self-employed. If we are using the 750 contributions as the benchmark for benefits, then people in my constituency who are self-employed will never benefit from the measure. I am saying that we need to look at this system very closely, because 750 contributions I am certain that the self-employed in my constituency will not make that. Not even if a 20-year-old starts from now—particularly under this administration. Maybe when the People’s National Movement returns to government we might have a better chance. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Browne: Excellent point. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. F. Jeffrey: That is just now, two years not far. “Clif, if I was you, I come across quick.” [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

Dr. Moonilal: I will come across on a Calcutta boat.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: I feel so sorry for my good friend. You know he was my school supervisor many years ago. So we are very close. When we hear about Moruga/Tableland being the landslip capital of Trinidad and Tobago, I am wondering what his colleagues are doing to address that problem. I am saying my dear friend, come over and we will make your burdens lighter. [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Mr. Roberts: You are a comedian.

Dr. Browne: Is it really the landslip capital of the world? [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. F. Jeffrey: I cannot help, Mr. Speaker—Oropouche East, you could apply too.

Dr. Moonilal: In the marginal seat of Oropouche East.

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Mr. F. Jeffrey: “Chaguanas West, ah know yuh want to come across too eh.” [Laughter and crosstalk] That is one thing. One thing about the People’s National Movement our arms are open wide.

Dr. Moonilal: “To have it in we pocket.”

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Come! Come!

Hon. Member: In the Treasury. [Laughter]

Dr. Browne: You went too far “dey.” [Crosstalk]

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Coming back to the Bill, I am trying to understand. [Crosstalk and laughter] We heard what happened in the last internal election and what was happening with my good friend from Chaguanas West. I do not think you deserve that kind of treatment. Come over. [Crosstalk] “D’Abadie/O’Meara, you in here too you know, yuh in here jus now.”

Mr. Roberts: I burned my card never to return, Sir.

Dr. Moonilal: It is time to go home with all aboard.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Going back with the Bill. I am a bit concerned about clause 45C.(1)

“Notwithstanding any of the provisions of this Act, there shall be exempt from income tax until the year ending 31st December, 2015, the gains or profits derived from the initial sale of a residential house site, being part of a land development project, provided the owner of the land produces a certificate from the Minister with responsibility for housing in support of the claim for exemption.”

I am saying, that is not for no small man. That is for somebody who is in the upper echelon in the society. I want to look very closely, that you have to get a certificate from the Minister with responsibility for housing.

Dr. Moonilal: That is from PNM. The same thing obtains now.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: “Eh heh? dais why so many PNM cyah get certificate.”

Dr. Khan: PNM make it so.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Well, under the PNM we used to operate differently. [Laughter and crosstalk]

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Hello! hello! hello! Mr. Speaker, under the PNM, we built four community centres; built and hand over four community centres in Mayaro, three in Siparia—[Desk thumping]—under the distinguished Member for Port of Spain

South. You tell me, in the La Brea constituency what have you done? You all inherited three communities centres in advanced stage of construction. [*Crosstalk*] Three years now, and “dey cyah finish yet”.

Mr. Roberts: Take care “yuh bounce yuh hand,” you know.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: “Doh worry.”

Dr. Khan: We put a pitch lake for you.

Mr. F. Jeffrey: So, the People’s National Movement is the way to go. And Member for Barataria/San Juan, we know you left the UNC at one time, you could come across here too. [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. Khan: I never left the UNC.

Dr. Browne: UNC left you. [*Laughter*]

Mr. F. Jeffrey: Clause 45D. (1)

“Notwithstanding any of the provisions of this Act, there shall be exempt from income tax until the year ending 31st December 2017—

- (a) subject to subsection (2), premiums and rents derived from the letting of a newly-constructed commercial building or multi-storey car park, the construction of which commenced on or after 1st October, 2012; and”

Mr. Speaker, that clause is “not fuh no grassroots.” So this is where the finances will come in.

“(b) gains or profits from the initial sale of such newly-constructed commercial building or multi-storey car park, the construction of which commenced”—again—“October 1st, 2012.”

That is not for no schoolteacher or something like that. That is for people in the upper echelon of the society. This Bill is not so much for the man at the bottom of class table. I just mentioned to you that in the case of the self-employed who have to pay this compulsory national insurance, in my constituency they would never be able to benefit from this Bill. But, the rich and mighty will be able to benefit from 45D(1)(a) and (b).

Mr. Speaker, I want us to really and truly think in terms of the man at the bottom of the ladder. We need to address these problems and we will be all right. The hon. Minister with this Bill is well-intentioned, [*Desk thumping*] but those points that I have raised need urgent consideration and once you do that, we will be well on our way. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Tourism (Hon. Stephen Cadiz): Mr. Speaker, I thank you. Just allow me a couple of minutes to deal with a couple of points. The Member for La Brea finished his contribution talking about the various Bills, finance Bills, only for a certain sector and that the little people would never benefit. He fails to realize that when investments are made as a result of proper finance Bills or when investments are made by those same upper echelons, that the people who benefit from that are the people to get the jobs to do the construction and all of that. Therefore, to make a statement that this Bill is not for little people is totally misleading, totally misleading.

Whether it is La Brea or Chaguanas East or wherever, the fact of the matter is that any investment brings jobs, brings all kinds of benefits to all sectors of the society. So I wish he would not make those statements because they really and truly are very misleading. Anyway, enough about the Member for La Brea, we move on.

Mr. Speaker, a couple of things here. We have talked many, many, times. We have heard it mentioned many, many, times in this House about the gaming industry. The gaming industry properly regulated can generate a huge amount of jobs—additional jobs. All kinds of opportunities for Trinidad and Tobago, especially when I look at it with the eye as Tourism Minister of what benefits will arise from a properly regulated gaming industry.

9.00 p.m.

As we know right now, there are in an excess of, I believe, 70 or 80—when I was in the Ministry of Trade and Industry that was the figure we were working with—close to 80 casino operations in this country unregulated and that has to stop. We have to bring gaming under a single umbrella, bring gaming under a Gaming Act that will really and truly do justice to the country, where the proper taxes will be paid, where people who go to gamble are not cheated. There are a number of areas, a number of issues in the gaming industry that we have to take control of. So, I think that without a doubt, we should agree with this that the gaming industry is something that will help the country, will encourage tourism.

There are other countries in the—in fact, today, in the Bahamas, there is a referendum on gaming about bringing a national lottery system into the Bahamas. They already have casinos in the big resorts in the Bahamas and in many, many other areas in the Caribbean. In the Dutch Islands there is gaming, in St. Maarten there is gaming, so is it not something that is new to the Caribbean and a number of those territories benefit greatly from the gaming industry?

The issue of the Litter Act—again, waste has money, recycling has money. It serves a purpose of keeping not only communities clean and orderly, but obviously there is money to be made in recycling. I think with the Litter Act that is going to be brought to this House, we will see a number of jobs, thousands of jobs I should say, being created by that one Litter Act. I think it is something we look forward to and, again, it serves a whole host of—the benefit that the country is going to derive from that, I do not think that we should be taking that lightly at all.

A couple of the comments that were made by the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East and, of course, as usual, he makes his comments and then he disappears. He talked about the economy, about not getting the economy moving. This administration, under the Member of Parliament for Oropouche East, who just happens to have the HDC under him, the Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs—I went on Saturday to my constituency to visit two developments done by the HDC. One was done under the previous administration, which is known as Lions Gate, which is an imported building system that was used to construct those houses in those buildings in Lions Gate. It is already there and we have to work with it. We will complete Lions Gate, but the fact of the matter is, that it is an imported building system and, therefore, the amount of labour that was used in the construction of Lions Gate is by no means at the level that it should have been.

Here it is, we have traditional building systems which is concrete and block work that is being used in the Oasis Development, an 800-unit development in the constituency of Chaguanas East. In record time, Mr. Speaker, that project has been constructed. We are more than 60 per cent completed. [*Desk thumping*] We are well within our construction time and we are well within the budget. Here it is that we are using blocks made in Trinidad and Tobago, steel made in Trinidad and Tobago. All the concrete obviously, being poured is all from Trinidad and Tobago. That one project is employing in excess of 500 people directly on the project—[*Desk thumping*—in addition, of course, to all the other services, the same block manufacturers, steel manufactures and what have you. All of that is employment.

So when Member for Diego Martin North/East makes these statements, really and truly, it is totally misleading. This economy is moving. The unemployment levels, again, we have been able to maintain the unemployment levels. Standard and Poor's and Moody's, all gave this country a very, very good mark. And, again, to come here and to make those statements about the economy being stuck

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and what have you, it is just not correct. It is just totally untrue, and I think that the other side needs to understand that they have a responsibility to this nation, that when they come to this House that they talk the truth.

For instance, the Member for La Brea is making wild accusations—50 per cent of unemployment in La Brea. The Member for La Brea invited me, as Minister of Tourism, to come and look at all these sites, the same sites that he was boasting about that they have in La Brea. I went there and I did not see 50 per cent unemployment in La Brea. One thing I did not see was that, so it cannot be. It cannot be correct. I also went to Point Fortin. The Member of Parliament for Point Fortin invited me there also. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Roberts: You saw her house?

Hon. S. Cadiz: I did not see the house. No.

Mr. Roberts: You did not go for lunch?

Hon. S. Cadiz: So when they talk about the economy being stuck, that is totally untrue. There are people working, the economy is humming, it is moving along, and the more that we do for ourselves, for instance, when we talk about investments—and the same Member for La Brea talking about investments only for a certain level of people. What do you want to do? Where is the money going to come from for these investments? When people are investing—people have to have money to invest, and that is how an economy works. It is very, very simple.

So, the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East, again—and I wonder sometimes of the statements that he makes when he talks—and the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre alluded to it, the issue of these vehicles—going on and on and on about eight-seater and nine-seater vehicles. What is the reason for doing that? What? To try and show the public that this Government is not aware, does not know what it is doing? It is very, very simple. [*Interruption*] Member of Parliament for Fyzabad, are you okay?

Mr. Sharma: Yes! I want to get a nine vehicle.

Hon. S. Cadiz: These vehicles are acceptable, these vehicles are being licensed by the licensing authority and the approvals are being given for these vehicles to be imported in the tourism industry. Why do they want them in the tourism industry? Because they are more suited for people with luggage, families travelling and what have you. It is a very simple thing. But to come here and make a whole big hurrah about he never heard of any vehicle having eight seats and seven seats and what have you or nine seats, just totally, totally ridiculous.

They constantly make up all these stories. I do not know where they get these stories from. They make these stories up and want to come here, in this Parliament that is supposed to be dealing with the people's business and mislead this population.

The fact of matter is, if you go and speak to members of the St. Christopher Taxi Service or any of the taxis services that operate at the hotels and ask them about these vehicles, they will find out. Just walk out of the Parliament and go next door and they will learn the truth. But to come here and mislead people, really and truly—but anyway, that is par for the course for the other side.

Mr. Speaker, one of the things that I just want to touch on: we had at the end of 2012—and, again, I keep making this statement. We get our figures on time now when it comes to tourism arrivals. We had 460,000 people come to this island in 2012, this Trinidad and Tobago—460,000 people. My target for this year is to get that figure up to 500,000, an additional 40,000 people coming to Trinidad and Tobago. That is going to put roughly \$400 million into the economy, with an additional 40,000 people coming here. Okay?

That is where we start, and when the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East makes, again, this ludicrous, ridiculous statement that only the services industry grew in 2012, you have to ask him the question: and, so what? The services industry uses what? The beverage industry profits from it because the services industry, whether it is tourism, whether it is the hospitality industry—Trinidad and Tobago is very unique in this region, Mr. Speaker, in that a greater part of the tourism dollar or the hospitality dollar that is spent is actually spent utilizing local material and local goods.

So when he talks about the services industry actually costs this country money because they have to buy these goods and buy these services—obviously, but they are being bought locally here in Trinidad and Tobago. There are some of the other territories in the Caribbean that are not so fortunate, whereas as much as ninety cents on the dollar leaves the territory because they manufacture absolutely nothing. But here in Trinidad and Tobago, we are very, very fortunate, that we can in fact keep reinvesting that money into the economy. So, again, I wish, before they make these utterances, that they would actually check before they do that.

I had a meeting today with the yacht services steering committee and, again, in the year 2000 we had 2,600 yachts/vessels that came here. That is why from 2000 onwards, there was a thriving yachting industry, particularly in Trinidad,

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particularly down in Chaguaramas. Of course, that fell off substantially. Last year, we had 1,000 yachts that came here and, again, I am looking at the mark of 3,000 yachts to be visiting Trinidad and Tobago, and there is work to be done with that. There is work to be done with immigration, there is work to be done with customs, there is work to be done with taxation, et cetera, and all of that is part of the plan when we are going to be boosting tourism.

Mr. Speaker, when those yachts come here, whether or not they are visiting for leisure alone or they are actually going to be outhauling, for instance, during the hurricane season and doing work, there were close to 1,500 tradesmen—a lot them self-employed tradesmen—working in the Chaguaramas area that catered to the yacht services industry. These are people who became specialists in making sails, in fiberglass work, in engines, in aluminium welding, all the different services that these yachts would require. Here it is, the trade just dropped off and nothing was done by that administration; nothing was done to try and shore up the yacht services business.

People have invested a lot of money in the yacht services business. You have the shipyards down in Chaguaramas. Again, people are getting to know their trades, investing money in their trades and, here it is, that administration saw that business just go. It went to other islands. Other islands that never really and truly had a strong yachting services business, and they just allowed the yachting business to go. They made absolutely no changes to the Immigration Act and no changes to the Customs Act. Do not shake your head, Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, because it is true.

Mrs. Mc Intosh: It is not true.

Hon. S. Cadiz: It is a fact and I—no, no! Everybody on that side always have the facts, like 50 per cent unemployment and what have you. It is a fact! *[Interruption]* I am speaking! So, we start bringing that business back, Mr. Speaker. Again, it is hundreds of millions of dollars that are going to be circulating in this economy. Again, it is just by working smart, understanding the business, understanding the industry and doing what you have to do to make it happen.

We talk about tourism. When the bottom fell out of the Tobago tourism business—in 2005, 87,000 people in Tobago—87,000 people arriving into Tobago. Nine flights a week direct from Europe and England into Tobago. That was 2005. Tobago was humming at that time. You speak to any of the hoteliers, the same people in the hospitality industry, the restaurants, the rent-a-car people and all of that, the place was humming.

Mrs. McIntosh: PNM—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. S. Cadiz: Hold on! If it is one thing that the PNM caused, is to destroy this country, destroy this economy. [*Desk thumping*] Make no mistake about it. Because here it is, Mr. Speaker, in 2005, 87,000 people arrived here. In 2011, do you know how many people arrived here? Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, do you know how many people arrived here? Twenty-five thousand people. Tobago lost nearly 75 per cent of its business, and what did that administration do with the same THA? Absolutely nothing! We are down to three direct flights a week going into Tobago.

We have to fight tooth and nail to build that business back. That administration saw the tourism industry in Tobago tanking and they sat there and did absolutely nothing. Not for one minute understanding the billions of dollars that had been invested in the tourism infrastructure in Tobago, and it really and truly did not matter to them. But anyway, we are fixing that. But in the interim, Mr. Speaker, we have to do the Tourism Development Fund. That is an initiative by this Government to help shore up the businesses that depend on the tourism industry in Tobago, that are really and truly hurting and they are hurting badly.

So we have the Tourism Development Fund, through the Ministry of Finance and the Economy, to shore up the businesses that are affected by the downturn in tourism in Tobago. Of course, the Government loan guarantee, again, which speaks to tourism and, also, about boosting the investment in Tobago. There has been no new investment in Tobago for a whole host of other reasons which I will not go into today. But Tobago knows why there has been no business, why there has been no new investment in Tobago.

9.15 p.m.

So, Mr. Speaker, if it is one thing that the tourism industry does, and by simply working it right, by simply doing the right things, having the right regulations, having the right incentives which, again, is something that we are redoing now. We are pulling out all the incentives in the tourism sector to see what worked, what did not work and what it is that we have to do, especially where we have competition from Grenada, go northwards. Everybody! The whole Caribbean is tourism-based and therefore we have to be able to compete directly.

So, Mr. Speaker, when we are talking about the management of the finances of this country, through the capable hands of the Minister of Finance and the Economy, without a doubt, this country is on the move, this country is gaining, it

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is gaining its foothold, especially in the tourism industry, we are going to making it happen. All I can say is that I fully endorse and I fully support the Minister of Finance and the Economy. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Amery Browne (*Diego Martin Central*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to make a brief contribution in this particular Finance Bill. I want to acknowledge the contributions that have gone before me and I want to clarify because I realize some of the responses from the Government side appear as usual to be a bit thin-skinned, and certainly focused insufficiently on the content of the issues raised by Members on this side.

I would just want to reassure the population that Members on this side of the House want a strong economy for Trinidad and Tobago. We care about the citizens of this country and the future of our country, but when a Finance Bill is brought in this manner, with a few days' notice to the Members of this House, and we recognize serious issues being raised in a number of the clauses, it is our duty under the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to raise those issues [*Desk thumping*] in an impartial manner, and we are doing exactly that.

So, Mr. Speaker, this is by no means any effort to downgrade our economy or anything like that. We know the record on the other side with regard to interactions with international agencies when not in Government seeking to do exactly that. We hold ourselves to a very different standard with regard to how we treat with the finances of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I realize there was a bit of merriment in the House on a few occasions, and I know this is the Carnival season and we just had an election season, and I certainly will not dwell on that. But part of our duty under the said Constitution is to hold the Government to account and I want to touch on just a few issues that were raised in this debate seeking to do exactly that, also representing my constituents.

Now, I turn to the hon. Member for Couva South who caused quite a stir in this House when he made some very controversial statements—statements which must be corrected at this time. He said—and I really did have to check because Members on this side were quite alarmed by his statements on this issue—that thanks to the UNC in this term, financial provisions for senior citizens are now entrenched in the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, no less true words have ever been spoken in the House of Representatives. Less true words have never been spoken [*Desk thumping*] because that is completely and patently false.

This Member is a Minister in the Ministry of Finance and the Economy so he must know better, but to come into this House in a Finance Bill and to make a statement like that, further misleading members of the population on a fundamental issue relevant to the Bill, it is truly shocking. He must know better, so my question to the Member for Couva South would be: why would you make a statement like that if you know better?

Mr. Speaker, this issue of financial provision for senior citizens is not referenced in the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago today, and it never was referenced in the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. So, to try to take credit for entrenching such in our Constitution when it never was there, and is not there today, is really an example—well, I do not know if it is a misprint or a misstep, but it is a reckless and unfortunate statement to be made here in this House.

The only comments I would have expected from the Member for Couva South on this matter would have been a further apology for the history of his political party, of deceit [*Desk thumping*] of senior citizens with regard to their financial provisions. Instead what he did, he tried to find a way to boast when he should have been apologizing because we know the promises that were made on this matter. So it really must be shocking in 2013, after two and a half years of what happened, to have to confront statements like these and I hope the Member would be guided and advised accordingly. Even when we look at some of the grants referenced in this Bill, it draws to mind the commitment that was made by the Government to make financial assistance available for senior citizens above the age of 60 years automatically without criteria.

Mr. Speaker, you speak to any Member of Parliament on the Opposition or Government side, that has not happened, and the criteria are still in place, and senior citizens are still going to MPs' offices and struggling to try to access and work their way through the system, so those promises have been broken systematically. [*Desk thumping*] "Doh" talk about the 60-year-old promise—systematically—despite their full-page colour ads. I really was surprised, in a 2013 Finance Bill, to have to be confronting comments like those, and I hope they would evaporate from henceforth.

Mr. Speaker, I do not know why they would boast about a clear example of deceit of senior citizens. But, we know that this is a Government that gives with one hand and tends to take back with two hands [*Desk thumping*] and that has been happening to senior citizens and citizens in every sector across Trinidad and Tobago. No such thing was entrenched in the Constitution. We have to hold the Government to account.

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Mr. Speaker, every Government tends to make much ado about increases in grants. This is not the first Government that would have sought to do exactly that. Very often, it is decisions that are made within the Ministry of Finance and the Economy after heavy negotiations and attempts to balance the books and so on, but when it comes onto the floor of the Parliament, it is presented as some grand gift, and we have seen that before and I guarantee you, we have seen that today and we will see more of it a little later on. That is all well and good, provided that these grants are properly administered in a fair and equitable manner for all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, and provided that continuous steps are taken within each of the social sector Ministries—the relevant Ministries—to ensure that political interference and intrusion into the screening process, the decision process, and even the disbursement mechanisms, that they are free of that type of political manipulation and interference.

I have to say that the signs are ominous under this particular Government, [*Desk thumping*] that exactly the opposite has been happening. Exactly the opposite has been happening! So we have no problems with increases in grants. We are concerned about the vulnerable citizens in all constituencies because we consider every citizen of Trinidad and Tobago to be our people. They are all our people and we are concerned about their welfare. However, that is the easy part to talk about an increase in any grant.

But, Mr. Speaker, given the global financial outlook at this time, it behoves us all in 2013 to consider very carefully the issue of sustainability of these types of grant assistance. I believe the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's may have referenced that en passant—the issue of sustainability of these grant programmes—and that is not something that we have heard much about from the other side because I do not think they have the capacity to even grapple with such circumstances. [*Desk thumping*] So despite promising change and talks about reduced dependence and so forth, and austerity, I think the Member who is sitting in the chair of the Member for Tunapuna referred to the—Minister of Finance and the Economy, sorry—issue of austerity and so on, we are not really seeing that at all but yet they use phrases like “prudent management” of the economy, et cetera.

So, Mr. Speaker, having already passed the halfway point in their term, it is very unlikely that this current Government will do any of the strategic thinking that is required to really rationalize the social assistances being provided across a large range of Government Ministries: the Ministry of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprise Development; the Ministry of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs; the

Ministry of the People and Social Development; the Ministry of Community Development; the Ministry of Sport—a wide range of Ministries intersect with the social sector and there are so many forms of grants and other assistance.

It is one thing to just tinker a bit and throw “ah \$200 increase” or “ah \$100 increase” et cetera, but the thinking citizens out there are wondering—is anyone looking at the big picture, looking at our future, looking at our children and their ability to fund these advances, and really taking a holistic approach? I will tell them: let not your hearts be troubled, the People’s National Movement is on their way to governance. [*Desk thumping*] We certainly will be doing things a lot better. It would not just be a promise of change but genuine change.

Mr. Speaker, when the last—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Calcutta change!

Dr. A. Browne: Now, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Couva South has come back in here and is starting to throw “Calcutta” phrases when we just had a lecture about raising the standards in this House. So leave that talk, Member for Couva South, for elsewhere.

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

Dr. A. Browne: Let us conduct ourselves better inside of here. I would not encourage it at—you know I would not encourage that kind of talk. [*Laughter*] Let us proceed. [*Crosstalk*] No, I do not want you to distract me at this time, Member for Couva South.

So, Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, before the last general election presented itself upon us, the Permanent Secretary and key members of staff of the Ministry of Social Development were engaged in a strategic process of doing exactly this—the heads of division—looking to decentralize the services of the Ministry of Social Development, and also involving some other Ministries in those discussions to ensure the presence of caseworkers and social workers in every community and neighbourhood. A lot of work had gone into that particular process. That would have helped harmonize how citizens in any neck of the woods, any constituency, any community, would interact with the social sector, and would be able to have knowledge of these grants, benefit from these grants, to be able to apply easily, to get feedback on the process, and also to actually receive their cheques or their grants from a staff member, a social worker, somebody trained to be involved in that type of interface.

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It would make it less likely—that approach would make it less likely that politicians and senior public officials would seek to insert themselves into the process. So you have phenomena for the first time where you have politicians and MPs being photographed with vulnerable citizens handing them their senior citizens' cheques—that has happened—or their Disability Assistance Grant or a self-help cheque, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera or a TT Card—the Member for Diego Martin West always references—out of trunks of cars and so on. This is completely—this is an atrocity to the way the system is supposed to be designed to work. I hope the Minister of Finance and the Economy would also take a role in ensuring—to pull us back from the brink as it were, in that regard, because we are really heading in exactly the opposite direction with regard to the disbursement of state services.

Mr. Speaker, so the Ministry was involved in that process, the heads of division were involved in that process, but we have heard precious little about it since, and we have gotten the exact opposite with the Ministry moving in another direction. Many of our social workers are now saying that what we have is a Ministry that is not decentralizing anymore, but it is actually being morphed into a secretariat for senior public officials. It is really a grand instrument of public relations designed and working around photo opportunities and other interfaces to build the public relations of senior of the head honchos, and, Mr. Speaker, that is really an abysmal development.

9.30 p.m.

The Member for Point Fortin was making a point earlier relevant to the disbursement of grants and so on. The Member for Caroni Central shouted across at her—let me see, I wrote down the words—“I will curtail your request”. If I am misquoting you, feel free to correct me, but I heard you say that in response to what she was saying, and that cannot be—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Ramadharsingh: She said she did not need it.

Dr. A. Browne:—so, you will decide to curtail her request.

Dr. Ramadharsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Speaker, that is a clear example of the type of thinking that we are not—it is an ominous mentality—[*Desk thumping*] [*Interruption*] and he is adding to it right now. Oh! We need to move in the other direction. It does not matter what is the Government—whether it is TOP or UNC—that cannot be the thinking that guides us into the social sector. [*Crosstalk*]

So, we have here the provision to increase the Disability Assistance Grant by \$200. I heard an adjective being used on this side to describe it. We are happy for any increase because that is a few dollars more in the pocket of a family that might need the assistance.

I have a question to the Minister of Finance and the Economy and that is—if you are increasing the Disability Assistance Grant by \$200, why has the income ceiling been kept at \$1,000 per month, \$1,200 per annum? The Minister said it very clearly in his introduction of the Bill. While we might argue about the quantum of the increase, I am also very concerned about the retention of the identical ceiling that obtained before. I am hoping that the Minister would explain that to the families out there because what it suggests or, in fact, what it says—the outcome of that is that once you earn a dollar over \$1,000 per month from any source of income, you basically fall off the system. Minister of Finance and the Economy, is that not correct? [*The Minister of Finance and the Economy nods*]

In bringing this large Bill to the House, I would say you would have had an opportunity to raise that ceiling to be more au courant with the realities of 2013 and those are not easy realities for many citizens. I am sure the Minister would have read about those circumstances at least if he is not personally familiar with them. It is serious business and I would suggest there is an opportunity, even in this Bill, to raise the income ceiling which would make more sense in today's economic realities. So, you raise it by \$200 but you get zero if you make a dollar over \$1,000 per month, which is really a pittance in itself.

My advice to this Government in all their attempted interventions—many of them have failed in the past, many Bills were withdrawn and other things—what I would suggest is that if you cannot make strategic improvements or sensible improvements in any area, at least ensure that the little hodgepodge increases you give make sense and avoid not making sense.

There is an oath that those in the medical profession would take—first, do no harm—and with some of the interventions that we have been discussing here, it appears that the Government has actually been doing harm. In some of these things, it might be better if they leave it alone until a responsible PNM Government would come in and make the corrections in a strategic manner.

So, what about the promise—speaking about the disabled community, what about those repeated promises of automatic food cards for all households with disabled persons?

Hon. Member: What about it?

Dr. A. Browne: Those promises were made repeatedly. [*Crosstalk*] Mr. Speaker, if there are responsible Members of Parliament present, they would tell you—[*Interruption*] Mr. Speaker, why is the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, who should be more concerned about the non-filming of panorama semifinals—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Imagine that!

Hon. Member: Yes!

Dr. A. Browne:—for the first time to our citizens. Why is he—[*Desk thumping*] seeking to interrupt me when he knows what I am saying is correct? All MP's are being—Mr. Speaker, he is interrupting me.

Mr. Speaker: Member, I know that you were out for a little time. [*Laughter*] So, I would ask you to really observe Standing Order 40(b) and (c), respectively. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: No. No. No.

Mr. Speaker: Wait, Member—[*Interruption*]

Miss McDonald: “Take back dat.”

Dr. Douglas: Mr. Speaker, I withdraw that statement.

Mr. Speaker: Well, I really did not hear you, you know, to be honest. May I appeal to Members on that bench, starting with the Members for Caroni Central and Couva South and Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, yes. If you all can just hold your fire for a little later on when we have dinner again, part two. [*Crosstalk and laughter*] So, I would ask Members to just be observant as it relates to Standing Order 40(b) and (c) respectively, and allow the Member for Diego Martin Central to make his contribution in silence. Those who would like to speak, just take notes. Continue, hon. Member.

Dr. A. Browne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not know about dinner part two, but I know a broken promise when I hear one and that was another broken promise by this Government. [*Desk thumping*] The Members of Parliament who interact with their constituents would tell you that persons have been coming to us, calling us and asking about this very issue, and saying that they were of the information that they would be receiving these automatic food cards, once they have—and I am sure Members opposite, some of them, interact with their constituents for long hours and they would be aware of that.

I do not want to draw the Member for Chaguanas West into this debate by any circumstances, but I recall even him in his quieter moments making contributions suggesting that there needs to be a lot of work done in that particular—yes, it is true. [*Desk thumping*] Now, you have the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West and they—[*Interruption*—seeking, yes, and he would not deny it because it is true—you have the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West who has been ejected from the Ministry now seeking to deny what is actually happening.

Those promises were made and I am not here to tell the Government what to do or not to do, but I would suggest to them that when dealing with vulnerable members of society, be careful to be able to back up what you say with reality because every time a budget presentation is made or the Minister makes pronouncements, people are expecting follow-up. To this point—I do not know what the future would hold—but to this point, those automatic food cards have not been provided to members of the disabled community. It would have been better if you get your act together and then open your mouth. So, that was another issue that I thought needed to be raised and some of them are asking, is this another misprint that has been visited upon us by the UNC-dominated coalition?

Mrs. Mc Intosh: “Dey have nobody to dominate. Dey have nobody to dominate.”

Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Speaker—[*Interruption*—there is nobody—all right. The Member for North/East is trying to distract me and I will not be distracted. This is very much an ad hoc Government and this Finance Bill in itself is a bit of a manifestation of that. There is a smattering here, a smattering there, trying to tidy up some things from the past.

The Member for Diego Martin North/East illuminated the dangers of that kind of staccato approach to governance when he examined the implications for our national insurance system of the provisions within this Bill, introduced with great calm and serenity by the Minister of Finance and the Economy in about a 30-second segment of his presentation, and there are many people out there who would have sat up and said, what is going on here? Where is the explanation?—without explanation, without proper process. We are in the midst of a quiet—well, it should be—we would have hoped for an evolution, but it seems to be a deterioration in terms of a considered approach to these very important systems.

Mr. Speaker, we have had sufficient bad precedent in this regard, the dangers of operating in this particular manner. Listen, this Bill also amends the Motor Vehicles Act which was tinkered with by a former Minister of Works and

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Transport some time ago, and the effect to this day has been a nightmare for my constituents and citizens across Trinidad and Tobago. So, the approach that is being taken here, this type of staccato approach can be dangerous because, when you make minor changes or several changes without really taking a holistic view, you can actually do more harm than good.

I asked a policeman recently, when last have you charged someone for plying a vehicle illegally for hire? He said well, I cannot do so. I cannot do so. You have members of the law enforcement fraternity, some of whom would benefit from this additional allowance who are saying, my hands are tied. They have no clue when their hands would be untied or unfettered to administer the laws of Trinidad and Tobago. So, that type of tinkering can be dangerous, and what do you have? It was mentioned earlier and I will touch on it en passant. There are hundreds of these uninsured vehicles—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: Thousands

Dr. A. Browne:—thousands. The enlightened Member for Diego Martin North/East says, thousands—erudite. Thousands of vehicles uninsured for such purpose being plied for hire—Mr. Speaker, I am sure you experience it as well, I am certain of that. Now, you are driving down any road in our country, and you have no idea when the vehicle in front of you will stop abruptly for a passenger. It could be a panel van, it could be a maxi taxi, it could be a “P” vehicle, it could be a “T” vehicle, it could be a pickup truck; you have no clue because you certainly cannot tell based on the registration on the vehicle. Any vehicle can pull up hand brakes at any time to pick up a passenger and that causes road rage, it causes accidents, it causes traffic and it just causes a deterioration of a basic system of road transport. Mr. Speaker, that is a classic example, and they have left the system as is since that manipulation was done.

You come here with a Finance Bill, with amendments for the Motor Vehicles Act and express no concern about that reality and do nothing about it. I am saying that this is a missed opportunity to correct something that does need to be corrected. Add to that the reality that our citizens, our brothers and sisters are travelling in these vehicles at risk—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Imbert: No insurance.

Dr. A. Browne:—yes, no system, rape, robbery, injury. No insurance, no coverage, no help should they crash, no inspection, nothing is happening in that regard—another example of the ineptitude of this United National Congress, Mr.

Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] Then they want to talk about increasing injury benefits and so on, when the conditions for such injuries are being facilitated and fostered by the actions and inactions of their Government.

Mr. Speaker, clause 3—well, who can be unhappy about that? We are happy that members of the special reserve police would finally be getting their special duty allowance and the clause facilitates that. I am more concerned as an MP about outcomes than anything else. The outcome that we all would wish for is a decrease in violent crime. We know that the Commissioner himself has spoken on that and says there has been no such decrease in violent crime. [*Desk thumping*]

They cast these types of things as motivation and so on. It is an overall anti-crime measure, part of this invisible crime plan and so on, but we see that it is all talk and no results. The results are just manipulation of statistics. When you compare 2012 to 2011, if it is not favourable, what you do—you combine 2011 and 2012, and you seek to combine 2008 and 2009, and then you compare the two combined years, and try to pull out some favourable statistics. That fools no thinking citizen. We all realize that crime is a clear and present danger.

We are happy for the SRPs and their allowance, but we are also looking for results. Unfortunately, the reality in our landscape is fear, fear for our safety. Even the hon. Prime Minister herself indicated that an entire island in our twin island republic voted based on fear, and that cannot be something that we can be comfortable about, that is not something to boast about, and that is a sign of failure by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. The evidence is all around us—[*Desk thumping*—carjackings in Diamond Vale, murders, more murders than days elapse, fire bombings in Cocorite, policemen being robbed in the pre-carnival activities, all sorts of things going on, Mr. Speaker.

I will move on from that particular point because it is a point of failure on the part of the Government and I know they are fully aware. [*Interruption*] Yes, the Member for Point Fortin wants us to recognize that the Minister of National Security, while he tries to take credit for what he perceives as successes, must also take responsibility for the failure to reduce violent crime in Trinidad and Tobago—[*Desk thumping*—cannot pick and choose, your responsibility.

9.45 p.m.

Speaking of failed, Mr. Speaker, I heard the Member for St. Joseph—he is a distinguished Member with whom I have interaction when he is not on his legs screaming at us in the Parliament—but I heard him, as a Government MP, trying once again to defend the section 34 issue. I am not in a position to advise the Member, but I would strongly suggest that that is an issue that is a strong sore

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point for every honest, intelligent citizen of this country. I would strongly recommend that you recognize that it is your Government that brought that Bill to this House. It is your Government that amended it. It is your Cabinet that sought the proclamation of that one section.

And so, if there are arguments about whether you were fired rightly or wrongly by the Prime Minister, I do not think the *Hansard* and the Parliament is the place for that particular dialogue. This is an area of fault on the part of the UNC coalition and let us not pretend otherwise.

Moving right along, I promised to be brief and I am really trying to do so. This Finance Bill, 2013 also amends the Registration of Clubs Act and the Minister of Finance and the Economy—now this is a serious topic—categorically stated that, according to the UNC, the casino industry is considered a legitimate part of the entertainment sector. Mr. Speaker, if I am misquoting him, I would want him to indicate such right now. It is a legitimate—

Sen. Howai: What I said was that the gaming industry is a legitimate part of—not casino industry—the gaming industry.

Dr. A. Browne: Mr. Speaker, he has just reinforced the point that I wish to make and I thank him for that. Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance and the Economy has said and he has now emphasized that, according to his Government, the view of his Government is that the gaming industry is a legitimate part of the entertainment sector. He said that in the context of a Bill which seeks to make provisions with regard to the registration of clubs and levies and so on, slot machines and casino operations, so let us not split hairs on what is a very clear issue.

So, fair enough, that is the view of the Government and they seem to have arrived at that position. But what is this based on? On what data is that decision based? What consultation has occurred to lead to the Government coming to that particular conclusion? What research has been conducted by the UNC to lead them to such a policy decision and announcement here in the Lower House of Parliament? There was no reference to social sector research, which I know and Members on this side know, has been conducted into gambling and gaming in Trinidad and Tobago. You have yet to hear any reference on this from the other side, because, maybe, that research is not in support of the conclusions that they have been dragging the population to.

In this area as in other areas, our decisions must be based on evidence and information, as opposed to surmise, conjecture or subjectivity or personal benefit;

not saying that there is any personal benefit in this particular matter, but we are just looking for that type of information evident.

Surprisingly, the Member for Chaguanas East actually made a constructive contribution to this particular issue. He rose to his legs briefly, and for five minutes stood here representing on behalf of the gaming industry, and the Member for Chaguanas East indicated—

Mr. Imbert: What?

Dr. A. Browne: Yes, you missed it—that in the Bahamas—he indicated, while he was so representing, that in the Bahamas there is a referendum going on, on gambling. I would want to ask him: why? Why is that country conducting that type of research? Why are they conducting—

Dr. Khan: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. A. Browne: They are conducting a referendum! Mr. Speaker, the Member for Barataria/San Juan is asleep in his chair; he is not even listening. They already are gambling. The industry is already regulated, but they are conducting a referendum. That is a different Government to the Government that we are saddled with in this country. They are consulting their population on this matter because they are concerned about the serious implications of casino gambling on their population. They are concerned about the implications and they are conducting that level of consultation with the public to the extreme of a referendum.

We have heard the promises of consultation and referenda on the other side. None has materialized in essence, but this is an area where we have a clear pronouncement by the Government today. They have presented no data, evidence, research or information to support it, but they have made a decision and “who vex loss” on this particular matter.

I would fear, to use the Prime Minister’s words, that there is a powerful lobby in existence in support of and on behalf of the casino gaming industry, and it would appear to me that they have found fertile ground to advance their lobbies at this time. I am judging from what I have heard and the pronouncements that have been made. In the absence of data, in the absence of evidence, in the absence of information, in the absence of research, they have made the decision on behalf of this country, while talking about the Bahamas and the fact that they are having a referendum at this time.

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Then, the Member for Chaguanas East also boasted; yes, he also took the rest of his time to boast about tourism in Tobago. That is not a surprise from a Minister of Tourism. He probably sees that as his job. First of all, he failed to acknowledge the role of the THA in the successes of any improvement in tourism in Tobago; but he also failed to consider how tourists and tourism will be affected when you have the head of a government making pronouncements about an entire island being possessed by fear. That must have an impact on the tourism that he was boasting about.

Just to move on from that point, you also have highly influential persons in society advising individuals not to go to Tobago. We are all aware of that and the Government has nothing to say on the matter. The Minister of Tourism has nothing to say on the matter and we must be worried when that is happening in this country. So, whatever the status of the tourism sector is at present, there are loud pronouncements being made at this time that the Government needs to respond to if they want to be called a responsible Government; otherwise they do not really care about tourism; they do not really care about Tobago in my view. But that has been pronounced on.

Clause 5 of this Bill also amends the Litter Act. Again, we were listening very closely to the Minister of Finance and the Economy and he spent a few seconds on this one in particular and he said a few things. In essence, the fine for littering in this country is now \$500. Wow! Is that really going to solve littering? We now have the Minister announce very grandly that the litter wardens—how many are there, about 200? Less than 200?

Mr. Jeffrey: 147.

Dr. A. Browne: One hundred and forty-seven litter wardens have now been dispatched into the byways of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, is there any citizen in this country who feels that that is going to solve the littering problem? I would hope there are not because that will never do it. No sensible person would come to that conclusion.

Mr. Speaker, obeying the law starts by the example of obeying the law, and whether it is littering outside Zen or littering on any highway or any byway, public officials must start obeying the law themselves and then we might see a difference.

Let us face it. A lot of littering occurs out of motor vehicles in this country and all of the rubbish you see at the sides of the roads and the highways it is a lot of people who are driving—the worse type of citizen—and they eat or consume

something and they just throw it out of the window. Sometimes you would see it even in front of a police vehicle. Someone is driving, they throw something out and they are ignored. They are not pulled aside and the existing laws are simply not enforced. I do not know if there is more motivation for a police officer to charge someone with a \$500 fine as opposed to a \$50 fine because the question is: are they implementing the law or are they not? So by changing the fine, I do not think you are addressing that.

The danger now is that you have these litter wardens out there, the temptation from our police officers is to say that is their work—just like the traffic wardens and so on—and there needs to be a very clear understanding as to the roles and responsibilities of the two. Is it that the police are no longer expected—because many of them are not doing it, but at least we have been expecting them to do it? Is it that we no longer have that expectation of the police service? I would want the Minister of Finance and the Economy to clarify these matters because, without clarification, the interpretation out there is not going to be what would benefit Trinidad and Tobago at all. So people have been doing this with impunity.

Then, how are these litter wardens going to cover the thousands of kilometres of roadway in this country? Are they on foot? Are they being given vehicles, bicycles, horse and carriage? How are they moving around to see what is going on? How would they patrol, let us say a highway? How is a litter warden going to stop the littering on the Diego Martin Highway?

The Minister of Finance and the Economy made the announcement. He gave the dates; he gave the numbers and so on. I would want him, as a responsible Minister, to give a little more information to make citizens feel that this is a good investment of their money, because this is our money, the taxpayers' dollars, going into this particular project. So, we would want some more information from the Government on this particular matter.

Then, there are so many remote areas where there is dumping and littering—the top of Morne Coco hill. The Member for Diego Martin North/East is very familiar with some of these spots. Are we going to have litter wardens walking up Morne Coco hill on foot, rain or shine, monitoring? How is this really going to work? Otherwise this is just another PR exercise and it is not like parking where you can focus, let us say, on a few urban areas and at least begin to address the problem.

This is a nationwide concern. It involves mobility—I do not know if they would have airborne resources; I have no clue, but the surveillance for littering

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cannot just be someone standing up in a nice cap and a uniform. You cannot expect them to have any impact. What our citizens would do, some of them, would be simply to drive past until they turn a corner from the litter warden, roll down the glass and throw the item out at the same time.

Mr. Speaker, sounds good, but we need to go a little beyond the headlines and to treat with this responsibly. This is a very touchy subject for citizens of the western peninsula because the uncontrolled littering and a number of other factors have been implicated in the worst natural disaster that we—it is not a smiling matter—we, the residents of that peninsula—you are smiling.

Miss Ramdial: I am not smiling.

Dr. A. Browne:—we, the residents of that peninsula experienced in August 2012. So everything that touches on that strikes a nerve in the western peninsula and we are very, very concerned about it.

I would move along, but just to suggest to the Government that if they are really concerned about reducing litter in our environment and in our water courses, they would get the police, first and foremost, to enforce the existing laws because they are not doing so in this regard; and they would also deploy CEPEP, URP and any other environmental resources in a much more strategic manner.

I heard the Member for St. Joseph, very diplomatically, complaining and then letting us know that those resources have been decreased in St. Joseph. I do not know that he could be happy about that as an MP, and no MP would be happy to see what is going on in the East-West Corridor and other parts of the country where the verges are overgrown, water courses—take a look into the Diego Martin River and see what is happening there. We are just begging for trouble once again. The Government clearly has not learned. They have not learned.

10.00 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, moving on to clause 9, and there was talk today by several Members opposite about jump-starting the construction industry. This appears to be one of the pet topics of the Minister of Finance and the Economy—jump-starting the construction industry in the future. In my view, Mr. Speaker, this Bill is yet another missed opportunity with regard to a key part of that industry's future, and that is the safety standards for buildings in Trinidad and Tobago. A finance Bill is an opportunity to make an intervention in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, we recently celebrated—well, observed, a very sombre anniversary in this country, quietly; a sombre anniversary, not a celebration,

because almost one year ago we lost a number of citizens in a horrific fire in Trou Macaque in Laventille. I believe it was about four citizens at that time. There were many pronouncements from public officials, MPs, the Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs, many others: “We are going to do this. We are going to look at safety, fire escapes, future construction—”, et cetera.

Now we have this Bill—in clause 9, we are seeking to further incentivize and jump-start construction in Trinidad and Tobago, but from then to now, we have heard precious little on that very important issue that deals with life and death, and the safety of our citizens.

So you have all of these existing HDC developments; I could speak to Powder Magazine and all of these others, where letters have been written with regard to fire safety—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the Member for Diego Martin Central has expired.

Motion made: That the hon. Member’s speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. *[Mr. N. Hypolite]*

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. Speaker: You may continue, hon. Member. *[Desk thumping]*

Dr. A. Browne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and to Members on both sides for their support of the extension. Mr. Speaker, the reality is that precious little, despite that old talk over a year ago, precious little has been done in this regard. This Bill would have been an opportunity to push us forward in that respect, but what do we have? Thousands, tens of thousands of our citizens are still living at great risk of fire in government buildings and non-governmental buildings across Trinidad and Tobago.

With a little more thought and a little more strategic intent, the Government could have taken us a step in the right direction. When talking about clause 9, jump-starting the construction industry to ensure that all such construction—via incentives and penalties—is done on a more responsible manner even when the State is doing their construction. So we could argue about who built the buildings in 1950-whatever or 1960-whatever, but a lot of that has now passed us. What we can discuss is how we move forward from here, or what I can tell you is that it has been a nine-day wonder in this country.

After those funerals there were so many pronouncements, precious little has been done and our citizens are still at great jeopardy, with no fire escapes, no fire

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equipment; you go into some of these apartment buildings, the entire system has broken down. As an MP, I have written to the Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs, the HDC and the relevant agencies, and there has been no response, whatsoever. So we can sit and twiddle our fingers and so on, but these are real issues, these are people issues and they need to be dealt with, with urgency.

The Members on the other side made a big deal about things like this before, and they rightfully criticized the lax standards that have been applied. They rightfully made those criticisms but it turns out that their talk was just old talk, and nothing really has been done in this regard. The warning to this Government is if you do not learn from those types of disasters—look at what happened in Brazil, Mr. Speaker, with over 200 persons incinerated. If you do not learn from these disasters you are destined to see a repeat. If the Government did not learn from that fire over a year ago, when dealing with the construction sector, dealing with state and non-state housing, we are in for trouble in the future. Sorry to say it, but it is true.

They did not learn from those floods in Diego Martin and other parts of the country as well, Pointe-a-Pierre and other places; they did not learn from that. We are destined to repeat those disasters. I am tempted to say, if they did not learn from the disaster in Tobago—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: No!

Dr. A. Browne: I would not say it, Mr. Speaker. I would not yield to that temptation.

Dr. Moonilal: It was a disaster, yes. It was a disaster, you are quite right.

Dr. A. Browne: Well, I see the Member for Oropouche East is admitting that their performance was disastrous on that island. Mr. Speaker, I do not want to delay too much longer, but you would hear my plug, trying to plug in this Bill, the need to clean those watercourses because the situation would get worse.

Mr. Speaker, a lot of talk in this debate involves prudent management of the economy, but every day we see evidence of exactly the contrary in Trinidad and Tobago. You talk to any member of the private sector and they tell you they are struggling under this Government, and I have made the observation before because it is the truth. The private sector representatives say they always do better under a PNM Government than when the PNM is out of power. [*Desk thumping*] The UNC has been struggling with this reality but it is the truth.

Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the Minister of Finance and the Economy, when these Bills and when the budget and so on have been read, is aware of how some of the Ministries that fall under his guidance as the economic manager—how some of the Ministries have been expending those resources. I wonder if he is fully aware, and maybe we need to take the opportunity of this Bill to make the Minister aware of some of these expenditures. We were just talking about the social sector, and the fact that the Minister of Finance and the Economy chose to leave the income ceiling for that grant at \$1,000 per month, \$12,000 per annum.

Mr. Speaker, it cannot be due to a lack of resources because I have been informed, and I stand to be corrected, that the entire staff of that Ministry was recently taken to the Hyatt hotel for dinner.

Dr. Moonilal: When?

Dr. A. Browne: Yes, the Hyatt.

Dr. Moonilal: Mine?

Mr. A. Browne: Not your Ministry, you must be more responsible. To the Hyatt hotel and I have been informed—and if the Minister wishes to contest the figure he is free to do so—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*].

Dr. A. Browne: Yes, Member for Caroni Central.

Mr. Hypolite: “And cannot fix the woman house.”

Dr. A. Browne: No. No. “Doh” tell me that old lady’s house has not been fixed. Mr. Speaker, over \$700,000—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: What?

Dr. A. Browne:—\$700,000 was expended in that one night of dining at the Hyatt hotel.

Hon. Member: “Oh my lord!”

Mrs. Mc Intosh: \$700—?

Dr. A. Browne: If that information is wrong I am very open to correction or adjustment by the Minister, but that is the information that came from the Ministry. So, Mr. Speaker, if it is an issue of lack of access to finances to vary the income ceiling, then it is expenditure like that. Now, of course, previously, a decision was taken that alcohol would not be served at functions of that Ministry

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because of the nature of its social sector responsibility; of course that decision has gone to the wind. So you can ask yourselves how much of that money was expended in liquid refreshments.

That was just one example of the Minister of Finance and the Economy paying closer attention to how that expenditure is conducted, and another one involves the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure. So we come here and we have these finance Bills and we are looking at the prudent management of the economy, and the Minister of Finance and the Economy seems to have convinced himself, but I think he is acting on a lack of information.

Mr. Minister, I see you are paying attention now. There was a consultation in Diego Martin recently by the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure dealing with construction, major infrastructure—this is the highway expansion project—and, Mr. Speaker, the residents came out, encouraged by their MPs, came to this consultation and they warned the Minister, loudly—the media was there—that some of the plans being implemented at this time are dangerous. To put a major traffic light infrastructure on this expanded highway is going to be a recipe for chaos and further traffic. And you know what is going to happen?

The Government has shown all signs of moving right ahead—notwithstanding the overwhelming voice of the residents—to do exactly that. And what is going to happen is that we are going to have to find more money afterwards to solve that exact problem. You are seeing the money being expended at this time, and before, to remove the traffic lights on the highways going from east to west, and we are going in the opposite direction in the western peninsula.

So that is an example of the Minister of Finance and the Economy at least being aware that while he is there in the Ministry, some of these government Ministries are really not operating in a prudent fashion. You cannot even fool yourself to say that they are operating in a prudent manner.

The final point coming out of that consultation—as I have the ear of the Minister—has to do with the fact that there is already very serious flooding in the Four Roads and Victoria Gardens community. This new highway expansion—and residents understand it. They stood up, they shouted at the Minister, “We are going to have problems with increased flooding unless you deal with the drainage infrastructure that connects below the highway to the Diego Martin River”; a small drain runs through Victoria Gardens and Four Roads.

It is certain, unless the Government varies its steady course on this project and unless they take care of that drainage concern, this highway is going to cause

severe and devastating flooding to Victoria Gardens, Four Roads and environs. It has been said and we shall see. I am hoping the Government is not too late to address some of these factors. But you know what, and I will not dwell on it much further, the drainage division has now been moved from the Ministry into another Ministry, and there is a whole mix-up.

The Government is totally confused and you saw that with the estimates recently—everything being shifted around, it is confused. You know why it is confused, Member for Couva North? And she feels it is her duty to defend her sector. We had that consultation and not a single representative of the drainage division was present to inform, advise or respond.

Miss Ramdial: Probably we were not invited.

Dr. A. Browne: Well then you have to blame the Minister of Works and Infrastructure for not recognizing that the drainage division had not been invited.

Miss Ramdial: Who [*Inaudible*]

Dr. A. Browne: If this was a responsible PNM government under the Member for Diego Martin North/East with regard to Works and Infrastructure, Mr. Speaker, I am certain the drainage division would have been there, and when you—[*Desk thumping*] Mr. Speaker, it is those—what they are claiming are minor things, that is nothing—the end result of that type of thinking is a natural disaster. That is how these things work, so overlook it. Member for Couva North, you are doing a fine job.

Miss Ramdial: I am not overlooking it.

Dr. A. Browne: Great is the UNC.

Miss Ramdial: I am not overlooking it.

Dr. A. Browne: We will see the results, Mr. Speaker. [*Interruption*] I am going to move on from that point. Mr. Speaker, this is now—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Member for Couva North, please.

Miss Ramdial: Sorry. Sorry.

Dr. A. Browne: She has achieved sufficient to be described as interrupting me at this time. Mr. Speaker, I am going to wrap up very shortly—[*Desk thumping*]*—*but I think I need to say—

Mrs. Mc Intosh: “Talk boy, talk.”

Dr. A. Browne: Yes, exactly. I think I am going to go on a little more because clearly there is some enthusiasm on the other side, Mr. Speaker. So that is really the wrong approach and the Minister of Finance and the Economy needs to be aware of these things.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Couva South boasted about equity in constituency resources, and he thought he was responding to the Member for Point Fortin when he did so. He boasted about that, Mr. Speaker. He said something about “as the resources increase we will then be able to give more to other constituencies”—something along those lines, I heard him carefully.

Mr. Speaker, and then the Minister of Finance and the Economy also referenced the issue of school construction when he was “explatiating” about jump-starting the construction sector. I wonder if that Minister of Finance and the Economy is aware of the ongoing disaster at the Diego Martin North Secondary School, under the watch of this Government.

Mr. Indarsingh: What happen [*Inaudible*]?

Dr. A. Browne: You need to be aware of it because if you are talking about school construction and resources for schools construction, decisions are being made and not made at the Ministry of Education that are having a devastating impact on the lives—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Refresh our memory on that.

Dr. A. Browne: I will refresh your memory right now. Mr. Speaker, by request of the Member for Couva South, I need to inform the Minister of Finance and the Economy that the entire school community of Diego Martin North/Central Secondary has literally been displaced for two terms now, and why? Why has that happened? The Minister comes here every year boasting about construction during the holidays and so on, the school officials made their requests in writing, I have seen them. They were ignored by the Ministry of Education.

An entire August vacation came and went—nothing was done. They broke down the existing classrooms, two blocks of classrooms. They did not replace those classrooms so you have decreased classroom space, and then they sent more students in September—a larger number of students were then sent in September. The end result—disaster.

10.15 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, we are now in January. The Minister visited with me in November and made a lot of promises. What is going on there now is even worse

than before, because it is now a full construction environment—a worksite during the school term. The vacation, not a nail was hammered—during the August vacation—and we now have the students, virtually all have been displaced. The school is a dust cloud, and no one is paying any attention. The Minister of Finance and the Economy needs to be aware of these things.

I spoke to the Minister of Education—I am not going to dwell on it much further—and told him that these students were out there. Some of them are involved in child labour and all sorts of other things, roaming the streets. There is one guidance counsellor for a number of schools in the area. At least in the meantime, increase the social support to that school community. Of course, nothing was done. That is heartlessness; that cannot be prudent management of any resources. That is educational irresponsibility, and that is going to result in a further disaster in the lives of these families. That is reckless, dangerous and is another serious constituency matter that the Minister of Finance and the Economy needs to be aware of, especially when boasting about school construction.

This Government has been in office for over two and a half years. I do not think the students deserve that type of neglect. I hope they would not come and say, “Well, the PNM should have built the classrooms.” Let me just say for clarity: they broke down the existing classrooms, two blocks of them, and did not replace them, and they sent a larger student body in September—reckless irresponsibility.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre spoke at length about the issue of social protection. I just want to make a point to him and his Government: that is a little broader than that matter. That issue, social protection, has been referenced by the Minister of Finance and the Economy, and all that is well and good. But there is another type of protection that the nation needs, and it is not the manner in which they have defined it; it is societal protection.

The Prime Minister referenced the issue of fear, but I am going to go even further than that. I always examine every Finance Bill to see if it responds to the reality that in this sweet paradise of Trinidad and Tobago there are two economies. There is the formal economy that the Minister of Finance and the Economy is managing and that we are addressing today, and there is another economy, a sinister narco-economy in Trinidad and Tobago.

When I look at the decisions taken in the past, I look where we are now, I look just at the lack of action, the lack of conviction of major offenders, importers and so on. Any intelligent citizen would recognize that while we are trying to manage this economy, that other economy is flourishing, unmitigated at this time. We can

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sit here and amend all of these Acts: Special Reserve Police Act, Retiring Allowances Act, Motor Vehicles Act, Income Tax Act. We could talk about jump-starting the formal economy, et cetera, et cetera. We need to recognize that all sectors are affected by that narco reality: the casino sector, the construction sector, the real estate sector, the labour sector, the tourism sector, the social sector, the Judiciary definitely and the political sector are all affected.

So, Mr. Speaker, Minister of Finance and the Economy, “do your do”, but if better measures are not taken by your Government—this Government—to protect our borders and enforce the law, our economy, our society, our citizens and our children will be crippled and destroyed by an increasing drug scourge that is silent but deadly. I believe that is the most important threat to our future and our economy, and that must be the priority of any sober government.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

The Minister of the People and Social Development (Hon. Dr. Glenn Ramadharsingh): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate that is replete with measures that will continue to change the socio-economic landscape of Trinidad and Tobago by the People’s Partnership Government. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Sharma: Well said, well said!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: We are driven by the mantra that we started with, the work—that is, to serve the people, do the groundwork, serve the people, continue the relations, serve the people, keep the mission, serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] And we will not be distracted by the ravings and rantings of those who want to see the world through their own lens and not through the lens of reality.

I listened to the Member for Diego Martin Central, and his best point was when he misquoted me when I responded to the Member for Point Fortin, who indicated that she did not need all those hampers. I said, “Well you would curtail your request.” Instead the Member disingenuously used it to spin it in a way while he was on his feet, completely not allowing any response.

Mr. Sharma: Propaganda. [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. Browne: Member, would you give way?

Hon. Members: No! No! [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: The dignity of being a gentleman in that way does not become him. But I will get to the real points in this finance debate. [Interruption] Mr. Speaker, if I could get some peace in which I could operate in my space here at this time. [Laughter]

The Member would be listened to because he ended his contribution speaking about the narco reality that haunts Trinidad and Tobago and what are the real issues. But he did not end his last contribution in like manner. In fact, he was deafeningly silent today on the matter that he was most concerned with the last time he spoke in this House.

I wish to quote from the *Hansard* of October 26, 2012. [Interruption] I will do that in any contribution; I will congratulate him, no problem. He said:

There is a bigger and more serious narrative that we should not miss at all, that has to do with the weakness of the system and that has happened and continues to happen. Financiers continue to be very active in the politics of this country, and we need to acknowledge that, and they continue to try to get as close as possible to MPs if they determine who are in favour and who is high up in the Government. They will continue to try to get closer, and it is happening. Wealthy people, millionaires working very hard to achieve that type of advancement. Not nice people in the main. Vicious, ugly, aggressive, greedy people that have no compulsion whatsoever; no principle politically, are not founded on anything. Every investment in politics is a business.

He continues for a very long while, and also went on to say that:

It affects all parties, parliamentarians, Ministers and public officials, and that we must begin to voice our opinion on this matter on both sides of the House.

But I find him deafeningly silent on the millions of dollars being spent by his political party on a convention and a political election, but he speaks glibly about all other matters in this debate, but does not speak to the matter that he was most gravely concerned with just about two months ago.

Dr. Browne: But you just quoted me.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: You were deafeningly silent today, Sir, on that matter that you were so troubled about, and you saw the newspaper ads, you saw the political advertisements, you saw the TV ads, you know how much they cost, and you said nothing, because your party probably is in the ascendancy in that regard. You were deafeningly silent, but replete with misinformation, misguiding the population of Trinidad and Tobago. [Crosstalk]

Dr. Browne: I will say it in every debate.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: I do not know how to please this particular MP, and I do not think he knows how to please his constituents. I hear him talking about places that he has not visited in years in his own constituency.

Dr. Browne: Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 36(10).

Mr. Sharma: Sit down, sit down!

Dr. Browne: Standing Order 36(10).

Mr. Sharma: What is that? [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Well, I do not think the Standing Order is relevant. But I want you to be guided. Listen, Member, if you can speak to me it would save a lot of crosstalk. Member for Diego Martin Central, you have just had your full hour and whatever, 30 minutes or 15 minutes. Would you be kind enough to allow the Member for Caroni Central to speak in silence, and not to engage in crosstalk. Continue, hon. Member for Caroni Central.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just to note, I left him in full vocal regalia without disturbing his trot or his pace at all.

Some of his points were directed of course at social welfare. He indicated that promises for the elderly do not materialize. We go to the talk shows. We take the senior citizens to the secondary schools in what is the intergenerational conversation, so that they could speak to the secondary school students about their experiences and begin a process of mentorship.

We have just had the first senior citizens cultural pageant that was held at the Capital Plaza, [*Desk thumping*] where we had senior citizens from throughout the country participate, appreciate them, 60 and 70 years—the Member for La Brea is an old stalwart, he should have been among one of the contestants. [*Laughter*] The performance he gave today, he should have read us some statistics, because 50 per cent unemployment in La Brea—I feel he is a bit off the mark there. It has to be a bit of comic relief.

Mr. Sharma: You need some rope for the goat.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Anyhow, getting back to the issue here, Mr. Speaker. We meet the senior citizens. We entreat with them, and if there are issues to be dealt with we will deal with them. But the vast majority of the senior citizens of this country are breathing a sigh of relief that they are getting service in this manner. [*Mr. Speaker pounds desk*]

Mr. Speaker: Member for La Brea and Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, please.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: And the argument about my learned colleague, the Member for Couva South. He comes from a background of trade unionism, fighting for the people, for truth and justice, knowing what it is to struggle, to walk the streets in the hot sun, sometimes not even having the luxury of a cup of water or a glass of water, because you have a march that has hundreds and thousands behind you and the water is about a mile or two down the road. So you have to be scorched in the sun in the interest of the people.

When he says that people feel more comforted that it has been changed from a senior citizens grant to a senior citizens pension, he knows what he is talking about. People feel that when you say you are giving them a grant, it sounds like a handout, it sounds as if you could take it back any time. There is not a sense of comfort or a sense of security. What the People's Partnership did as their first act in the Parliament was to give a symbol of our commitment and to demonstrate a promise fulfilled, back to the senior citizens pension, and do away with the grant. That is what we did as the People's Partnership. [*Desk thumping*] That was a psychological victory for senior citizens who are frail and weak and afraid of that word "grant", who were quibbling when they heard that word "grant" every month.

Now they do not even have to worry about the pension cheque. The same pension cheque that in a former administration when you lost it, you had to wait a horrifying six months because the archaic laws on the book did not allow the accounting department of the Ministry to write another cheque for the person. So they had to wait a horrifying six months.

Mr. Roberts: "Suffering the people."

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: In the first Finance Bill that we brought to this Parliament, we changed that law, so people only had to wait one month and they would get it—from six months. Those are the initiatives that the elderly look at and seize, they feel it. Therefore, there is a sense of security. So it is not only the senior citizens pension, but it is the secure senior citizens pension given by this administration. So that is what we have done for our senior citizens.

Then, almost with a total lack of logic, he compliments his colleague, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, for making a point about the amount of money we gave to the differently abled community. Now you have to listen to this. The Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West said, "Oh, allyuh giving \$200 in dis day and age; what yuh go buy with dat?"

Mrs. Mc Intosh: I do not speak like that.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: I do not have the benefit of the *Hansard*. I will repeat your accurate, very specific words, but I am paraphrasing, if that is allowed.

Mrs. Mc Intosh: I do not speak like that. [*Crosstalk*]

10.30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, let me just indicate, my responsibility is to guide, to caution, to advise and warn. I have done that. I will then act later after these. You cannot be engaging in a running commentary whilst another Member is on his legs. You are in breach of the Standing Orders. I have appealed to Members over and over and over. You keep ignoring my warnings. I will have to act. So I am just warning Members on both sides, please allow the Member to speak in silence and if you want to speak and you have not spoken, kindly take notes. But you cannot be continuing how you are going. Hon. Member, continue, please.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I will lead by example and take it down a bit. The Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West made a contribution where she said, "what dey go do wit that money?" She called it a "pawsly."

Mr. Roberts: "Pawsly."

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: "Pawsly" amount of money which we are still trying to research that word to see if we find it in any dictionary—

Mrs. Mc Intosh: Paltry.

Mr. Roberts: No, you said "pawsly".

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—in the English-speaking Caribbean or the English-speaking world for that matter. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. De Coteau: Principal.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: So she says the money is not enough. "Yeah, yeah". We took your correction, and we thank you principal. But the Member for Diego Martin Central says and I want to concur with my colleague who said en passant, who contributed on this matter, but what about the sustainability? What about the global financial outlook? In other words, inferring if we could afford the \$200. He knows fully well that it takes more than \$36 million to give a measure

like that to the differently abled. That is the commitment of this partnership government, to spend that kind of money, [*Desk thumping*] to give an increase in a mid-term where you have no electoral benefit. Well you give that to the people because it was about time. And you know why? Because we have been creating the enabling environment—

Mr. Roberts: Yes.

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—before because we did not want it to appear that we give money and run.

Hon. Member: No.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: We were creating that caring, enabling environment, the infrastructure to support the differently abled [*Crosstalk*] and I would tell you, Mr. Speaker, that that would not come overnight. We are not walking around with social welfare magic wands, but we are walking around with a social welfare vision for the development and empowerment of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Yes.

Mr. Roberts: Preach, man, preach.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Then the MP, the former Minister, has—

Hon. Member: The audacity.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—the audacity, thank you—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Temerity.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—to talk about decentralization. Mr. Speaker, you want to tell the people in Toco about the Ministry of the People and Social Development? You want to tell the people of Cedros and Icaos where the Ministry of the People and Social Development was in Guayaguayare? You want to tell the people of Balmain in Couva? You want to tell the people in Tobago? You want to tell the people in La Horquetta? You want to tell the people of Mayaro, in Guayaguayare? In Cuchawan Trace?

Dr. Moonilal: Oh, yes!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Do you know where it was? It was in Port of Spain!

Mr. Roberts: Oh, yes!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—the library, the social development library in the Ministry of the People and Social Development.

Mr. Roberts: Where it is now?

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: They had two outreach exercises in a period of three years and it was held in collaboration with other stakeholders in the social sector.

Mr. Roberts: Yes man.

Hon. Member: That is not true.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: And they have the temerity—

Mr. Roberts: Give them the facts.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—to talk.

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Crosstalk*] Ministry in Couva.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—about decentralization. Decentralization in the first year between January 2010, and May 2010 before the People's Partnership came into Government—you know how many people got serviced by the Ministry of the People and Social Development? Three thousand and ten clients walked through the doors of our 14 social welfare officers. Those are facts. You can get your people to check it. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Roberts: We did not disturb you.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: From June 2010 to December 2010 we saw 12,000 people—

Mr. Roberts: Oh good!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—through the length and breadth [*Desk thumping*] of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Member: Yes, man!

Mr. Roberts: Yes, man!

Mr. Indarsingh: That is the difference. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: That is performance.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: We were to take that figure—

Mr. Roberts: Four hundred per cent more.

Dr. Khan: And PNM people in that too.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Everyone. Everyone. We saw red, black and white. Those were the colours that we were dealing with.

Mr. Roberts: Four hundred per cent.

Mr. Indarsingh: Leadership.

Mr. Roberts: Performance.

Dr. Khan: Ask the Member for St. Joseph? [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: We then intensified those exercises in 2011 and we were able to reach the target of 30,000.

Mr. Roberts: Oh, good!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Today because these things [*Desk thumping*] are part of the nature of the work—

Mr. Roberts: Well done.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—the figure continues to increase.

Mr. Roberts: Well done.

Mr. Volney: That is performance.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: So, the decentralization that he was talking about to help harmonize and ensure case and social workers with well-trained persons it is taking place.

Hon. Member: Yes.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: And this development—because how it works is that, first of all, the best surgical equipment—the Minister of Health would tell you—is of no use if it is locked up in a surgical room that no one has access to. Yes. The best law books in the country, the Member for St. Joseph would tell you, are of no use if the normal lawyers in the practice cannot access it. It is when you take the resources that you have—

Hon. Member: To the people.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—to the people, then you engage in a constructive exercise [*Desk thumping*] of nation building. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: He is waxing warm there.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: It is very difficult to tell—[*Interruption*—I move on.

Hon. Member: Move on, move on. Forget him.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—very difficult to tell the difference between the Member for La Brea now and the Member for La Brea five years ago—[*Crosstalk*—the difference between a government Minister and a Member of Parliament. He seems to be totally throwing up his hands in the air hopelessly [*Laughter*] asking about the Vance River Ground, [*Laughter*] the Vessigny beach, the La Brea Community Centre, but he is asking some very intellectual questions today—your fishing policy.

Mr. Sharma: I am scared to use the rope from the goat.

Hon. Member: “Yuh buy a goat?”

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: I am very impressed with my own Member of Parliament. I am a bit disappointed in his statistics.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: The employment figure is off the charts there. [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: “He running behind goat.” [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: But may I spend a little time, Mr. Speaker, on the Member for Diego Martin North/East, and I call him “voop and run”. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Roberts: Eighteen is bad.

Hon. Member: Run?

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: “Voop and run”. Those of us who grew up in the—[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: No, you cannot call the Member [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Sorry, Mr. Speaker. [*Crosstalk*] I withdraw that remark, but what I meant is that his actions mirror that—he comes in and he pelts a lot of shots [*Crosstalk*] and then you just seeing him running in a pitch or sorts. But he is never here to really—I remember, to answer the case—the Member the last time we did the budget, went on for almost 45 minutes scaring

the country, and I have his contribution here about gas prices and how they are going to hurt at the pump, and how the law is bad and nothing came of it. That is the kind of hullabaloo that we have to deal with from time to time—talking about the eight-wheel vehicles when the Member for Fyzabad knows that there was a special request from a particular group. He probably knows it too, but he carries on as if to frighten and scare the population.

Hon. Member: Yes, yes.

Mr. Sharma: Nobody takes him on.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: But, thankfully nobody is really alarmed any more as we all have grown accustomed to this; carrying on about self-employed persons and scaring people—if they have a little snow cone machine that they would have to do this big thing, put them out of business—when in fact, the Minister of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development spoke to the facilitation of small business as a key engine for the development of the economy of Trinidad and Tobago.

Then the Member spoke about broken promises. Well, Mr. Speaker, I was trying to load up the broken promises of the PNM government on the new iPads and I was getting serious trouble—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Roberts: “It crash.” [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—because of the storage capacity. [*Laughter*] [*Desk thumping*] “I doh think those iPads ready for the kind of information that we want to put.” I had five Excel documents, each with about 400 pages, [*Laughter*] in different categories, but I would try to give you—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Roberts: I did not even have gigabytes.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—just three. He is saying that we—broken promises—what about the Point Fortin Hospital? What about the Oncology Centre? The highway? Biometric card? I cannot go through my entire list, but I can send the Members on that side an email or a few emails that would remind them of all the things they have promised. Indeed, not in this debate, we all have to take on a half an hour just to stick to the broken promises. The Member tries to do that every time.

In fact, in the budget of 2011 the Member said—he mentions these promises and says not done, not done, before he even gets a chance to say, yes we did. For the elderly, government would launch the elderly mobile service; not done. He

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turns to the Member for Diego Martin Central: do you know anything about an elderly mobile service? A figment of someone's imagination. A figment? We have 24 buses on the road for the elderly and the differently abled. [*Desk thumping*] It is called the Eldamo project, and people cry when they know that they can call 8004DIAL—400DIAL, that is it, and they can get a bus to pick up a differently abled child.

Hon. Member: Yes, man.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: An elderly who is differently abled; Eldamo. [*Desk thumping*] But, there in the appropriation financial year of 2012; Member for Diego Martin Central do you know anything about an elderly mobile shoppers service? Figment of someone's imagination.

Mr. Roberts: “All ah dat?”

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Not so.

Mr. Roberts: Misleading.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Not so. He continues in the same contribution. Other major projects for the next fiscal year include a new wing at the San Fernando General Hospital. Start yet? Mr. Speaker, I was so proud the day when the Prime Minister and the Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs and the Minister of Health opened that new wing at San Fernando where so many people have done without a bed and we are giving so many new beds to the people of the south region. [*Desk thumping*] But there they are, carrying on. The Chancery Lane extension of the hospital—

Hon. Member: Two hundred and fifty-six beds.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—256 beds. A project that started—\$550 million was spent on. The original cost was targeted to be \$720 million. We came in, the only hospital the people had was the one that the British government built for them in 1958.

Mr. Roberts: Oh goodness!

Hon. Member: Shame!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Not much expansion since then. Dr. Moonilal, the MP for Oropouche East, tells the sad story of a lady who came in and had to wait outside in the walkway and sleep on a bench because there was no bed, and in the morning when she was hungry and she saw food she enquired whether she could get a meal and they said, no, you do not have a bed and because of that we cannot give you a meal. That is the kind of—[*Interruption*]

Dr. Moonilal: That is PNM.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—dehumanization that the people had to endure.

Mr. Roberts: Not that the PNM.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Now, for \$30 million more than was budgeted, we are now able to provide the people of San Fernando and South a 256-bed facility.

Mr. Roberts: Yes, man! Yes! “Praise de Lord!” [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Well done! Well done!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Same speech—Mr. Imbert says, next year we will finally build the oft-promised National Oncology Centre. “Yuh eh even move a blade ah grass,” he says. Today, just this week, the Minister of Health says that the tenders have been closed.

Dr. Khan: This week.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: This week. [*Desk thumping*] And the Oncology Centre for persons suffering from cancer will finally be built.

Mr. Samuel: “And Arima coming”.

Mr. Indarsingh: “Point coming”.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—talking about our social [*Crosstalk*] protection measures.

Dr. Khan: Evaluation in three months and—[*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: In every sphere of human activity we can see improvement. In the area of national security we are beginning to see several improvements in the way the crime—you are seeing that in the area of murder for 2009 it was 507; for 2012—377, in our time. In 2009 you had cases of break-ins, 685; in 2012, 568—100 less—but these figures are in the public domain. But certainly our social protection measures are taking effect.

Mr. Roberts: Yes, man.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: The CSO says that the poverty level has reduced from 18.7 to 14.8!

Mr. Roberts: Yes, man! [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—under this administration. [*Desk thumping*] While there is still too much poverty in Trinidad and Tobago for an oil and gas rich nation, for a government to have been carrying poverty levels of 24 and 28 per cent in Mayaro and 28 per cent in La Brea, that was unacceptable, we have taken down these figures now to 14.8—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Roberts: Yes, man!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—under the Partnership Government. [*Desk thumping*] And the work continues. Because, Mr. Speaker—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: “That is CSO figures?”

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—the Director General of the ILO, Juan Somavia, pointed out that:

“Through war and peace, the depression and economic growth, governments, workers and employers have continued to come together in dialogue around our table of shared values: that work must be a source of dignity; that labour is not a commodity; and that poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere.”

Those are the words that we hold dearly.

10.45 p.m.

Our Pillar (2) is Poverty Eradication and Social Justice to create conditions, better conditions for the people of Trinidad and Tobago; to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger and to continue to decrease the persons living in poverty by 2 per cent per annum. People must continue to be the centre of development and one of the measures today in this budget that—[*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Budget?

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—in this Finance Bill that will help the people of Trinidad and Tobago did not come here by accident. It was rooted in the philosophy of the People’s Partnership Government. We brought a manifesto to the people and the section on page 42—I know you all had a copy that you would walk with every session, but you may not have it, so it is page 42:

“We recognize the differently-abled as possessing potential which should be developed for the well-being of the individual and the entire nation. We will fully integrate persons with disabilities into the society and provide the highest standards of specialized education, health care, and social services to assist them to achieve personal independence, to reach their fullest potential

and enjoy a decent standard of living. In this regard, our Government will collaborate with NGOs, FBOs and the private sector to deliver programmes to address the needs of the differently-abled.

Our Government will ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy full equality, especially in the areas of education, (for example, facilities including classrooms, washrooms, seating...) and the necessary regulatory legislative framework to be established to ensure equal access...We will institute a regime of tax concessions and devices...for the disabled. We will review the disability grant with a view to increasing benefits.”

And this in clause 7 of the Bill says that we will amend section 11A(3) of the Public Assistance Act to increase the monthly disability assistance grant from \$1,300 to \$1,500, a promise delivered.

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

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: If this were the only measure I would not be so proud but, as I said, we did so many other things, continuing to recognize the international day of persons with disabilities.

For the first time the mothers of cerebral palsy children do not have to beg and eke out an existence from their families who may already be of low income, because you know these things call for lots of money—with milk, special medical equipment and special care—and the mothers have to leave their jobs so they can take care of the child that they brought into the earth. Some mothers cannot leave their job and they have to ask a caregiver and entrust their child who is very delicate to someone who just needs a job, and there is almost a painful encounter or exit when the mother has to go to work and when she has to come back home to see her child.

Under this Government, while they were protesting in the streets, and we spoke to them, every mother of a cerebral palsy child can access employment today for \$84.50 to take care of her own child. [*Desk thumping*] Also, we were able for the first time to give a subvention to the cerebral palsy society so that they could bring in physiotherapists—before, they would go to MPs. Myself contributed, Prakash Ramadhar, the MP for St. Augustine, and other MPs and Minister contributed when we heard of the plight, and today they have their own \$74,500 subvention of which they can get physiotherapy at least twice a year, and we will continue to work with other societies so that the smaller groups can access what the large groups were accessing, and the smaller groups can use it for specialized work.

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We brought out the *Dictionary of Trinidad and Tobago* in sign language, so that now you have—you can now sign language our local culture, our art form, tassa, paratha, steel band, mas, all of these have their own signs now in Trinidad and Tobago, our unique culture. We did this in our term.

We will raise from the ground, just like we are doing to the San Fernando General Hospital, in terms of medical and health care. The only thing, we have to take care of the differently abled children, a remnant from the colonial past—the Princess Elizabeth Home, the Lady Hochoy Home—things that were given to us in colonial times, since then nothing has been done with local resources by the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago where people could walk in without accounting to a board, but a board that is recognized and put there by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. We would raise from the ground the \$11.5 million facility for the differently abled.

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

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: We see this not as a big building but we see it as a big-hearted building.

Mr. Roberts: All right. “Aaah”, all right. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Not as a large structure but we see it as a smart structure—[*Interruption*]—because we would put in there the software and the technology to link with the greatest minds in the world in the care for the differently abled children.

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

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: And we would do this while the hospital for children is being built not too far in the lands of Carlsen Field. Therefore, while we do this work, larger work is coming that will dovetail into the work that takes place now. So, Mr. Speaker, lots of things are happening, and we are very, very happy to be part of this work.

Mr. Roberts: And much more to come.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: And there is much, much more to come.

With regard to the comment made before about the automatic—and I will get to that. In fact, it was in the 2012 budget, the Minister of Finance, the hon. Winston Dookeran at the time, received a party from the Ministry of the People and Social Development, where we did ask for an increase in the disability grant, and he told us that it was under review and as soon as he had adjusted the

economy, with the Clico debacle and the HCU matter, that they would look favourably at an increase because it would indeed cost about \$36 million more.

At that time we did in fact talk about a series of non-financial measures that could have created a more enabling environment for the differently abled, and so it was that we said that a person who is differently abled must receive an automatic food card. They should not—we have heard of too many cases where the person is at home in a wheelchair. They cannot work and they have to then go to the social welfare offices and sometimes they may not be receptive, because the systems have to work—the institutions—it is not about personalities. It was in that budget, the 2011 budget in fact, that the Minister included that we intend to give the following measures to the differently abled: grants will be paid to single mothers who are the caregivers of a special child where the income is inadequate to support the family.

Today, Mr. Speaker, I am happy to report that Cabinet has approved this decision and arrangements are being made to amend the public welfare Act to include this measure that will come very soon. Individuals who are differently abled will automatically qualify for the food support under the food card programme. This measure is a measure we devolved at the social welfare offices. We do this when the cases come to us, but the system will kick in after our consultations with the differently abled community.

We abide by the rule, nothing for the differently abled without consulting the differently abled, and we are still working out the parameters and policy for that automatic food card to be given out, but we do give it through the MPs' offices and through the social welfare offices when the differently abled persons do apply. But we are working with the 40 or so differently abled organizations that represent the 7 per cent of our population that form the differently abled community—almost 50,000 persons in number, Mr. Speaker. That is the kind of work that we are doing. We are not rushing to go anywhere. *[Interruption]*

We are doing things systematically so that we can create the true paradigm shift in the delivery of social services in Trinidad and Tobago by these changes to the Public Assistance Act.

All persons with a disability will be able to access free transportation on the PTSC system. Specially designed buses for the differently abled—well I spoke to that—that is now delivered under the Partnership Government. All disabled persons who wish to further their education and enter the labour market, via business development training, will benefit from a scholarship of \$5,000. This is

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another policy that is being worked out with the groups, the differently abled groups, so that we can truly lead the differently abled on an empowerment programme so that they can develop themselves and so, not depend on the State for any welfare, but find jobs of their own that they can—that they can account for.

I had the pleasure to visit Tower D. I was going to see another Minister, and while I was there I asked the receptionist, I would like to see, I think it was the Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs, and she made the call, and she has one hand. She said, “yuh doh recognize me? I met you and you met me in a disaster and you told me where to meet you and I came and you gave me the letter, and today I got this job through the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development.”

Mr. Sharma: “Yeah man, yeah man, yeah man.”

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: That is the kind of work we want for the differently abled community, that they may be lacking in some way but they will make up for it with the motivation, the inspiration, the leap forward with the encouragement and support of the Ministry and the officials that serve them on a daily basis.

Also, with respect to our senior citizens—beyond moving from six months where they have to wait for a pension cheque that is stolen, mutilated or destroyed, and reducing that to one month—today the senior citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, at the end of the month, receive their pension money directly into the account; it is called “direct deposit”. [*Desk thumping*] More than 41,000 persons are now receiving that pension, so they do not have to worry about TTPost—

Mr. Roberts: And lining up.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—“doh” want to go because it is a crime-ridden area, or because of some incident of elderly abuse, or because some perpetrator or some lawless person steals the cheques and tries to encash them. Today that money goes directly into the account, and 41,000 persons now access this service, and that is the reality that they are afraid to confront. Where those 41,000 persons were at the mercy and behest of criminal elements who could steal their cheques and they have to deposit for six months, that was the kind of service being meted out to them in another regime. That is the kind of service that they will never want to go back to, and they will resist it at all attempts. [*Desk thumping*]

11.00 p.m.

Mr. De Coteau: Vote or no vote.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Therefore, that is why—if some of them had to speak again, they would make the same speech, unwilling to accept the reality that confronts them, that there is a new type of service, there is a new type of vision, there is a new type of delivery, under the People’s Partnership Government. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Mr. Speaker, I think that we have made some points. We have not touched many areas of work that continue apace, but I thought it was wise to respond to some of the concerns that have been raised. Also, the figures bandied about were false and malicious. I know for a fact that treating the workers of the Social Welfare Department who devolve this service to the clients, 365 days per year is not a crime, it is a sign of appreciation and it is done by the public servants. When politicians get up in this room and attack the public servants, the Chief Technical Officer—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Roberts: Shame!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—the Permanent Secretary—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Roberts: Shame!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—the Deputy Permanent Secretary—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Roberts: Shame!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—for treating the staff of a Ministry that has 1,200 persons, and saying that the bill is \$750 when the bill is less than \$500,000, to treat 1,200 persons. That is a disgrace, that is something a politician must never reduce himself to—[*Desk thumping*] to attack the people who would work for small incomes and serve the people on long hours and when you and people, politicians, get up in this very dignified House and attack the public servants of Trinidad and Tobago, the social workers, attack the TT Card officers, when they attack the social welfare offices, the people who work hard and long hours, they attack the Corporate Communications Unit, they attack the Social Displacement Unit, they attack the Poverty Reduction Unit, they are saying you do not deserve to be treated. Why must our public servants not—you treated all kinds of artistes, you treated persons who were community leaders in the hotels of Trinidad and Tobago, why can we not treat the social worker who attends to the differently abled, who attends to the pensioner, who attends to the weak, the sick, the infirmed, the needy—[*Desk thumping*] who do it for small incomes—

Dr. Moonilal: Gang leaders.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—and deserve a day in the best hotel in Trinidad and Tobago to have a dinner with their colleagues.

Hon Members: Yes man, shame!

Hon. Member: Thank you, my brother. Give a dinner.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Do not attack the public servants. Do not attack the workers of the Ministry of the People and Social Development in such an unjustified and undignified manner, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Sharma: What a shame!

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: It is an affront to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It is an affront to the 78,000 pensioners—

Mr. Sharma: Shameless.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—who are our clients; it is an affront to the 51,000 persons who are differently abled; it is an affront to the 38,000 who access our public assistance services; it is an affront—

Dr. Browne: Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 33(4).

Mr. Speaker: Continue hon. Member for Caroni Central.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Thank you, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am just saying—

Miss McDonald: How much Tobago cost?

Mr. De Coteau: Ask the captain of the Congress.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—politicians should attack policy; they can attack the manner in which things happen. [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Speaker: Members, please, Member for Port of Spain South.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh:—but when they come to the level where they begin to attack the senior public servants who plan a function for the workers of a Ministry, it is a crying shame, and it is somewhere that a politician, no matter how desperate, should never reduce himself to.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the speaking time of the Minister of the People and Social Development has expired.

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Motion made: That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Hon. C. De Coteau*]

Question put and agreed to.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just to wrap up a few points. The Member for Diego Martin North/East came and spoke about the energy sector in gloom and doom. I am happy to say to you, Mr. Speaker, the energy sector is up 27 per cent in drilling as opposed to 2011, in 2012. In 2012, we had the most successful bid round in 14 years. We are revitalizing Trinmar and we are drilling as never before. BP is drilling Savonetta 5 and 6 to bring in more gas to the coffers of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] so that we can do more for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

About the wrecking that you complained about, talk to your mayor. [*Desk thumping and laughter*] Apparently there is not enough internal conversation generated sometimes, please, and some of these issues you may be able to solve internally.

Hon. Member: We will get rid of him next month.

Hon. Dr. G. Ramadharsingh: We are very, very elated and happy that we are part of this measure. I have not even spoken about social displacement where we are beginning to do the work that was not done before. We are beginning to partner with the NGOs, those who have the capacity, and those who do not have the capacity, we are creating the capacity in them. We are picking up those who come from abroad, who are sent here as deportees and we are working with them through the Vision on Mission. We are now about to finish a Wallerfield facility for ex-prisoners that will receive worldwide attention as a phenomenal development in terms of rehabilitation of ex-prisoners. That facility will be open by mid-March.

We are working with Transformed Life Ministry, the Vision on Mission, the Missions International, to take doctors and nurses and engage the street dwellers; speak to them with the Mental Health Officers sanctioned by the Minister of Health, on site with the assistance of the regional corporations. We are continuing the pilot project that sees us assisting many of the persons who are the most vulnerable in society, the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, to begin to find a way.

For the first time, myself and the Minister of Legal Affairs will give several of them the first birth certificate that they will ever hold in their own hands at the age

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sometimes, of 60 and 70 years old. They will get an ID card for the very first time—beginning to get a sense of self-identification in a land that they were born in, that they were never given before; to begin to connect and reconnect back with families who are willing to take them back now that they have begun the process of rehabilitation and the journey back into society. We will continue to facilitate, but these things we will work on, phase by phase.

We will not start projects that will be left in the air. We will build a strong foundation and that strong foundation will always be served by this book that we took to the people. [*Holds up the People's Partnership Manifesto*] This book that talks about prosperity for all, the flagship of human development, the fact that all are equal and each part of Trinidad and Tobago deserves as much as the other. The principles of equity that guided the thoughts that created a Ministry of the People that would reach out to all of the people of Trinidad and Tobago regardless of their circumstances and station in life. That is the philosophy that will drive the foundation deep and that will build the structures high so that we will reach all of the people that need to be reached and assisted and empowered. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy—

Dr. Browne: Mr. Speaker, I had indicated under section—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: Ohh, yes, yes. Sorry about that, hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy. I did call you but he did indicate under 33(6), the honourable Member, just a point of explanation—one minute, no more.

Dr. Browne: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, thank you. Under Standing Order 33(4), I wish to clarify a total—Mr. Speaker, the Member for San Juan/Barataria is being very rude.

Mr. Speaker: Please, please allow the Member to speak. Hon. Member, you have my protection and I call on the Member for Barataria/San Juan to allow the Member to speak.

Dr. Browne: Thank you, thank you. Mr. Speaker, the Member for Caroni Central totally misrepresented comments that were made prior to his contribution. There was no attack whatsoever on any public servants in Trinidad and Tobago. What happened, for the record, was that a Member of Parliament rose in this Chamber and asked about the estimated \$700,000 cost of that dinner at the Hyatt. There were questions about the alcohol bill related and a suggestion that that money could have been used to further increase the grant and also to increase—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. Browne: Yes, and also to increase the income ceiling associated with the disability assistance grant. The Minister answered none of those questions, provided none of that clarity, but sought to avoid scrutiny of a ministerial decision by construing it as some type of imaginary attack against public servants. Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and the Economy. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance and the Economy (Sen. The Hon. Larry Howai): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. From this point we will be going into the committee stage, so it is not my intention to detain this honourable House much longer than I need to, and when I say I will be brief, I do mean I will be brief.

I want to thank Members on the both sides for their contributions this evening I think I found the contributions generally, to be of a good standard and certainly a number of areas have been identified which have caused us to take a further look at some of the things which we have in the Bill.

As I indicated at the start, the economy remains strong and really stands out as a beacon in a world fraught with much downside risk where many economies in the world are in recession and where unemployment is at astronomical levels, in some countries as high as 25 per cent and 26 per cent, with unemployment among youth particularly, over 50 per cent. Certainly Trinidad and Tobago has not fared as badly as many of these economies, and we do have a strong foundation on which we can build.

If I could quote, Mr. Speaker, from both Standard & Poor's and Moody's, both of which were referred to earlier by speakers on the other side. Standard & Poor's rated us as "A" with a stable outlook and their comment is that:

"The ratings on Trinidad and Tobago are supported by the country's net external asset position, low external vulnerability, and stable political system."

They have identified that if there happens to be a protracted slowdown in the energy sector, along with poor implementation of our investment plans, then the ratings can come under pressure. But basically, Mr. Speaker, their evaluation of Trinidad and Tobago is very sound.

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Moody's has also indicated that:

"...the government's robust balance sheet, fiscal savings, and a strong external liquidity position...mitigate susceptibility to event risk; a solid institutional framework with a high degree of policy coherence and continuity;"—also supports the rating—"and relatively high income per capita."—is something to be envied—"The rating is constrained"—they say—"by the small size of the economy, a limited degree of diversification"—which we are working on—"concerns about medium-term growth"—mainly in the Caribbean, because they see the prospects of the rest of the Caribbean as being particularly poor and they feel that that would impact on our markets and our exports of goods and services to these countries—"and the relative deterioration of fiscal and debt metrics"—which basically arose out of recognizing the Clico obligations.

11.15 p.m.

During the first quarter of this year we have had a number of successes, as I pointed out; a number of major projects are ready to get going. We have launched a Clico Investment Fund; we have moved into the final phase of the payments of the Hindu Credit Union; we have implemented zero rating on VAT for food; we have implemented the Securities Bill; we have started the PPP (P3) modality for investments in the public sector and we have made considerable progress with the diversification of the financial services sector, with at least three financial institutions indicating a willingness and readiness to commence investments in Trinidad and Tobago.

In considering the comments which have been made by the other side, I am reasonably assured that we are on the right track. While there has been some criticism, the relatively low level of criticism of these initiatives suggests that we are on the right track.

As I said at the commencement, there are a few areas which, in reviewing and in response to the comments from the other side, we do have some recommendations for amendments which we will take up in the committee stage: one being in respect of retirement allowances; two, in respect of the total value for residential homes—residential construction—of \$1.5 million. We are proposing a further adjustment—our proposals regarding the National Insurance Act, in particular to—we are certainly agreeable to withdrawing the proposals made with respect to the self-employed, which we think, based on the comments that have

been made, we would like to take another look at and, perhaps, come forward with a separate piece of legislation in, perhaps, March of this year to facilitate an implementation by July of this year.

So, with these short words, Mr. Speaker, I would like to bring the debate here to an end and for us to move to the committee stage.

Mr. Speaker, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.

House in committee.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2.

Question proposed: That clause 2 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that clause 2 be amended as circulated.

Delete clause 2 and substitute the following:

“The Retiring Allowances (Legislative Service) Act is amended-

- (a) In section 5, by deleting subsection (1A);
- (b) In section 6, by deleting subsection (1A);
- (c) in section 9 –
 - (i) by deleting subsection (1)(a) and substituting the following:
 - ‘(a) is entitled to a retiring allowance; or’;
 - (ii) by deleting subparagraph (i) of paragraph (b) and substituting the following:
 - ‘(i) he would have been entitled to under paragraph (a)’; and
 - (iii) by deleting subsection (1A); and
 - (d) by deleting section 9A.”

Mr. Imbert: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. If you look at the Explanatory Note on page 1 of the Bill, it states that, “with effect from October 1, 2011, all retired legislators who served Trinidad and Tobago for periods amounting in the aggregate of not less than five (5) years should receive a retiring allowance of no less than \$3,000.00.” Have we taken that out? We seem to have forgotten that. Because this is deleting the whole of clause 2, and in clause 2(a)(ii), there was “a minimum of three thousand dollars, whichever is the greater”. Has that gone? You are taking out the whole of clause 2. That is what it says: “Delete clause 2...” The amendment deletes the whole of clause 2. It says so: “Delete clause 2...”

Dr. Moonilal: I am advised that the existing law remains the same.

Mr. Imbert: Which existing law, the \$3,000?

Dr. Moonilal: 2012.

Mr. Imbert: So the \$3,000 is already there?

Dr. Moonilal: Remains, yes.

Mr. Imbert: Okay. So this was an error here in the original drafting, then? Or you were just putting back what was there before?

Dr. Moonilal: We were putting back. It was restating.

Mr. Imbert: Okay. No problem.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 to 5 ordered to stand part of Bill.

Clause 6.

Question proposed: That clause 6 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Chairman, I beg to move that clause 6 be further amended. We have circulated an amendment to clause 6 and would like to further amend as follows:

- A. In paragraph (a), delete subparagraphs (i), (ii) and (iv) and renumber subparagraphs (iii) and (v) as (i) and (ii) respectively.
- B. Delete paragraph (b) and renumber paragraphs (c) and (d) as paragraphs (b) and (c) respectively;
- C. In paragraph (c) as renumbered, delete subparagraph (ii);
- D. Delete paragraphs (e), (f) and (g) and renumber paragraphs (h), (i) and (j) as paragraphs (d), (e) and (f) respectively;

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- E. Delete paragraph (k), and renumber paragraphs (l) and (m) as paragraphs (g) and (h) respectively;
- F. In paragraph (h) as renumbered, in the proposed section 54(C), insert after subsection (12), the following subsection:
 “(13) Notwithstanding subsection (12), where one parent of the deceased insured dies the surviving parent shall receive the total amount of six hundred dollars monthly as a pension where the parent qualifies for less than six hundred dollars monthly.”
- G. Renumber clause 13 as 14.
- H. Delete paragraphs (n) and (o) and renumber paragraphs (p) and (q) as paragraphs (i) and (j) respectively; and
- I. In paragraph (i) as renumbered, in subparagraph (i) delete “Table A9”.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, what would happen to the 13 that is there now?

Mr. Chairman: The 13 will now become 14, as I understand it.

Mr. Imbert: Is that what was just said, that 13 would become 14?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Imbert: All right.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 7 and 8 ordered to stand part of Bill.

Clause 9.

Question proposed: That clause 9 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that clause 9 be amended as circulated.

- A. In subclause (c)(i)(B), delete the words “nine hundred and fifty thousand dollars” and substitute the words “one million five hundred thousand dollars.”
- B. In subclause (c)(ii)(B), delete the words “nine hundred and fifty thousand dollars” and substitute the words “one million five hundred thousand dollars.”

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, there is a word missing in (c)(ii)(B). The word “after” is missing: “...improvements were made”—after—“1st February”. On page 39 of the Bill at the bottom you are missing the word, “after”. [*Interruption*] Right. So let us put it in. Insert the word, “after” after the word “made” or before “1st” or something like that.

11.30 p.m.

Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Chairman, I beg to move a further amendment to clause 9. At (B) (i) insert the word, “after” after “made” and before “1st”.

Mr. Chairman: That is it? Hon. Members, in clause 9(c)(ii)(b)(i) we insert after the word “made” the word “after”, so it would read, “\$950,000.00 where the repairs, alterations or improvements were made after 1st February, 2013”. Is that what is being proposed? With the amendment that you have here, it will read “one million five hundred thousand dollars, where the repairs, alterations or improvements were made after 1st February 2013”. Is that all right?

Dr. Moonilal: Correct.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 10 to 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16.

Question proposed: That clause 16 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that clause 16 be amended as circulated:

16. In subclause (b)(i), insert before the words “by inserting after”, the words “in subsection (1),”

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Speaker, I have had some discussions with the Minister of Finance and the Economy on this. I get the impression he wants to leave this as is. But, I just want to point out that in the Finance Act, 2012, the penalty was changed from \$100 for every month to \$500 for every year. Prior to that it was \$100 for every month, it is now moving from \$500 a year to \$500 a month. That is more than 1,000 per cent increase. I urge the Minister to reconsider this. You cannot change this in the Senate, you know, because you cannot come back to the House with this. So I would suggest, as a compromise, make it \$300 or something like that. The \$500 a month is just too much; make it \$300.

Mr. Howai: We accept.

Mr. Imbert: You would have to delete “five hundred dollars per year” and replace it with “three hundred dollars per month.”

Dr. Moonilal: The Government would like to move a further amendment to clause 16. The further amendment would be delete the entire (e) and substitute a new (e) which read as follows.

In section 516 by deleting the words “five hundred dollars per year” and substituting the words “three hundred dollars per month.”

Mr. Imbert: That is correct.

Mr. Chairman: Let me just see if I get this clear. The proposed amendment to clause 16 is as follows: In clause 16 (e) we delete the entire (e) and we substitute a new (e) for the deleted (e) which reads, “in section 516, by deleting the words ‘five hundred dollars per year’ and substituting the words ‘three hundred dollars per month.’”

So we are deleting the whole of the old section (e). We are replacing it with a new section (e) which states: in section 516 by deleting the words “five hundred dollars per year” and substituting the words “three hundred dollars per month”. That is the new amendment.

Hon. Members: That is correct.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 16, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 17, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 18.

Question proposed: That clause 18 stand part of the Bill.

Dr. Moonilal: Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that clause 18 be amended as circulated:

“Delete clause 18 and substitute the following:

“Notwithstanding any law to the contrary, the sections of this Act listed in the First Column shall come into force on the dates set out in the Second Column.”

First Column	Second Column
3	1 October, 2012
7	1 February, 2013
9(a),(b)	1 January, 2013
9(c)	1 February, 2013
9(d)	1 October, 2012
10	1 January, 2013
11	1 January, 2013
13	1 January, 2012

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 18, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to, That the Bill, as amended, be reported to the House.

House resumed.

Bill reported, with amendment, read the third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing, Land and Marine Affairs (Hon. Dr. Roodal Moonilal): I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to a date to be fixed.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 11.43 p.m.